

CITY OF BELLEVUE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MINUTES

May 21, 2019
6:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
City Council Conference Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chairperson Mercer, Commissioners Ma, McEachran, Oxrieder, Piper

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioners Jain, Kline

STAFF PRESENT: Alex O'Reilly, Dee Dee Catalano, Christy Stangland, Toni Esparza, Natalie Minas, Department of Parks and Community Services

GUEST SPEAKERS: Theresa Burton, Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Family; Betty Takahashi, Bellevue School District; Jennifer Gibbs, Lutheran Community Services; Rhiannon Brill, Friends of Youth; Paul Lwali, Friends of Youth.

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m. by Chair Mercer who presided.

2. ROLL CALL

Upon the call of the roll, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioners Jain and Kline, both of whom were excused.

3. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS – None

4. COMMUNICATIONS FROM CITY COUNCIL, COMMUNITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS – None

On behalf of the Youth Link Board, Assistant Director of the Department of Parks and Community Services Toni Esparza invited the Commissioners to attend the upcoming Community Leadership Awards ceremony on May 29. She noted that the award categories had been changed to include a more diverse representation of leadership.

5. STAFF AND COMMISSIONER REPORTS

Human Services Manager Alex O'Reilly took a moment to honor Commissioner McEachran for his eight years of service on the Commission, and Commissioner Oxrieder for her four years of service. She said their wisdom and support had been exemplary.

Ms. Esparza thanked Commissioner McEachran and Commissioner Oxrieder for their dedicated investment in the work of the Commission. She presented each with a certificate of appreciation and a mug.

Commissioner McEachran admitted that he had had no idea what would happen upon being appointed to the Commission. He noted that he had recently retired as the senior pastor of a large faith community and that he could next be appointed assistant to the new bishop. He said he also had applied to become a member on the Arts Commission. He said his service on the Commission had been in the company of a lot of very nice people.

Commissioner Oxrieder thanked the Commissioners she served with for their insights and dedication, and the staff for the amazing work they do. She said during her tenure on the Commission she had learned a great deal about the community and added that learning more is what she would miss the most.

Chair Mercer commented that she had gone through two funding cycles with Commissioner McEachran and Commissioner Oxrieder and said she found that the work brings about a great appreciation for those also doing the work.

6. INFORMATION FOR THE COMMISSION

A. Child Welfare System Panel

Ms. O'Reilly stated that during the off years in the two-year funding cycle, the Commission embraces the opportunity to become educated about issues in the community. She said a discussion of the child welfare system was suggested by Commissioner Piper.

Ms. Theresa Burton, area administrator for the McKinney Vento program for the Bellevue office of the state Department of Children, Youth and Family. She said the Bellevue office is the largest in the state and it serves Snoqualmie, Carnation, Duvall, Preston, Woodinville, Redmond, Kirkland, parts of Bothell, Mercer Island, Bellevue and Renton. Safety first for kids is the goal of the department and if that cannot be accomplished in the home the focus turns to home care followed by permanency and wellbeing. The office is charged with providing reasonable effort toward reunification, active effort where the child is Native American. In the event a child will not be returned to their home, placement is sought in a home willing to serve for the long term.

Ms. Burton explained that where child abuse or neglect is suspected, an intake call is made. The intake worker gathers the information and decides if the situation minimally meets the state law standards for physical abuse, sex abuse, sexual exploitation or neglect, which are the situations in which the department intervenes. There are specific RCWs that define each of those. For example, the definition of physical abuse is any non-accidental injury to a child, shaking a child under the age of three, and punching a child with a fist as opposed to an open hand. A parent can physically discipline their child but it cannot be excessive and must be for the purpose of disciplining.

The Commissioners were told that most cases referred to the department are in regard to neglect. Just over 60 percent of all cases fall into that category. The next highest percentage is physical abuse, and the smallest percentage is sex abuse. The struggle with neglect is that it is usually chronic and ongoing. Sometimes it can be difficult to remove children from situations where there is neglect where it does not rise to the level of being a threat to their safety. As such, neglect cases are extremely challenging and the department tends to see repeat families.

In 2015 some 108,000 total calls were made to the hotline. In following up on those calls, only a small percentage of children were actually removed from their homes. Of the total number of calls, 95,000 were classified as non-CPS intake contacts. A grandparent raising their grandchildren who face a medical emergency can call the department seeking help; that is considered a non-CPS intake. The department employs family voluntary service workers who work with families to prevent removal and placement in the foster care system. From the total calls, only about 40,000 resulted in personal visits; the balance were screened out.

