

CITY OF BELLEVUE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MINUTES

September 21, 2010
6:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
City Council Conference Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chairperson Huenefeld Gese, Commissioners
Bruels, Plaskon, Stout, Yantis

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioners Beighle, Hoople

STAFF PRESENT: Emily Leslie, Alex O'Reilly, Joseph Adriano, Megan
Farwell, Terry Smith, Department of Parks and
Community Services

GUEST SPEAKERS: None

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:33 p.m. by Chair Huenefeld Gese who presided.

2. ROLL CALL

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

3. PETITIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS – None

4. STAFF AND COMMISSION REPORTS

Human Services Manager Emily Leslie reported that earlier in the day she had attended the meeting of the King County Alliance for Human Services. She said staff from King County was present, and the Dow Constantine “worst-case-scenario” budget was discussed. If the sales tax measure is approved in November, a different budget will be developed. It was reported that there are fund sources for some human services, but in terms of the general fund portion for human services, the county is proposing going to zero. The King County Alliance is gearing up to testify at the County Council budget hearings, the second one of which is slated for October 5 at the Bellevue City Hall.

Ms. Leslie pointed out that October 5 is the Commission's regular meeting night. She noted that the Commission would be making its presentation to the Council on October 4 and proposed canceling the October 5 meeting. The Commissioners concurred.

Grant Coordinator Joseph Adriano said he met earlier in the day with the Severe Weather Shelter contractor, Parks structural personnel, and a representative from the Police Department to go over details. A number of revisions were made to the activation criteria, including relying on Acuweather instead of the National Weather Service to determine if overnight temperatures will drop to or below the freezing mark.

Human Services Planner Alex O'Reilly informed the Commissioners that on October 7 at the North Bellevue Community Center there will be a forum focused on veterans issues and services on the Eastside. Joel Estey with the King County Veterans Levy Project is working to put together a panel of speakers.

Ms. O'Reilly also reported that the second annual November meeting for the Eastside Easy Rider Collaborative is scheduled for November 3. The agenda for the meeting includes staff from Washington State Department of Transportation talking about SR-520 tolling, which is set to begin in the spring of 2011. A number of human services providers are expected to attend and comment on how the tolls could negatively impact low-income families.

5. DISCUSSION

A. Debrief 2011-2012 Human Services Funding Process

Mr. Adriano said two years ago some of the ideas for streamlining the process included dividing the applications up based on the needs identified in the Needs Update, specifically breaking up the applications in terms of need areas; and postponing the review of certain applications that would likely be funded, in other words the historically stronger programs. At the time, however, it was decided the Commission would wait until the 2011-2012 funding cycle to determine what should be done differently.

The funding deliberations just undertaken largely mirrored the 2008 process in terms of breaking up into teams and following the traditional goal areas. One major difference, of course, was the focus on the economic recession. Another notable aspect was the HSConnect expansion that added eight cities to the joint process, bringing the total to 17. That complicated the coordination process because all 17 cities had to be brought on board. The substance of the application was maintained, but during the next review some of the cities are going to want to see changes to some of the questions. Before those discussions occur, however, it would be a good idea for the Commission to talk about the questions it would like to see asked on the next application.

The fact that the applications were filled out entirely online was new to the process. The printouts that each city received were not the best, however; they were not well formatted, especially the tables, and that made them very difficult to read. Those details are being worked out with eCityGov.

The Commission identified issues related to the economic recession as possibly determining factors for funding. That affected two programs targeted towards homeless women, a program for homeless veterans, and the Sea Mar Community Health program, which largely targets the Latino community.

Mr. Adriano said after the first reading of the applications, the Commission identified programs that were unlikely to be successful for various reasons. That saved time during the second round.

Commissioner Stout asked if in the future it will be necessary to reach funding decisions much earlier in the year. Ms. Leslie said the anticipation is that the schedule that applied to the most recent funding cycle will be the schedule followed into the foreseeable future.

Commissioner Plaskon asked what comments are being offered by other municipalities. Mr. Adriano said early in the process when the focus was on determining what questions should be asked in the joint application, there was a lot of angst, particularly on the part of the south county cities. There were certain questions they did not want asked, and others that they did want asked. For example, they wanted to eliminate the questions focused on cultural competency. The various cities have not gotten together yet for a debriefing of the 2010 funding cycle; that will happen sometime during 2011.

Commissioner Plaskon asked why Seattle is not part of the group. Ms. Leslie explained that Seattle does not engage in the same competitive process and does not have a commission to make recommendations; all recommendations are made by the staff. Seattle is unique in that they offer some grants but also offer direct services. King County has inquired about the joint process, but not Seattle.

