

CITY OF BELLEVUE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MINUTES

March 17, 2009
6:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
City Council Conference Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chairperson Stout, Commissioners Beighle, Hoople, Huenefeld-Gese, Plaskon, Seltzer, Yantis

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: None

STAFF PRESENT: Emily Leslie, Alex O'Reilly, Joseph Adriano, Warren Leyh, Terry Smith, Patrick Foran, Department of Parks & Community Services

GUEST SPEAKERS: Alan Kiest, DSHS; Tracy Myers, Catholic Community Services; Rochelle Clayton-Strunk, Hopelink; Calvin Bizek, Salvation Army; Brian Anderson, Emergency Feeding Program; Maggie Sung, Refugee Women's Alliance; Rich Bowen, World Impact Network

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m. by Chair Stout who presided.

2. ROLL CALL

Upon the call of the roll, all Commissioners were present.

3. PETITIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS – None

4. STAFF AND COMMISSION REPORTS

Commissioner Beighle said she attended the Sophia Way and the YWCA Women's Shelter community conversation. She said she came away with the understanding that more follow-up is needed for those receiving care. One client in particular voiced concern about having to fill out an application and have a background check; because she refused to do that, she was not able to get into the program.

Commissioner Yantis said he participated in the community conversations held with Childcare Resources and with veterans providers.

Commissioner Seltzer said she met with the leadership group at Eastside Domestic Violence Program, and with the Emergency Feeding Program.

Commissioner Hoople said he spent the past weekend volunteering at the Special Olympics in Wenatchee. He said he also participated with the King County Veterans Levy Oversight Boards presentation to the Covington Youth and Family Services Commission. He said he also toured Tent City IV which took a hit from the recent wind storm.

Chair Stout said she participated in a meeting on March 13 with United Way at which they were closing out their community councils and outlining their new plan for action. She said she came away from the meeting with some concerns and suggested the city should closely follow United Way to make sure East King County gets the services it needs.

Human Services Manager Emily Leslie said at the King County Alliance for Human Services meeting earlier in the day Kurt Triplett, Chief of Staff for King County Executive Ron Sims, provided an update regarding the revenue tools the county is seeking from the state legislature. She said the county has extended several programs for six months using reserve funds, and they are hopeful that with some of the revenue tools they will be to keep the programs funded through at least the end of 2009. The county is starting to work on the 2010 budget already and a lot of things are still up in the air.

5. DISCUSSION

A. Panel Presentation on Emergency Assistance and Emergency Food Programs

Mr. Alan Kiest, Regional Administrator for the DSHS Eastside office, explained that his office is located in Eastgate and serves 17 cities. He said the number of adult TANF cases in King County rose between January 2007 and January 2009, after being reduced by about half between 1997 and 2007. Caseloads are driven by the number of new applications and the number of exits; tampering with either one will affect the size of the caseload. The increased caseload has been the result of fewer clients exiting the system as the economy softened. During 2008 the highest number of new applicants in any month for the Eastside office was 36 through August. In September the number was 66 and hit a peak in January with 84 and things appear to have plateaued at that level. The office has ramped up by putting more people on intake.

Mr. Kiest said the normal TANF rolls include cases of immigrants, family breakups, employment turnover and the homeless. Those being added to the rolls now are skilled unemployed persons from all walks of life, including software technology, sales, and the mortgage/real estate realms.

In October the Governor reacted to dropping state revenues by instituting a hiring freeze. The reduced number of persons on the TANF rolls had resulted in a decrease in office personnel by about 24 percent in the Eastside office. In January the hiring freeze ended but in February was replaced by a legislative hiring freeze that will last at least until June. The capacity of the Eastside office to absorb the influx is therefore limited.

Ms. Leslie asked if the skilled workers showing up at the DSHS office are eligible for unemployment. Mr. Kiest said it depends on the jobs. Many are essentially self-employed as independent contractors, which means they operate outside the unemployment compensation system. For many, their incomes have simply stopped. About three years ago the legislature changed the food stamp eligibility requirements so that assets are no longer included in the computation; the entire focus is on current income. That means food benefits can be handed out to millionaires without a current income flow.