The Family Assessment Response (FAR) program was launched in 2015 as an alternative to investigations in cases of low- to moderate-risk situations. Department workers go in to determine if safety is an issue but they also make assessments for services. Where there is sex abuse suspected and serious physical injury, the cases are referred to department investigators who in turn almost always work with law enforcement. Typically, the FAR program involves cases of neglect. In 2015, there were 20,000 families worked with, and of those only 6227 cases resulted in the removal of children. Acting on the primary goal of reunification, 3646 kids were returned to their families during that year. Not all kids, of course, can be allowed to go back home. Of those not returned to their families, some 1400 were adopted, 466 were entered into guardianships, and others exited without a plan.

Ms. Burton said the department is currently in dire need of placement homes. She said she has kids in the system who are going into hotel spaces. Placement homes are a better answer, even if they can only take a child for a couple of nights.

Chair Mercer asked if the situation is currently dire because there are more kids in need of placement, or because there are fewer people willing to open their homes for

placements. Ms. Burton said the latter is true. In 2008 there was a push that resulted in having some 400 options. Many of those people, however, chose not to re-up their license and thus were removed from the system. Adding to that the fact that the emergency process can take quite a lot of time, and new requirements for foster parents to vaccinate their biological children, has resulted in additional losses. She said she could not say that statistically there are more kids in the system than there have been in the past.

Commissioner McEachran asked about placing children in hotels. Ms. Burton allowed that it is not an ideal approach. The department works diligently to find homes for children and to avoid using the hotel option.

Commissioner McEachran asked how many workers there are in the department who are doing the work with children. Ms. Burton commented that social worker retention is an issue. In 2015-2016, turnover in the office reached 100 percent. It has gotten better, but younger workers find that they can move on to other jobs fairly easily and receive a much higher wage with less stress. Case workers should have no more than 18 active cases, but most currently have 30. The department must respond to intakes within 24 hours, and on days when the number of intakes is high, it is very difficult to do that given the limited number of workers.

Commissioner Piper asked how widespread substance abuse is. Ms. Burton said 75 percent of the cases involve substance abuse. The remaining cases involve mental health, serious injuries where there is an intent to harm, and sex abuse.

Ms. Betty Takahashi, the McKinney Vento liaison for the Bellevue School District, said the district was not mandated to work with foster children until the Every Child Succeeds Act in 2016. Passage of the Act meant that each school district had to designate a liaison for the McKinney Vento students, homeless students and foster care students. She said there are currently 25 foster care children in the Bellevue School District; in 2018 there were 64, in 2017 there were 38, and in 2016 there were eight. Previously, the only way the district knew about foster children was if the parent indicated such on the registration form. Now there is a database that can be downloaded from the state and that has proven to be very helpful.

Ms. Takahashi said the most important thing is for foster children to remain in their school. If a child is taken by CPS for any reason, or if they change placements, particular attention is given to making sure the children remain in their current schools, though that is not always possible for various reasons, such as a lack of foster care families in Bellevue. The students can be transported from out of the district to their school, or if it is not safe for the child to continue in their school, they can be enrolled in another school. The transportation issues can be challenging, particularly if a child is placed far from their home school. Students who move into the district from another district are enrolled in a local school right away. If pulled from an abusive situation, the district is able to ensure that their records are not traceable.

Placement of foster children in Bellevue is an issue because there are not enough families. High school kids sometimes must stay in the school office, the DSHS office or in a hotel. Others simply move around from place to place on a daily basis. The district works with DSHS on transportation issues, particularly the first couple of days after a child is taken from their family.

Ms. Takahashi said one challenge for the district is that social workers get changed and the school is not notified. That makes it difficult to know who to call in the event of a problem and in trying to set up transportation. The district drafted a notification form with all pertinent information about each child, including contact information for social workers. Students in foster care are afforded help the same as any other child, including participation in clubs and sports. Where there are fees involved, they are taken care of by Tree House, DSHS or some other means.

There have been issues associated with finding before- and after-school child care for foster children. The district works with its own child care system in addition to reaching out to other providers for help, allowing foster parents to work their jobs. Effort is put into getting kids into summer programs.

The district has been working to inform teaching staff about trauma-informed care for both foster and homeless kids. Two training sessions have been held to date so teachers can be more aware of the issues facing the children so they can be more understanding. The district is also working to ensure there are mental health services available to the students. Groups teaching various life skills are made available to foster kids.