Commissioner Stout said she felt strongly about maintaining the cultural competency question in the application. A number of agencies have shown growth in that arena, but the problems are not yet resolved.

Commissioner Plaskon asked how many, if any, applications were started by agencies but not completed because the process is too difficult. Mr. Adriano said there were about 20 applications that were started but not finished, but it appears it was the system that caused them to drop out rather than the actual application questions. Most of those applications were from south county grass-roots organizations that largely lack technical expertise.

Commissioner Stout said she heard a number of complaints about the online application from Friends of Youth staff, most of whom are tech savvy. One of their issues related to importing Word documents. Mr. Adriano said during the process it was found that text copied and pasted from Word would sometimes turn into HTML format, which in some cases caused the maximum number of characters allowed to be exceeded. It was suggested that there may be some value to returning to the 1.0 method which allowed for completing the Word document offline and then uploading it, but with so many agencies having information already entered online that will not need to be repeated during the next round argues against that.

Commissioner Bruels suggested that despite the challenges, the fact that the Commission was able to work through the applications so quickly and efficiently is a testament to how well the information was organized and presented.

Commissioner Plaskon asked if the fully online approach makes more work for staff in preparing the information to be presented to the Commission. Ms. Leslie allowed that the technical part meant more work for Mr. Adriano, but in terms of the staff reviews it was not more work, except that the timeline was shortened.

Commissioner Plaskon said he appreciated the metrics that were listed and the way the agencies were asked to break things down in terms of outcomes and throughputs.

Commissioner Bruels said he noted during the process some confusion on the part of some agencies with regard to outputs and outcomes. He said it would be helpful to communicate with the agencies the difference between the two. It also would be helpful to have some standardization with regard to how cost per unit is determined. There was some apparent confusion relative to the issue of cultural competency which could possibly be improved by asking some of the questions in a more leading way.

Ms. O'Reilly said she recently has been working with some of the agencies helping to develop their draft scopes of work for their contracts. The scopes of work that get attached to the contracts include units of service as well as clients served and outcomes. She said she has found that many agencies are conducting some tracking in addition to just counting but it has not occurred to them to include that information in their applications. In the 2011 contracts, the agencies will be asked to set targets and by the time the next application process rolls around many more agencies will be moving toward outcomes over outputs. Outputs certainly are important, but the outcomes are true indicators of what differences are being made.

Commissioner Plaskon said he would not want to see the application answers focused only on outcomes that fall within a funding category. He said hearing from the agencies about all the services they provide is very helpful, even if those other programs are not going to be funded. Commissioner Bruels concurred, adding that anecdotal and non-empirical data is often just as valuable.

Commissioner Bruels asked if during the next funding cycle it would be possible to receive all of the materials electronically instead of in hard copy. Mr. Adriano said he personally read all of the applications in electronic format and that they could be delivered in that format to anyone who wants.

Commissioner Plaskon said he would like to see the Commission have an additional two or three weeks in which to review the applications and conduct its discussions. Ms. Leslie said it was the Budget One process that truncated the usual timeline, and she pointed out that the process will still be around in 2012. Commissioner Plaskon said one option would be to move forward the date when the reviews begin rather than trying to push forward the date when a recommendation must be in hand.

Chair Huenefeld Gese commented that because the applications had to be read in a much shorter period of time it was easier to remember the details of each when it came time to discussing them. It was helpful to just be submerged in the process.

Commissioner Yantis said he felt the review and discussion timeline had been adequate. He noted that the group is able to come to consensus fairly quickly. Commissioner Bruels agreed and said the group does a very good job of listening to each other, which helps move the discussion toward consensus.

Ms. Leslie said one of the tools staff uses to help make the process be as good as it can be is a survey of the agencies. She said she would make a summary of the survey available to the Commissioners.

6. DISCUSSION

A. Report on Contract Monitoring Visits

Mr. Adriano reported that staff conducted monitoring visits at 17 agencies and 20 programs, some in conjunction with colleagues from other cities. He said on an average year only about ten monitoring visits are made. In the earlier part of 2009 a different style of monitoring was tried in concert with Redmond and Kirkland. The questionnaire was revised to be more conversational and subjective. After five or six visits, however, it was determined that the hard contract information was just not being gathered, so the old format was brought back for the 2010 visits. The additional visits were necessary to catch up on information lost during the 2009 visits.

Mr. Adriano said monitoring activities are contractual requirements. Every contract includes language requiring agencies to make all information related to funded programs available to the city for evaluation. That includes all records and documents, including clinical and financial records. Monitoring visits are usually announced about a month in advance, and as a courtesy the agencies are provided beforehand with a checklist and the questionnaire that will be used during the visit. The issues covered during the visits include program operation, cultural competence,

the income guidelines used, program and agency administration, the quality of client records kept, financial records and recent audits, and reporting requirements. After each visit staff writes up a report letter that identifies any concerns raised during the visit that may require follow-up.