Commissioner Huenefeld-Gese asked what basic things people are asking for when they present themselves at the DSHS office. Mr. Kiest said the range of services offered include childcare subsidies, medical assistance, basic food benefits, grants for general assistance, TANF, social services, and employment partnerships.

Ms. O'Reilly noted that in the early days of the WorkFirst program some good partnerships were formed with community colleges for needed training. She asked how those partnerships have been affected by the economic downturn. Mr. Kiest said the partnerships continue to operate. What has changed is the stream of revenues used to support the different partnership programs. The sub-cabinet that oversees WorkFirst is acting to tighten the budget belt, and that is radiating out to the various partnerships. He said he cannot predict how things will go in the near future but is hopeful the current negative tide will be stemmed.

Chair Stout asked how long people are able to stay on the rolls. Mr. Kiest said the TANF program began nationally as a 60-month program, and the state plan also had a 60-month maximum. The state subsequently changed its plan to where people are not automatically removed from the program after 60 months. Only about a dozen people are excluded from TANF by the Eastside office over the course of a year.

Commissioner Yantis noted that the state program was revised in part to better deal with people who were not readily employable. He asked if there still is a group of people subject to the 60-month limit. Mr. Kiest said for the most part the 60-month limit is gone, replaced by the concept of participation. When the federal government reauthorized TANF a year ago under President Bush the emphasis of the program was turned upside down. Where previously the focus had been on getting people off the TANF rolls, the program was revised to get those still on the rolls participating so many hours per week. In theory, anyone participating properly can now stay on the

rolls indefinitely, though those who are not participating properly could be sanctioned at even less than 60 months.

Commissioner Plaskon asked what the general eligibility requirements are. Mr. Kiest said people seeking a cash grant must have incomes of less than the cash grant amount; for single persons, the cash grants are about \$339 per month. Someone with an income of \$600 per month will not be eligible. In October 2008 the eligibility requirements for the food stamp program were changed and became very complicated. The target of 150 percent of poverty was moved up to 200 percent of poverty; that was done deliberately to allow more people to access the grants. There is, however, a back-end calculation that can result in people getting a benefit of zero dollars. Under the federal stimulus bill, those who qualified for zero dollars are getting some positive dollars. In the state of Washington, about 73 percent of those eligible for food stamps are receiving them, which is the highest percentage it has ever been.

Chair Stout asked how long it takes for an eligible person to receive a food stamp card once they apply. Mr. Kiest said those of expeditable status will receive their benefits within five work days. About 95 percent of the applicants receive their benefits in 30 days. Because housing costs are so high on the Eastside, about half of the applicants are expeditable.

Ms. Tracy Myers with Catholic Community Services said the services provided by the emergency services program in Bellevue include eviction prevention, move-in assistance through rental assistance, shelter stays using motel vouchers, and gas, prescription and food vouchers. She said the services are provided to low-income families, individuals, and seniors who are experiencing financial crises. The agency has multiple funding sources, each with its own criteria.

Ms. Myers said there has been an increase in requests for help in paying energy bills. Many clients are reporting that they have ceased taking their cars to work and are seeking bus tickets. People are presenting needs for transitional housing and for longer-term hotel vouchers. Many are seeking low-cost child care resources, and some have been asking for moving costs.

The agency is seeing a lot of first-time users as a result of recent layoffs and work hour reductions. There has also been an increase in the number of pregnant women seeking assistance, some of whom have reported difficulties in finding work because they are pregnant. For those seeking rent assistance, the average amount they owe is around \$800. Because Catholic Community Services is limited in what it can offer for rent assistance, clients are finding it necessary to seek help from more than one provider.

Catholic Community Services wants people in the community to be aware of the services available, but also has a goal of being aware of services offered by other agencies in order to make referrals. The agency is closely tracking program

indicators across the entire Catholic Community Services spectrum to determine programming focus areas and where funding should be targeted. A grant has been received to do case management services aimed at preventing homelessness.

Mr. Calvin Bizek with the Salvation Army said the agency is focused on helping people with emergency issues related to housing and utilities. He said the number of requests in those areas has been steadily increasing. The rules restrict helping any given household to only once in a 12-month time period, and the increase in requests has meant giving less to each person so that more overall can be helped. The agency requires birth certificates, picture identification, and notice of a cut-off or eviction from a utility or landlord. Clients must make 30 percent of the poverty level in order to qualify; during the holiday season that limit is increased to 50 percent of the poverty level.