Commissioner Piper asked about McKinney Vento and how it is funded. Ms. Takahashi said McKinney Vento is a federal law that ensures the educational rights of homeless students. Under the law, money is set aside for different services students need, including books for the running start program, free and reduced lunch, and other programs.

Ms. Burton stated that when a child first comes into care, a CPS worker is assigned the case, conducts the investigation and goes to court with a recommendation. If the court determines the child should be removed, the case is automatically transferred to a new social worker. The school district may not know who the new social worker is. She agreed that is a gap that needs to be filled.

Ms. Jennifer Gibbs, a social worker with and program manager for Lutheran Community Services (LCS), said she has been with the organization for ten years. The program was developed for foster families and was intended from the start to prevent foster care drift, or children moving from foster home to foster home, and the trauma that creates. The ultimate goal is permanency for children, whether it be with their own families or through guardianship or adoption. She explained that the licensing of foster families is done by LCS, which also provides supervision for the children. The challenges seen by LCS are different from those seen by families that

are just with the state. LCS enjoys small caseloads and works closely with foster homes. Social workers are assigned to work with families from the time they come into the system to the time they exit the system.

Ms. Gibbs said social worker turnover is a huge issue for foster kids. Another challenge is recruiting foster families willing to commit to taking on kids for a period of time, including permanently. Permanent placements are the primary goal of LCS. As a private agency, LCS needs to retain its foster care families, but that is hard to do. Many families have become frustrated with the system and feel they receive inadequate training from the system.

One of the biggest things the agency is seeing is kids coming back into foster care. Reunification is always the overall plan after foster kids are with foster parents for a year or two, but too often after reunification they are coming back into their foster homes. For some children, the cycle repeats itself three or four times, and often the issue is that they are neglected by their natural families, often due to substance abuse problems.

Because LCS social workers have small caseloads, they are able to work closely with foster kids and foster families. They are able to go to court with foster families to explain issues and situations, and to sit down in meetings with foster families to explain what is happening and to make suggestions for what should be done.

Chair Mercer asked if the licensing done by LCS is done differently from the way the state does it, and if the agency competes with the state for the same foster families. Ms. Gibbs said the licensing requirements are all the same. Ms. Burton said she did not believe the recruiting done by LCS is in direct competition with her department. She said the ultimate goal for both organizations is to see more foster homes licensed and available to accept kids.

Ms. Rhiannon Brill with Friends of Youth commented that there has been more of a collaborative approach recently. The focus has turned more to building a hub foster parents can go to get connected with an agency or the state based on their demographics.

Chair Mercer asked what determines where a child gets placed. Ms. Gibbs said everyone receives the same referral when a child needs a placement. Ms. Burton said the forms are filled out and mailed to the placement team which in turn emails the information out to foster parents and private agencies. Foster parents then indicate if they are interested or not.

Ms. O'Reilly asked if it has been found that children of different ages or with different issues fare better in getting placed in a private system as opposed to in the state system. Ms. Gibbs said one advantage private agencies have is that they know their foster families very well and can work to ensure a good fit. Ms. Burton allowed that

foster parents not working with a private agency receive the placement referral emails and must decide on their own whether or not they are a good fit for a particular child.

Commissioner McEachran asked how many social workers LCS has. Ms. Gibbs said there are supposed to be one program manager and three social workers, but currently she is the only person at the agency. Work is under way to fill the vacant positions.

Ms. Burton said Overlake Christian Church has opened its visitation center to her department so when parents visit, everyone can play ping pong and other games. The church is also trying to get a contract to serve as visit providers.

Ms. O'Reilly asked who helps the parents of foster children get the services and treatments they need. Ms. Burton said her workers do that.

Mr. Paul Lwali, president and CEO of Friends of Youth, said the agency has been in operation on the Eastside for close to 67 years and annually serves about 6500 kids with a primary focus on youth homelessness but also youth and family services and child welfare. The agency works closely with other agencies and with the state. The youth who seek help generally are facing a trauma and they are provided help and services accordingly.

Ms. Brill said she is the director of residential services for Friends of Youth and as such oversees the agency's child welfare work, including residential facilities and the foster care program. She said like everyone else, the goal of the agency is to reunify youth with their biological families. To accomplish that requires working closely with both the DCYF and the biological families. In the residential facility there are youth who have committed sexual offenses or displayed inappropriate sexual behavior, and the focus for them is on getting them the treatment they need so they can hopefully be reunited with their families.

