

Cambridge Human Services Commission
Minutes of Meeting 1/10/2013
5:30 – 7:30pm
Citywide Senior Center
806 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge

Commissioners present: Lori Likis, Christine Elow, Khari Milner, Katharine Thomas, Ayse Atasoylu, Kati LaBraico, Christopher Hall

Regrets: Rev. Lorraine Thornhill

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

Presenter: Lieutenant Leonard Di Pietro from the Cambridge Police Department's Community Services Unit presented on the Cambridge Safety Net Collaborative

Lieutenant Leonard Di Pietro started with a brief history of the Cambridge Police Department's Juvenile Unit. When Commissioner Robert C. Haas first arrived to take command of the Cambridge Police Department (CPD), there was no juvenile unit. Youths were arrested by police officers in the Criminal Investigations Unit and often ended up with a criminal record for the rest of their lives and possibly jail time. Lieutenant DiPietro stated that at the time, the thinking at CPD was "to lock them up or let them go." Commissioner Haas devised a diversion program for youth to keep them out of the court and the criminal system. The CPD approached the City Manager for funding of 6 school based Youth Resource Police Officers to work with the Cambridge School Department. Currently the Youth Resource Officers (YRO) are assigned to various schools in the City.

The Cambridge Safety Net was developed in collaboration with the Cambridge School Department, the Cambridge Health Alliance, and the Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP). Nationally 70% of youth who exhibit criminal behaviors are diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Mental health consultants were brought in and treatment plans were developed to be incorporated in the Safety Net.

Since 2007, Youth Resource Police Officers have been assigned to schools, after school programs, and youth centers throughout the City. Officers are assigned cases usually through the schools when youth get in trouble and follow up with home visits and case management referring youths to appropriate services and mental health professionals when necessary. The Safety Net Collaborative followed with cross-trainings among partners and brought in experts on youth issues. Over the years, trust has built up between partners and youth. All possible efforts are made to divert the youth from the court system by promoting restorative justice and mediation.

Early on in the implementation stage, DHSP youth workers and YROs went door to door in housing developments to introduce the program and themselves.

The Safety Net Collaborative operates with three primary strategies: prevention, intervention, and police diversion. Priority is placed in connecting youth to appropriate services. In prevention, officers engage with youth by sponsoring sports and mentoring programs for youth. In intervention, YROs work with schools, youth centers and parents to identify youth with concerning social, emotional, or behavioral challenges. If youth are known to be involved with drugs, officers will conduct a home visit and will be pro-active in the prevention and intervention stages. Youth who have committed a non-violent criminal offense, may be placed in a police diversion program as an alternative to entering the juvenile justice system. In the diversion program, youth accept responsibility for their actions, pay restitution, when appropriate, and perform community service.

In FY2012, there were 41 formal diversions from criminal prosecution, over 500 interventions, and over 600 home visits. That year there were 22 juvenile arrests. By comparison, in 2004, there were 73 juvenile arrests.

The participants in the Safety Net Collaborative meet regularly every other Monday to discuss cases and come up with a plan for the youth and the family involved. Key warning issues Safety Net staff look for are when a youth is on the periphery of the community either suffering from mental health issues or substance abuse and appears to be disengaged, or when a youth is a victim or witness to violence. YROs get to know youth who may be estranged and mentor them in appropriate programs, including sports, and they also serve as role models. The Safety Net Collaborative will identify and work with youth from middle school age up to 22 years of age who are at risk.

Ellen recommended and Commissioners were interested that at the February 14th Human Services Commission meeting, we have a presentation by the DHSP's Cambridge Works Program, which provides job training and transitional jobs for residents 18 to 35.

Meeting adjourned.