Mr. Bizek said the agency now has a waiting list that averages 17 names per week. The number of first-time clients has increased by 25 percent.

The Salvation Army provide emergency food bags consisting of about five pounds of groceries; clients can receive the bags about once every three months. The agency receives only \$1000 per year from FEMA to fund the program. Efforts are under way to pull funds from other sources to increase the program funding to \$1000 per month, in addition to \$200 per month in hygiene items.

Ms. Rochelle Clayton-Strunk with Hopelink said the agency offers emergency services similar to those offered by Salvation Army and Catholic Community Services. They include rent assistance, first-month rent assistance, motel vouchers, utility vouchers, prescription vouchers, and bus tickets. Who can be served is based on income levels; in general the non-grant discretionary funds can flow to clients up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level. The amount of assistance the agency provides depends on the funding source; for non-grant discretionary dollars, the limit is about \$300 per month for rent and \$100 for other services. With the average Eastside rent being much higher than \$300 per month, clients must seek help from more than one provider.

Ms. Clayton-Strunk said Hopelink administers the energy assistance programs, the federally funded LIHEAP and the PSE HELP program, both of which have very strict guidelines. The LIHEAP program clients cannot exceed 125 percent of the federal poverty level, and the PSE HELP program clients cannot exceed 150 percent of the federal poverty level, though a notice of need is not required. Demand for the two programs is running quite high; since October 2008 some 2200 clients have been served.

In general, Hopelink experienced a 37 percent increase in requests for financial assistance between September 2008 and January 2009 when compared against the period between September 2007 and January 2008. For Bellevue specifically, requests for financial assistance increased 49 percent during that same period.

Hopelink believes it is seeing more formerly middle income households, though previous income sources are not being specifically tracked. The agency is seeing an increase in the number of requests for mortgage assistance which is an indication of clients formerly being in the middle income bracket. The maximum assistance of \$300 per month represents an increase from the previous limit of \$200, and that has triggered a need for the agency to engage in additional fundraising efforts. The agency is talking about what will have to happen in the event the funding runs out; the likelihood is that clients will be turned away.

Commissioner Hoople asked what percentage of the client base is over 65 and retired. Ms. Clayton-Strunk said Hopelink has not been seeing a big increase in the number of seniors in need of assistance, at least not yet. As their portfolios decrease, seniors will undoubtedly come forward seeking assistance. What is being seen now is likely only the tip of the iceberg. People are using their savings, their unemployment benefits, and they are selling things in an attempt to get by; many of them are not to the point yet where they will need to seek outside help. When that threshold is met, there will be huge increases in the number of requests made to service providers.

Mr. Bizek said during the 2007 holiday season, Salvation Army received 165 applications from seniors for gift bags for Christmas. In 2008 that number rose to 565. The economic crunch is hitting everyone.

Answering a question asked by Commissioner Plaskon, Ms. Clayton-Strunk said Hopelink does not have enough money to offer case management to all clients. The plan is to follow-up with in-home visits and helping clients develop plans to follow and providing them with connections to housing programs. The goal is to keep people in their homes to prevent homelessness.

Ms. Myers said it is similar for Catholic Community Services. She said there must be a least two contacts per month, either in-home or in the office. The case management services can last as long as two years. The current focus is on people who have only recently lost their jobs, not the chronically homeless.

Mr. Bizek said Salvation Army has not traditionally offered case management. As many clients as possible are assisted with the hope that the help given will assist them on their own feet. The agency is, however, looking to hire a case manager so that clients can be better tracked.

Commissioner Hoople asked to what extent clients are finding a need for legal assistance to get out of contracts or other things. Ms. Myers said Catholic Community Services has a legal action center to which clients can be referred. Their current focus is on landlord/tenant issues, but they are gearing up to focus on mortgage and foreclosure issues. Currently Solid Ground is the only mortgage assistance counseling agency in King County.

Ms. Leslie asked how the agencies are reaching out to the community with information about the services that are available, especially to people who have not had need of services in the past. Each representative indicated that no special outreach efforts are currently being made, in part because of the limited funds available.

