



Cambridge Human Services Commission
Meeting Minutes
April 9, 2015
5:30 – 7:30pm
Citywide Senior Center
806 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139

Commissioners present: Christine Elow, Christopher R. Hall, Khari Milner, Nan Stone, Katharine Emilie Thomas, Rev. Lorraine Thornhill

Regrets: Dr. Ayse Atasoylu, Lori Likis

DHSP staff: Janice Alger, Mike Payack (recorder)

Presenters: Jen Baily, Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative Coordinator; Priscila de Calvache, Let's Talk! Coordinator; Beth McGinn, Pathways to Family Success Coordinator

Mike Payack introduced Jen Baily, Priscila de Calvache, and Beth McGinn of the Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative.

Jen Baily and Priscila de Calvache discussed the background of the Agenda for Children. Formed in 1997, the Agenda for Children is a collaboration of the Cambridge Police Department, City of Cambridge Department of Human Service Programs, Cambridge Department of Public Health, Cambridge Public Library, and Cambridge Public School Department. A community-based process identified two priority areas: Early literacy (which led to the Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative) and Out-of-School Time programs.

The Let's Talk! Campaign was born out of research that showed a close correlation between the size of a child's vocabulary and the amount of parental talking. Most early literacy programs focus on reading, but (as the name implies) Let's Talk! Focuses on talking. The goal of Let's Talk! is to help children enter school ready to learn how to read and write by educating and supporting their parents and caregivers. Program staff achieve this end by working to improve the quality and quantity of conversations taking place between young children and their parents starting at birth.

Some of the key techniques Let's Talk! Focuses on include: Serve and Return (brain development), the concept of "play talk" vs. "business talk" ("play talk" includes talking, reading, singing, playing, and telling stories), oral language development techniques (Observe/Wait/Listen, imitation, expansion, extension, and turnabout), and dialogic or interactive reading. Some of the key messages Let's Talk! conveys to parents include: Learning begins at birth; Talk with your child as much as possible while doing everyday activities; Talk with your child as much as possible in the language you speak best; Engage in conversations, back and forth, with your child; Read with your child every day and talk as much as you read.

The Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative employs a group of multilingual, multicultural Literacy Ambassadors who serve as the primary link between the Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative and the harder-to-reach families in the Cambridge community.

Program staff visit the Cambridge Hospital twice a week to meet new moms. At four months of age, all Cambridge newborns are sent a “Born to Read” package of books. Staff conducts home visits to model positive, interactive literacy practices with families in their home environments, and connect families to available resources. In partnership with the Center for Families, program staff host literacy-based community playgroups for young children and their caregivers. Parents can also sign up to receive weekly Let’s Talk! tips via text message by texting “LetsTalk” to 313131 (charges apply). The weekly texts include literacy tips, information about upcoming events, and information about community resources.

During the summer of 2014, the Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative piloted the Book Bike, modeled on old-fashioned book-mobiles. The Book Bike partnered with the Let’s Move with Summer Food program, visiting 3 of its sites on a weekly basis. The Book Bike distributed 789 books in 2014. This summer, the program will add an additional bike as well as two new sites. Janice Alger pointed out that the Book Bike/Let’s Move with Summer Food Program partnership is a great example of interdivisional DHSP collaboration: The Summer Food Program partnered with the Recreation Division to add the Let’s Move component of physical activities and games to their meal sites; and the Kids’ Council provided a recommendation to support the Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative’s Book Bike. Now participants can receive services from all of these divisions in a single setting.

The Agenda for Children Literacy Initiative also recently hired a “Dad Advocate” jointly with the Center for Families to intentionally engage fathers.

Jen discussed positive program outcomes. Eighty-three percent of parents who received a literacy home visit reported that they had changed the way they talk to their child. Eighty-two percent of parents who received a literacy home visit reported they had changed the way they read to their child. Ninety-three percent of participants were “very aware” of the importance of talking to children after attending the workshop, compared to forty percent beforehand.

Jen and Beth McGinn discussed the Pathways to Family Success program. The purpose of the program is to create a place where immigrant families can learn to navigate and understand the US school system and expectations—with peer support, access to resources, and education.

The program meets for two-and-a-half hours on Saturday mornings for twenty-six weeks. Program staff also has monthly one-on-one meetings with participating families. Participants are recruited by Community Learning Center staff, Center for Families staff, Literacy Ambassadors, fliers at schools and community agencies, and word of mouth. Workshop topics include: Home-School Connection, Supporting Children at Home, and Connecting to Resources.

For FY2016, the Commissioners recommended that the City undertake a formal process in which satisfactorily performing Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) grantees are invited to apply for renewal funding for another year. The Commissioners further provided suggestions on the types of questions that should be included in the renewal application.

Mike announced that the next Human Services Commission meeting is scheduled for Thursday, May 14, 2015, and will be devoted to CDBG. Mike will report back on FY2015 CDBG site visits. The Commission will also review FY2016 Renewal Applications and make a funding recommendation.

Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Mike Payack
Planner/Contracts Manager
DHSP/Planning & Development