

Human Services Commission
Meeting 2/10/11
51 Inman St., 3rd Floor Resource Room
5:30-7:30pm

Commissioners Present: Claudia Hill, Nan Stone, Christopher Hall, Rev. Lorraine Thornhill

Regrets: Marian Darlington-Hope, Paulina Mauras, Lori Likis, Khari Milner, Kati LaBraico, Ayse Atasoylu

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

Presenters: Lisa Locher, Family Law Attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS)
Ronit Barkai, Director of Housing Services, and Risa Mednick, Board Chair at Transition House (T House)

Jolyon updated the Commission on the upcoming CDBG funding and a potential cut of 7.5% as proposed by the Obama Administration. The City will not know until April the actual amount of the CDBG award, but there is every reason to believe that it will be significantly less than last year's funding. Last year the Department allocated \$320,000 in CDBG funding to fund human services programs in the City.

Nan Stone asked if there were other agencies currently not being funded that are doing a better job? Jolyon stated that currently funded agencies are performing well. Ellen mentioned that there are other funding sources from HUD and the City which fund an array of homeless services and job search and training; she went on to say that in previous Commission Hearings, agencies expressed a need for mental health services for families and children.

Ellen mentioned that if we were to restrict funding to current CDBG grantees, we could send out an RFP asking agencies for proposals reflecting a 10% or 25% cut in funding. Given the timetable for the next two months we might want to have the annual event in April and in the March meeting decide on the funding process, when we might have more information on funding.

Lisa Locher presented on trends in domestic violence she sees as the Family Law Attorney for GBLS, the largest legal services agency in Massachusetts. She started by describing the hard cuts GBLS has had to make. Over the past two years there has been a 40% reduction in staff. The Family Law Division saw a cut from 14 to 8 attorneys. Its mission is to represent victims of domestic violence in Probate and Family Court. Recently, due to a backlog of cases in court, there has been a push from the Court for conciliation through mediation over domestic violence issues. This has proven to be detrimental to the victims as often they continue to be battered. There has been an increase in non-English speaking victims and the trend is for court interpreters to serve both parties as they stand side by side in court. To prevent batterers' repeat court filings, in some cases as often as once a week, GBLS started charging and being awarded attorney's fees after child support is paid.

In the current economic recession, GBLS has seen an increase in domestic violence due to the stress of unemployment, particularly among undocumented workers. Acts of violence are more vicious. Families who would have filed for divorce before because of domestic violence are now staying together for economic reasons, to keep a home, and for the sake of the children.

In the current economic climate, large law firms are donating associates' time allowing GBLS to farm out depositions and litigation; thus freeing up a paralegal to be at the Middlesex Court three days a week to help file restraining orders and affidavits, serving as the gateway to Cambridge cases.

Risa Mednick, board president from Transition House, presented on domestic violence trends by starting with some statistics from the Cambridge Police for 2010: 167 simple assaults, 90 aggravated assaults, 6 rapes and 3 stalking incidents. Risa emphasized that the actual numbers would be much higher because of under-reporting. A national study has estimated that one in four women will be a victim of domestic abuse sometime in her life.

Transition House has been in Cambridge for 30 years. Over time their housing and family support programs have been expanded. They receive 10 hotline calls a day. There has never been a day with a vacancy in the shelter. For the past 9 years T House has been running a Transitional Living Program located in scattered site apartments. Staff match families to share apartments. The length of stay varies from 9 to 18 months. Domestic violence victims stay in their shelter for about three months until families access subsidized housing or are transferred to the Transitional Living Program. At this stage, clients are often able to secure a divorce, find work, and the lives of the women and their children are becoming stable with intense community involvement.

Over the years T House has developed relationships with many area agencies including the Community Learning Center, Multi-Service Center, youth programs, Baby U, the Police Department, Cambridge Housing Authority, Cambridge Health Alliance, the School Department, GBLS, Community Legal Services & Counseling Center, and the Guidance Center. But more families are coming to them with economic desperation and an array of problems (immigration, mental health issues), not just for refuge from batterers. It has been more difficult to find subsidized housing, making the lengths of stay in shelter and their Transitional Living Program longer.

T House provides services to 150-200 families annually. They are seeing younger women 19, 20, 21 years old and also those over the age of 60. Currently residents speak as many as 16 different languages.

Meeting adjourned. Next Human Services Commission meeting will be on March 10th.