Commissioner Huenefeld-Gese said clients she has talked with have very high utility bills and are able to pay only a small percentage. What they are hearing from the utilities is that they must pay the bills in full. Mr. Bizek said that is why after receiving \$150 or so from Salvation Army, people must go to other agencies seeking additional funds. Ms. Myers said the beauty of the LIHEAP and PSE HELP clients are not required to have shut-off notices; the maximum under the LIHEAP program is \$1000 per household per season, and for PSE it is \$750. The allocation is based on usage.

Chair Stout observed that if a household were to lose their utilities through non-payment, the cost of reconnecting could be just one more financial barrier and one more step toward losing the home altogether. That is why intervention needed to prevent eviction or losing a home should be the primary concern.

Mr. Bizek said Salvation Army is working on a program to help curb repeat users.

Mr. Rich Bowen with the World Impact Network said the agency operates the Renewal Food Bank which deals only in food. He said there are no income restrictions or place of residence guidelines; anyone wanting food must simply show up. The only restriction is that persons are limited to coming to the food bank only once per week.

Mr. Bowen said the food bank services are up a little over 30 percent from a year ago. February 2009 was the busiest month the feed bank has seen in eleven years of operation, and the anticipation is that March will be even busier. The number of Hispanic clients is continuing to increase at a rate greater than for all other population groups. New clients are asked to indicate how they heard about the program; the Hispanic community mostly becomes aware of the program from existing clients, while new Caucasian clients tend to hear about the program from the internet or some other source.

The food bank received two grants in 2008 to be used to remodel the facility. That increased the client space by about 40 percent.

Ms. Clayton-Strunk said Hopelink provides three food services: the food bank, emergency food bags, and home delivery to homebound clients. Emergency bags are available to anyone requesting food. Ongoing food support and home delivery require families to register for services and demonstrate that they fall below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Hopelink has an intake process that qualifies for food services and identifies clients for other needs as well.

Ms. Clayton-Strunk said the period of September to January of 2009 saw an overall 23 percent increase over the same period in 2008. In Bellevue specifically, however, there was a 31 percent increase. The demographics for the clients in the food programs are very similar to those in the emergency financial assistance program.

The agency enjoyed an excellent in-kind response during the holidays and was able to serve everyone who asked for assistance. The agency is currently looking at different delivery models and is seeking to be very creative given that the current trends could be just the tip of the iceberg.

Mr. Bizek reiterated that the Salvation Army will be increasing its current \$1000 per year for emergency food to \$1000 per month. That will allow for increasing the amount of food in each food bag, and will permit people to come to the agency for a food bag more frequently. The feeding program hosted by the Salvation Army but operated by other agencies has grown from an average of 50 people a year ago to between 70 and 90 five nights per week; the program is close to reaching the limits of the building.

Mr. Brian Anderson with the Emergency Feeding Program said the program offers non-perishable bags of groceries to clients. The bags are distributed through some 132 partner social service agencies, schools, food banks and faith-based agencies throughout King County. Anyone requesting food is accommodated without income restrictions. There have been marked increases in the number of folks coming forward in need of help with food. There was been a 47 percent increase in orders from the distribution partners in the last quarter of 2008 over the same period in 2007, and an 86 percent increase in January 2009 over the same month in 2008. On the Eastside, the partners requested 30 percent more bags in the last quarter of 2008. To date in 2009, the overall increase in requests has been 56 percent on the Eastside.

Mr. Anderson said most of the people seeking assistance are below the federal poverty level. In Bellevue specifically, a lot of Latino families are coming to the agency for help, and in most cases they heard about the program through word of mouth. The majority of folks who do not already know about the program find out about it through the 2-1-1 system.

The program is facing challenges in keeping the food bags flowing. There was very good community support during the holidays. Several funding sources are in place to be used to purchase goods, but they fall short of the total need. The agency is ramping up its food drive efforts to assure ample supplies for the summer months. In September 2008 the program simply ran out of food and was not able to fill all the orders; that backlog has since been cleared, but the need is still great and is increasing.