Ms. Brill said the other panelists had done a very good job of identifying areas of improvement. She said Friends of Youth runs into a lot of transition for the youth with DCYF workers, going from placement to placement to placement, which then impacts their schooling. Friends of Youth is also struggling with getting foster parents licensed. Finding willing families is difficult, but some licenses have sat on the state's desk for three or four months waiting approval. The licensing process is quite invasive, which is needed to make sure licensed homes are safe for youth, but the process itself can trigger frustrations and application withdrawal by the parents. The best recruitment option is word of mouth by foster parents.

Like DCYF, Friends of Youth gets calls for youth in crisis. Training is provided to the foster parents so they understand how to deal with high-needs youth who are displaying behavioral issues and who might have drug and alcohol or mental health concerns. DCYF caseworkers do not have the ability to provide in-depth personal

training to either foster parents or to kids because their caseloads are overwhelming. The maximum caseload for Friends of Youth caseworkers is 12.

Ms. Brill stressed the need for the state and private agencies to work together to address concerns, including licensing and application issues. She said Friends of Youth may serve a population that other agencies do not serve and by working together the needs can be better met.

Chair Mercer asked what are the best ways for the city to positively impact foster care, other than having everyone tell their friends to sign up to be foster parents. Ms. Brill said on the grand scale she would like to see more programs that provide structure for youth. Such programs should be outside of residential home or foster care settings. She said a recent federal mandate has put a focus on prevention which is certainly a key element. Being able to reach youth and children early on who are showing some moderate risk behaviors and helping them to build skills would minimize the number in need of care down the road.

Mr. Lwali added that there are many in the community who simply do not know how overwhelmed the child welfare system is. Anything done to raise awareness would be helpful. Friends of Youth is very good at doing what it does, but it is not as good at marketing awareness of the needs.

Ms. Burton said there is a clear need for transitional housing, especially housing that will accept men and children. There are men out there willing to parent their children, but few shelters that will accept them.

Ms. Gibbs stressed the importance of community and collaboration. She said the Washington Association of Children and Families comes together on a regular basis to talk about how to collectively serve children. Everyone has the same goal and as such it only makes sense for all groups to work together toward achieving that goal.

Ms. Burton said there are planning meetings held on a regular basis at which providers are brought in to talk about progress and to focus on permanency planning. There is a lot of communication happening on a regular basis. Fostering Together is an organization that helps recruit foster parents. Office Moms and Dads is a volunteer program that involves having people spend time with children at the DCYF office so caseworkers can get things done. It would be great to have something like a group home facility in Bellevue that could handle the higher-end kids.

Ms. Gibbs said she sees a large number of referrals, almost on a daily basis, for high-needs kids who have a lot of issues and who are acting out.

Ms. Burton said there were budget issues three or four years ago in which all of the assessment beds were cut. While it used to be possible to place children in a behavioral rehabilitation home (BRS) willing to take them for 30 days during which

time an assessment was carried out, now kids with behavioral issues end up staying in hotels.

Ms. Brill said Friends of Youth has BRS homes as well and the kids placed in them are generally aggressive, violent, prone to run from programs and are not engaged in treatments. BRS homes require more funding due to a need for a higher level of training and the level of support needed from caseworkers.

Commissioner Ma said it was his understanding that there are few group homes on the Eastside and in King County generally. He asked if group homes are needed to serve as BRS facilities. Ms. Burton said she can sometimes place a child in a group home such as a therapeutic foster home, but often they require 24/7 monitoring for various reasons. Kids usually do not rise to needing a BRS facility until they have blown out of foster care, and reunification is difficult given behaviors that are beyond what the parents can manage. Group home facilities have more staff, which is certainly needed.

Ms. Brill said there are only a handful of group home facilities on the Eastside. She said the new federal mandate is focused on preventive care, but there are kids that cannot be helped with that approach alone because of their behaviors. It would be wonderful if there were no group homes because that would mean all the kids are skillful enough to be in a less restrictive setting, but that is not the case, so group homes are necessary.

Ms. Burton said there are only two long-term hospitals in the entire state that take high-needs children, one in Tacoma and one in Spokane. The clip list for those kids is very long. There is a clear need for more such facilities.

