

Human Services Commission
Meeting 10/26/10
Citywide Senior Center, 2nd Floor Classroom
5:30-7:30

Commissioners Present: Ayse Atasoylu, Christopher Hall, Kati LaBraico, Lori Likis, Khari Milner, Claudia Hill, Nan Stone,

Regrets: Marian Darlington-Hope, Rev Lorraine Thornhill, Paulina Mauras

Staff Present: Ellen Semonoff, Stephanie Ackert, Jolyon Cowan, Jose Soares (recorder)

Presenters: Juan Vega, Executive Director, Monique Puig-Antich, Director of Operations, Centro Latino

Juan Vega and Monique Puig-Antich gave an update on the recent merger of Concilio Hispano with Centro Latino. The merging of the two agencies was announced in April 2009 after a 6 month planning stage, which was supported by the Boston Foundation and Common Impact. As staff from both agencies were integrated, a new personnel handbook and policies were developed. Volunteers from the Human Resources department of State Street Bank helped revise and develop a personnel policy. When asked about the challenges, Juan mentioned that the difference between the two agencies' cultures was a big challenge. To get everybody to buy into a new culture in a larger organization and structure took some negotiation. As a result, some staff chose to leave. Both Boards of Directors were combined and participated in the forming of the new agency. It was decided that after the initial integration it was necessary to expand services to Revere, East Boston, and Everett to reach underserved growing communities. Centro Latino engaged Service Corps to develop a marketing campaign and a new logo.

Given the recession, in the past two years it has been more challenging to raise money from private foundations for the expansion and creation of new programs. Government funding has also been cut, particularly from the Department of Public Health for HIV prevention and education. As a result, vacancies have not been filled and the former Concilio' satellite office in Chelsea was closed. However, fortunately Centro Latino has spent the last five years changing its funding profile to rely less on government grants and more on private foundations.

Nan Stone asked what precipitated the merger. Juan mentioned that over the years he was in close contact with the leadership of Concilio Hispano, which has been in the Cambridge community for over 40 years. In the last few years, he had noticed a series of changes and gaps in leadership and in the services in the surrounding communities. At the time, Centro Latino had volunteered to participate in an initiative from Bridgespan consultancy and was undergoing a new business plan entitled "do more good, better." The Board of Directors of Concilio contacted Juan Vega and after several discussions between both agencies' boards the idea of the merger came up.

Ayse Atasoylu asked, if over the years, there were noticeable changes of clients' needs and requests for services. Monique replied that there was an increase in need for rental assistance, applications for food stamps, disability benefits, and requests for education and job training.

Khari Milner asked if there were any programs or areas of service that Centro Latino would like to enhance. Juan responded that in terms of planning and expansion the primary population Centro Latino serves are immigrants, some new to the workforce, and the current push is for job training and education. With the current unemployment rates, Centro Latino is focused on retraining, educating and building capacity of participants. Centro Latino is looking to partner with other community agencies in Cambridge who have developed expertise in particular areas of service.

Ellen mentioned that the City's Cambridge Employment Program provides job search and assistance with resume writing for Cambridge residents and the Community Learning Center provides English language and computer classes.

When asked which countries are most of their clients coming from, Juan mentioned that in general most people are from El Salvador, Puerto Rico, and Colombia.

Claudia Hill asked what their top five goals were for 2011. Juan and Monique shared that at the top of the list is to increase private foundation funding; to secure larger multi-year funding to expand their workforce training initiative. They also plan to continue a new marketing plan to introduce the agency's uniqueness and expertise. And lastly, Centro Latino wants to create an outcomes evaluation for the agency.

Monique said that currently the substance abuse counselor spends some part of Mondays at the Middlesex jail working with about 200 inmates while in pre-release. (Monique, later after the Commission meeting, clarified that none of their Cambridge CDBG funds were used for client services at the Middlesex jail.)

The primary services Cambridge residents are coming for are ESL, HIV counseling, immigration issues and young parenting support classes.

Long term board members from both agencies have stepped down and Centro Latino is currently recruiting more board members.

Monique also announced that Jazz for Peace is holding a benefit concert for Centro Latino on December 5th at Ryles.

It was agreed that for the next meeting, Food For Free staff would be invited to present on how it is using its new CDBG grant. Part of the meeting would also be devoted to hunger in Cambridge and would include pantry staff from the Margaret Fuller House to comment on their experience about how the economic recession is affecting the neighborhood.

The next Human Services Commission meeting will be held on December 9th.

Meeting adjourned.