

Cambridge Human Services Commission
Minutes of Meeting 3/13/2014
5:30 – 7:30pm
Citywide Senior Center
806 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge

Commissioners present: Christine Elow, Nan Stone, Khari Milner, Rev. Lorraine Thornhill, Kati LaBraico

Regrets: Lori Likis, Katharine Thomas, Christopher Hall, Ayse Atasoylu

DHSP staff: Janice Alger, Shelly Chevalier, Jose Soares (recorder)

Guest: Matt Nelson, Cambridge Police Department

Presenter: Sue Walsh, Assistant Director for Adult and Family Services, Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP)

After a round of introductions, Commissioner Christine Elow introduced Matt Nelson who will be working with the police department's community engagement team.

Janice Alger announced Jose Soares' retirement at the end of March.

Janice also announced that the City anticipates level funding for the Community Development Block Grant for fiscal year 2015, which starts July 1st.

Sue Walsh started her presentation by saying that before she was Assistant Director for Adult and Family Services, she was Director of the Office of Workforce Development (OWD), a division within the DHSP. The College Success Initiative discussion started when she was still at OWD as staff found that many of the skills necessary to succeed in college translate to the workplace. Sometime this year there will be a College Success Office in Cambridge to support a network of services and resources and to organize follow up support for Cambridge students who have enrolled in college. (Please see handout)

Cambridge is perceived as a college town and to hear some of the voices of parents and students, that perception is far from many kids' experiences. There has been a national conversation about the education gap for minorities, immigrants, and low income students, and the College Success initiative is hoping to address the obstacles to college access and persistence. Recently there have been changes to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). It generally takes more than 6 years for most kids coming from inner city schools to finish college.

Although the Cambridge Housing Authority's Workforce has a high rate of college acceptance, when CHA surveyed its graduates a few years ago, it found that just 36% had graduated college within 6 years; many struggled with finances, social adjustment issues, and academic challenges. There is tremendous pressure from family and friends for kids to come home and take care of siblings. Steve Swanger, the former Director of Tenant Services at the Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA), which oversees the Workforce program, was concerned with the fact that college kids ended up with college debt and were not able to finish their education.

Former Cambridge City Councilor Ken Reeves took a group to the Harlem Children's Zone to look at possibilities of replicating something similar to its College Success Office Cambridge. In 2011, a small group representing the CHA, the Community Learning Center, and the OWD discussed a transition to college program for first generation of college kids, primarily immigrants and low income.

Damon Smith, the Principal at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin (CRLS) high school wanted to connect the school's guidance staff with community providers. Friends of the CRLS received funding to test students on the Accuplacer, a for college placement test, to try to decrease the number of kids taking remedial courses at the high school.

While in college some students go into remedial courses and exhaust their financial aid and drop out. Many Cambridge learners are not always prepared for what to expect financially, academically, and socially and do not know how to find a good college match. Besides a robust curriculum, they need to learn how to better manage stress and time.

CRLS placed 412 students in two year community colleges over the past 7 years. 10% to 15% end up at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC). The high school has worked to develop a closer connection with BHCC. The College Success Initiative, with Cambridge Community Services taking the lead, initiated a pilot program last summer to support CRLS graduates who would be entering BHCC in the fall. Currently there is a 90% retention rate of kids going into the second year. This spring, BHCC is offering a course at the high school; it is the same curriculum that they use for the Learning Community seminar offered to current BHCC students. One of the goals of the course is to cover material about "What is it like to be a college student?" A number of other activities are happening for local students. Homeowners Rehab has a scholarship fund for kids who reside in their properties. The City, in partnership with Friends of CRLS, funds a college coach at the University of Massachusetts Boston to provide college coaching to CRLS alum.

The Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee (CEOC), which provides free tax preparation, now is in the high school to provide services to students and families.

Meeting adjourned.

The next Human Services Commission meeting is scheduled for April 10th.