



Cambridge Human Services Commission  
Meeting Minutes  
March 10, 2016  
5:30 – 7:30pm  
Citywide Senior Center  
806 Massachusetts Avenue  
Cambridge, MA 02139

Commissioners present: Christine Elow, Chris Hall, Anna Leslie, Linda Forman Naval, Sumbul Siddiqui, Nan Stone, Rev. Lorraine Thornhill

Department of Human Service Program (DHSP) staff: Janice Alger, Mike Payack (co-recorder), Ellen Semonoff, Nancy Tauber (co-recorder)

Presenters: Michelle Holcomb, Development Director, Food For Free; Ross Richmond, Community Partnership Manager, Food For Free

After welcoming members and guests and a round of introductions, Ellen Semonoff introduced Michelle Holcomb, Development Director, and Ross Richmond, Community Partnership Manager, both with Food For Free.

Michelle Holcomb provided a brief history of Food For Free (FFF). FFF was established 35 years ago as a volunteer food rescue organization using borrowed trucks. This past year, FFF served 112 programs, most of which are in Cambridge.

Michelle discussed the Cambridge Weekend Backpack Program (CWBP). CWBP was founded by Alanna Mallon in 2012 as a volunteer program. The program was designed to make sure that students who receive Free and Reduced Lunch also have healthy food to eat over the weekend, thus improving their health, quality of life, and academic performance. The program works with school staff to identify students who could benefit from the program. On Friday afternoons, school staff inconspicuously place a bag of healthy food inside participating students' backpacks to take home for the weekend. Each bag of food contains milk, fresh fruit, 2 nutritious breakfasts, and 2 nutritious lunches.

The teachers of participating students were surveyed at the beginning and end of the 2012-2013 school year. Alanna also collected anecdotal evidence from parents and analyzed participating students' attendance records. Results showed that participating in CWBP decreased absenteeism and increased family engagement, along with other positive outcomes.

In 2016 CWBP and FFF established a partnership. CWBP was officially adopted as an FFF program and Alanna was hired as FFF Program Director (overseeing CWBP as well as other FFF programs). During the 2012-2013 school year, CWBP served 15 students in one Cambridge Public School Department (CPSD) elementary school. During this (2015-2016) school year, CWBP is serving 385 students in all but three CPSD elementary schools.

FFF is now also piloting school-based markets in three CPSD elementary schools and the high school. These school-based markets are essentially food pantries within schools, however FFF took several steps to ensure as little stigma as possible being associated with utilizing these markets:

- They are called *markets* rather than *pantries*
- In addition to students and their families, markets are open to anyone in the school communities (including teachers, administration, and other school staff) regardless of income
- Emphasis is placed on making the markets visually appealing (and making the markets look as similar as possible to indoor farmers markets)
- Music is played to make it a festive atmosphere

Ross Richmond described being hired to develop and implement the Prepared Foods Rescue Program. Mr. Richmond's work in food justice began when he founded the Somerville Weekend Backpack Program (SWBP), which he based on CWBP. After hearing about CWBP, Ross reached out to Alanna Mallon, who provided him with tools and resources to start SWBP.

Ross described a new type of food now made available due to the recently enacted Massachusetts Food Waste Ban. This State law imposes penalties on large organizations that put organic waste into the traditional garbage/waste stream. This created an incentive for large organizations to donate their surplus prepared food. FFF worked with Tom Lucey, Director of Community Relations at Harvard, to set up a system in which surplus food at all 14 Harvard dining halls is flash-frozen by Harvard staff, picked up by FFF staff, and distributed to organizations capable of reheating and serving hot meals.

This food initially came in frozen 50 pound blocks, which made it hard to distribute to individuals. Eventually, FFF came up with a method of repackaging the recovered frozen foods into "TV dinners" (individual trays with three compartments, containing a protein, a grain, and a vegetable, which could be reheated in a microwave oven). FFF is piloting a program in which they distribute these *TV dinners* to homeless families who are currently being sheltered in local hotels by the State of Massachusetts. These *TV dinners* are a great source of nutrition in hotel rooms, which don't have kitchens, but do have microwave ovens.

FFF is piloting several other programs with the recovered prepared foods including *Take Home Tuesdays* at one of the school-based markets. This program allows participants at the school-based market to take home a family-sized reheated meal that can be consumed that same night.

Ellen Semonoff thanked Michelle and Ross for their presentation. Since three new members recently joined the Commission, Ellen provided an overview of DHSP's annual budget as an introduction to the work of the Department. The Department has an annual budget of approximately \$25,000,000, as well as receiving approximately \$7,000,000 in grants annually. The Department employs about 200 full-time staff and 400-500 part-time staff (depending on the season). The overview included descriptions of the following divisions of DHSP: Commission for Persons with Disabilities, Leadership Operations & IT, Planning & Development, Community Learning Center, Elderly Services & Council on Aging, Multi-Service Center, Office of Workforce Development, and Recreation. Due to time constraints, the Commission agreed to pause the overview and complete it at the next Commission meeting.

Ellen Semonoff announced that the City of Cambridge's FY2017 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) allocation is \$2,511,259. This represents a \$35,428 (or 1.4%) cut from FY2016. This means a \$5,314 cut to the portion of the allocation that the City dedicates to Public Services (or Human Services).

Mike Payack announced that he is in the process of scheduling CDBG site visits. Mike invited members of the Commission to attend.

Mike Payack announced that the next meeting of the Human Services Commission is scheduled for Thursday, April 14, 2016.

Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Mike Payack  
Planner/Contracts Manager  
DHSP/Planning & Development