Maggie Sung with Refugee Women's Alliance said the agency is working under its first contract with the city of Bellevue, but has been serving Bellevue residents for many years in the Seattle office. The holistic agency serves refugees and immigrants. Under the basic food contract, the agency is outreaching to the refugee and immigrant populations in Bellevue and educating them about the food stamp program in their own language. Flyers have been printed in several languages and posted in grocery stores and community centers. A Russian native is working with that community, and soon a Hispanic will be on board to work with that population.

Ms. Sung said the agency has been seeing some who had gotten themselves off of the program now turning back to it because of the economic downturn. Specific workshops on employment are being given so the clients can work their way back to self sufficiency.

Commissioner Plaskon asked what eligibility requirements are in place for the program. Ms. Sung said the food stamp guidelines are followed, which means people must be at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Any refugee or immigrant can come to the office to receive services for free. Referrals are made as needed to other agencies, including DSHS.

Chair Stout asked Ms. Clayton-Strunk if consideration is being given to distributing food more often than twice per month. The response she gave was that the program is looking to convert to a grocery store model that would give the client the option of choosing how often they want to come seeking food; clients would be given a monthly allotment of food points, then if they wanted to shop every day they could until their allotment for the month was used up.

Parks Director Patrick Foran asked the representatives if they all had enough food to distribute. Each indicated that they do for the present, except Mr. Bizek said the Salvation Army is very short on food for handing out. Mr. Foran said the city will not want to spend time and effort on things that are not needed. If the time comes when the demands outstrip the supply, the city should be made aware so help can be sought.

Ms. Clayton-Strunk said each of the agencies relies on donations for the majority of the food distributed. During the holidays the community responded very generously, but as the economy continues to slide downward, it could be that donations will begin to dry up.

Mr. Bizek said the Salvation Army actually saw its food donations decrease during the holidays which has left the organization very short on groceries. Mr. Anderson pointed out that in September the Emergency Feeding Program ran out of food to distribute.

Mr. Bizek informed the Commission that the Salvation Army received a grant that is allowing it to operate an after-school program aimed at feeding children. The program will run through the summer.

Ms. Sung said her agency helps anyone who walks into the office without asking for any documentation. The programs offered address domestic violence, developmental disabilities, early childhood education, family support, and vocational training. Clients are served in-house where possible, but where it is not possible they are referred to other agencies. For the food part of the organization, the goal is to get people connected to what they need and to assist them in becoming self sufficient.

6. DISCUSSION

A. City of Bellevue's Recession Response

Mr. Foran said the city's plan to address the recession is not fully cooked and still has a long way to go. He informed the Commission that the city as an organization is trying to get its arms around the current unique conditions and the drivers behind them and trying to determine what the role of local government should be. He said at a recent leadership team meeting the focus was on what should be done to continue providing services if and when conditions get worse. Contingency plans are being developed that include significant budget cuts, and no one is under the illusion that things will quickly turn around. At the end of the conversation he shared that earlier in the day he had participated in division meetings focused on the budget and had asked how many present had had friends or family members recently lose their jobs; of the 40 or 50 present, well over half raised their hands.

Mr. Foran said the leadership team recognizes that the role of local government during difficult economic times is to show a certain amount of targeted leadership. The city is facing increases in demand and a potential major decrease in resources. If the non-profit network collapses, the city as a whole will be in trouble.

The city has all kinds of emergency response plans for everything imaginable. In any given crises each department knows exactly how it is supposed to respond in mobilizing resources. The economic situation, however, is somewhat different. The leadership team concluded that if the economic crisis is a unique extreme condition that will last for a certain length of time and then end, there should be some discussion about a unique response. A collaborative approach focused on tackling the impacts will generate a more comprehensive response.

All of this is happening just as the Needs Update is being developed. It has occurred to staff that going to the Council to recite the same things that are recited every time the document is updated would be inappropriate. Instead, staff offered an abbreviated view of the outreach process and then focused on the need for the city to have a response to the current crisis. The Council was supportive and collectively wants a way to respond. They directed staff to come back very soon with an outline

of what the response might be. They stressed that there are already specific and unique things the city departments can just do without having a new plan in place and that any new response plan should focus on other things that could be made happen in a relatively short time.