Commissioner Ma asked what percentage of kids fall into the high-needs category. Ms. Burton said she did not have an exact figure but pointed out that even though there are relatively few, their needs are so great someone must work with them every day. Some are youth who are on their own and engaging in risky behaviors, including sexual exploitation. Commissioner Ma asked if increasing funding for high-needs cases would also decrease the load overall. Ms. Burton said it would. Commissioner Ma pointed out that even though high-risk kids are a small subset of the overall population, working with them would ultimately end up helping a lot more because of the ripple effect. It is important to support services that help the most needy in the population, even if they are fewer in number.

Chair Mercer thanked the panelists for their time and information.

Ms. Esparza challenged the Commission to reach out to hear from a few foster parents and from youth who have been in foster care. She said an organization in Seattle called the Mockingbird Society involves youth who have been in foster care advocating for themselves. Their point of view is that while those in charge may think they know what is best for foster care kids, they likely do not have first-hand

experience of what it is like to be in foster care. In Washington state there are some 10,000 children in foster care. Over 2000 of them are waiting for adoptive families, leaving 8000 who are waiting to see if they will be reunified. She said she had to date cared for more than 30 foster children in her home and faced a number of challenges, including being inundated daily with lists of children who need a place to go. Investing more money in addressing the needs of youth that have higher needs would create some flexibility in the system, but there is also a great need for post-placement care. Foster parents are frequently put in the position of having to negotiate for dollars that do not even remotely cover caring for the children in their homes. She said she personally knows a lot of families that would have kept their foster care licenses open, even post adoption, were it not for the fact that the system that must be navigated in order to care for a child goes away once adoption goes through. The needs, however, do not go away.

Commissioner McEachran said he had heard consistently about the incapacity of agencies to maintain quality providers of service and care due largely to huge caseloads.

Commissioner Piper said he is a licensed foster care parent with a license that was set to lapse in July. He said sadly many parents like him are one and done because of how incredibly frustrating it can be to participate in the system. People have different motivations for becoming foster parents, but getting rich is not one of them. He said he has been in the position of having to negotiate with the state over reimbursement given the level of care required. He agreed that while it was helpful for the Commission to learn about the child welfare system, the panel presentation did not in any way paint a complete picture.

Ms. O'Reilly agreed to work toward having a panel of foster care parents and those who have been in the system as foster kids.

7. INFORMATION FOR THE COMMISSION

A. CDBG Citizen Participation Plan

Grant Coordinator Dee Dee Catalano explained that HUD requires all CDBG entitlement cities to have a Citizen Participation Plan. The plan spells out how citizens can advise and be advised about both minor and substantial amendments to the Annual Action Plan and the five-year Consolidated Plan. The main criteria for a substantial amendment is that there must be a formal process involving public notice and a 30-day public comment period. Also required is coordination with King County and the other cities who must all submit their substantial amendments together. A public comment period is not required for a minor amendment. A minor amendment can entail changing up to 50 percent of an award, or either canceling or adding a new project. All minor and substantial amendments must be approved by the Commission according to the rules. The addition of any project to the list must be also approved by the City Council.

A motion to approve the new Citizen Participation Plan was made by Commissioner McEachran. The motion was seconded by Chair Mercer and the motion carried unanimously.

8. OLD BUSINESS

Ms. Stangland reported that the tour of Friends of Youth scheduled for May 22 would be rescheduled to either July 17 or 24.

Commissioner Oxrieder shared that her work for the school district included writing for the superintendent of the school board. She said after retiring she took a two-year evening program on how to write popular fiction and managed to complete one novel. Since then she has begun an historical fiction work that takes place in the Andes of Peru in the 1890s. The work is based on family history. She said leaving the Commission would give her more time to do the work.

9. NEW BUSINESS

Ms. O'Reilly reported that interviews for the two open Commission seats have been scheduled for June 14.

Ms. O'Reilly also informed the Commission that she and intern Natalie Minas are working to monitor funded programs. A monitoring visit to two Bellevue School District programs was recently completed, and a visit is set to take place soon regarding the three funded Bellevue College programs.

Ms. Catalano reported that along with staff from Shoreline she would be conducting a monitoring visit on May 23 to the Sound Generations Minor Home Repair Program, which is funded with CDBG dollars.

10. CONTINUED ORAL COMMUNICATIONS – None

11. ADJOURNMENT

A motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Oxrieder. The motion was seconded by Commissioner McEachran and the motion carried unanimously.

Chair Mercer adjourned the meeting at 7:56 p.m.

Secretary to the Human Services Commission

Date

Chairperson of the Human Services Commission

Date