

Cambridge Human Services Commission
Minutes of Meeting 2/9/12
5:30 – 7:30pm
3rd Floor Resource Room
51 Inman Street

Commissioners present: Ayse Atasoylu, Deputy Superintendent Christine Elow, Lori Likis, Claudia Hill, Khari Milner

Regrets: Christopher Hall, Kati LaBraico, Nan Stone, Rev Lorraine Thornhill

Presenter: Mina Reddy, Director of the Community Learning Center

DHSP staff: Ellen Semonoff, Janice Alger, Jolyon Cowan (recorder)

Ellen introduced Police Department Deputy Superintendent Christine Elow to those Commissioners who had not met her at the January Human Service Commission meeting. She will be serving as a liaison between the Cambridge Police Department and the Commission.

Mina Reddy, the Director of the Community Learning Center (CLC), began her presentation by describing the history of adult basic education (ABE). Its origins began in the 18th and 19th centuries largely coming from a religious foundation, and its emphasis then was on broadening adult literacy. In the early 20th century, more focus was put on vocational training as the country continued to industrialize. Then in the 1960's ABE became part of the empowerment movement of the time, and Federal adult education funds were channeled directly to the local level to avoid bottle necks in the states. At that time, the focus of ABE was GED preparation. GED is the equivalent to a high school diploma. ABE would then stop at graduation. Recently a series of influential policy reports about the status of the American workforce and by extension ABE have been emphasizing growing achievement gaps in earnings and rising inequality. All these reports created alarm amongst adult education policy makers, and consequently there has been a shift in emphasis away from the traditional ABE model focusing on the GED and family literacy programs.

With that background, Mina went on to talk about her current priority which is writing a proposal to the Mass Dept of Education for a 5 year grant due in late February. It is envisioned this grant will fund a significant portion of the CLC's budget as it has in the past. Unlike in previous applications, the focus is no longer on GED. The State now requires that ABE programs provide career and education plans for all students served, even immigrant retirees who are studying English (ESOL). So the new goal of ABE is no longer graduation or even just achievement in college, but also now emphasizing career development. This shift is also apparent in the counseling services provided to students. Counselors are now to be called Education and Career Advisors.

Mina then described the population the CLC works with. The center serves about 1,000 adult students a year with 22 full-time staff and approximately 30 part-time staff. While about 90% of their students are immigrants, many of whom are learning English, the CLC serves a diverse range of people. The center serves both young and old, and even the homeless. While the center can serve students over 16 years old, very few if any students are under 18, and most are older than 20. Close to 85% of students are Cambridge residents. Demand for classes at the CLC is so high that there is a waiting list of over a year

for ESOL classes. Among the many linguistic minorities the CLC serves, its Ethiopian population is growing most rapidly.

The wait list for GED classes numbers more than 400 people, but tends to move relatively quickly. There are monthly orientations for classes, which are offered both in the mornings and in the evenings to accommodate people's schedules. Priority on waiting lists is given to homeless students and students with young children. One of the major dilemmas staff at the CLC face is how to work with adults struggling to progress in courses in light of the high demand for openings in those classes. A few years ago the CLC set a time limit of between two to four years for each student depending on the class; however, staff are unsure of the usefulness of time limits so this may be scrapped. Drop-out rates tend to be higher for pre-GED programs than for ESOL. Students most typically drop out of classes for health reasons.

The CLC has a range of targeted education programs so that it is well placed to follow the State's more career focused ABE priorities. For instance, the CLC Bridge Program, which was started in 1998 serves as "bridge" to college for adults with a high school diploma or GED. The program helps prepare students for college with writing, math, and computers classes along with classes in financial aid and test readiness. The CLC was also one of 8 programs nationwide to be selected to receive a Points of Entry (POE) grant from George Soros' Open Society Foundations. This is a pilot program currently serving 50 CLC students in five classes, which helps them make appropriate career decisions in conjunction with their ABE.

Another targeted program is the CLC's Project LIFT. This HUD-funded program works with homeless clients in Cambridge providing computer literacy classes, and tutoring in resume writing. LIFT also provides individualized tuition to homeless students for GED preparation, and enhanced writing and math skills for better career prospects and/or college.

Ellen Semonoff and the Commissioners thanked Mina for her presentation. Ellen then began discussing the planned annual CDBG event on Thursday, March 29th. This event will be held in lieu of the regular March 8th Human Services Commission meeting. At the recommendation of the Commissioners at the January HSC meeting, Youths from the Do It Your Damn Self!! (DIYDS) Film festival will present on the Cambridge-based national festival. They will also present some short films pertinent to issues human service agencies in Cambridge are facing. Invitations to the event will be sent out to all Cambridge serving human service agencies. DHPS will co-host the event with the Cambridge Community Foundation.

Lastly, Ellen brought up the CDBG funding process for the City's FY 2013. The City is anticipating a small cut for the Department's allocation of CDBG funding, but not enough to have to cut agency's current awards; however, she suggested there was the possibility of substantial cuts for the fiscal year after next (FY 2014). Therefore Ellen recommended that the City once more distribute an RFP only to those agencies currently funded by CDBG. Lori Likis agreed that it made sense to have a closed RFP this year. All the other Commissioners also agreed. It was also agreed that during the April HSC meeting Jose Soares and Jolyon Cowan would review the programmatic performance of all CDBG funded agencies, and at the May HSC meeting the Commission would review CDBG proposals for FY 2013.

Meeting adjourned.