It is clear that a response plan will not be about spending more money, because no one has any more money to spend. The focus will need to be more about where the money is going and what it is being used for.

Mr. Foran said what people will need first in developing a plan is good information. People are asking all kinds of questions about the stimulus package, but there are no good answers yet.

It is clear that the city has organizations, departments, staff and resources that are directly related to public outreach. If the city does a really good job of focusing its efforts in that direction, the final result could be a community building exercise with neighborhood associations looking out for their neighbors. It is less important now to worry about whether or not a sidewalk will be constructed and more important to worry about whether or not a neighbor has enough food, or if their mortgage is going to be foreclosed on soon. What is needed is an increase in the capacity of the community to respond at some level.

Mr. Foran said the city has initiated a blog in which the question is on what the city can do to help. It has become the most populated blog the city has ever had. Individual employees are getting jazzed about figuring out ways to help. The police and fire departments have jumped on the idea of having a competition for a food drive. It has been suggested that a pool should be formed based on who is going to win.

Collaborating on causes rather than on projects will be more effective. By strategically and deliberately energizing community organizations, it will be possible to generate additional resources to get through the mess.

There will inevitably be gaps. The city currently plays the role of gap filler and will continue to be a very important function. It could be that organizations need volunteers and that city staff could help fill the need.

Mr. Foran said a task force with representatives from each city department is working on a response plan. They will be putting together a series of immediate actions along with a series of things that should be put in place.

Assistant Director Terry Smith said the first step will be to have a simple discussion about the needs in the community from what is being heard or seen. That information will then be processed and the pieces placed in different category buckets before generating a fair city response. Some training for the front-line people will be done on active listening and asking effective questions. As information is

generated with regard to where to turn for help it will be posted on the website. Within the city there are many who want to help in whatever way they can, as organizations or as individuals. There are also individuals in the city with needs, and ways must be found to get them together with those who want to help. There will be strategic issues rise during the process; one example is the impact the increased needs coupled with reduced funding is having on human service organizations.

Mr. Foran said the goal is to have something ready by April 15. The list could include repurposing some community centers, or rooms within community centers, to provide kitchens and the like.

Commissioner Beighle pointed out that it will do no good to connect those with needs to service organizations if the organizations do not have the dollars they need to provide services. Mr. Smith said that certainly is an issue that will need to be addressed.

Commissioner Huenefeld-Gese said improved communications between agencies will be essential. Mr. Smith concurred, noting that that is the emergency preparedness philosophy and strategy. Many providers will need to focus more on triage than on their traditional approach.

Chair Stout suggested the call centers will need to be at the center of it all and as such will need to be adequately funded. Commissioner Huenefeld-Gese agreed but pointed out that call centers do not receive much of the glamour associated with providing services because they do not actually give out food or put the homeless in shelters. The fact is, however, they are integral to the overall system. The communities may need to step up and help sell the community on the value of the centers, and make sure the resource is bolstered. Mr. Foran agreed as well, noting that the 2-1-1 system can help to alleviate calls to the emergency 9-1-1 center.

Mr. Adriano said if 2-1-1 in fact loses as much funding as they could under the current budget cuts, the service could be lost. He asked the Commissioners if they would favor setting up a similar service in Bellevue should that scenario play out. Commissioner Seltzer said it would make more sense to take steps to keep the 2-1-1 system from collapsing. Mr. Smith agreed and suggested that should be part of a proactive response to the crisis; the response could include additional funding from the various jurisdictions and/or getting more volunteers trained to work at 2-1-1.

Commissioner Seltzer said at the very least 2-1-1 and the services offered should be advertised in a big way. Commissioner Hoople agreed and added that more should be done to advertise the mini city halls the city has in place where people can obtain assistance.

7. OLD BUSINESS – None

8. NEW BUSINESS – None

9. PETITIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

Ms. Pavla Grover said few people realize the large number of calls Service First fields. She said the average is 200 calls per day, a large number of which are from people seeking information about services. Referrals are often made to organizations that provide food and shelter. It will be essential for the Service First staff to have the information they need to make proper referrals.

10. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Stout adjourned the meeting at 8:54 p.m.

Secretary to the Human Services Commission

Date

Chairperson of the Human Services Commission

Date