Mr. Adriano shared with the Commissioners the list of agencies visited and the programs they operate.

Ms. Farwell said one of the biggest things encountered was the way agencies do or do not verify the income levels of their clients. The Salvation Army indicated it uses three or four different documents to determine income level, but other agencies allowed that they do not verify income levels at all. Methods for verifying income include unemployment checks, letters from Workman's Compensation, verification from an employer, and proof that children qualify for free or reduced school lunch. The visit with Hopelink turned up the fact that their employment program was relying solely on client statements regarding income; that issue has since been rectified. ACRS reported that it does not verify incomes at all, and when asked why stated they thought it would be a barrier to their clients receiving services. Jubilee Reach noted that it uses some form of income verification for some of its clients, but admitted to using anecdotal information as well in lieu of actual verification.

Ms. Farwell said some agencies felt that the nature of the service they provide does not allow for verifying income levels. The Emergency Feeding Program is supposed to be there for clients in immediate need; it is not intended to be a long-term service, and as such the agency has chosen not to gather income information. The Youth Eastside Services (YES) and ACRS-Children, Youth & Families (CYF) programs both require their youth clients to meet a certain threshold before an intake form is completed; as a result, some youth went through the program without providing any income information. Additionally, for youth accessing services on their own, the agencies felt asking the youths to seek income information from their parents would be a barrier to service.

The questionnaires seek to know how agencies collaborate with other agencies to reach their goals. Most agencies were able to identify other agencies that receive grants from the city, as well as other organizations, but during the visits the staff were able to suggest other opportunities and venues through which they could broaden their service spectrums. Accordingly, the YMCA staff were encouraged to join FACES, and the ACRS CYF program staff sought help from the city in forming the relationships with school administrations that are needed to get their programs into the schools. The Emergency Feeding Program staff were encouraged to work more closely with the agencies that refer clients to them and to use shared intake forms as a way to improve their income verification efforts. The Refugee Women's Alliance was encouraged to connect with the Cultural Navigator Program at Crossroads and to join the Eastside Refugee and Immigrant Coalition (ERIC).

Ms. O'Reilly said following the monitoring visit the staff at Refugee Women's Alliance secured a room at Crossroads Community Center which they use on a regular basis, secured a room at Hopelink's Bellevue office, and opened talks with the Family Resource Center about having a room to use there.

Commissioner Plaskon said it would be helpful to bring out the previous year's monitoring reports when receiving visit updates so it can be known if the recommendations were followed up.

Commissioner Bruels concurred. He stressed that collaboration between agencies needs to be more than just resource lists and phone numbers. Commissioner Yantis suggested information regarding how well agencies have followed up on issues highlighted during monitoring visits would be useful to have during the funding cycle deliberations.

Ms. Farwell said no overt problems related to cultural competency were encountered during the recent visits. However, a number of agencies expressed the difficulties associated with working toward being a culturally competent organization. It is not always easy to find qualified persons who speak the right languages to fill open positions, and it is difficult to keep up with changing populations. Most of the agencies referenced the Cultural Navigator program and the Language Line as important resources they use to help fill the gap. St. Andrews Housing Group highlighted the difficulties associated with one of their properties where there are people from various cultural and religious groups live; their staff have had to spend a lot of time building relationships and trying to reach understanding.

Commissioner Plaskon commented that cultural competency is critical and as such needs to always be on the burner. Even if an agency is not able to become fully culturally competent, they need to understand that the city and other cities that fund them will expect them to be constantly moving in that direction. Ms. Farwell pointed out that as demographics change agencies must scramble to keep up; often they take the time and effort to build up the staffing needed to address one population, only to see the demographics change and another population in need of services comes to the front.

Mr. Adriano stressed that as things stand, the contract language includes no specific requirement relative to income verification. However, the applications become part of the contract file, and from the applications it is understood that services will be targeted toward low-income or otherwise disadvantaged clients. There is also no explicitly enforced cross-system standard for income verification, so individual providers determine their own financial screening policies. Courses of action could include implementation and contractual enforcement of a minimum requirement for income documentation, applicable universally or only to certain sectors, with exceptions for services such as basic needs and safety. Another option would be to maintain the current flexibility which allows agencies to implement their own processes.

Commissioner Bruels said part of the equation might be focused on the scarcity versus abundance of services. He suggested an agency may only be able to offer a set number of counseling hours, and if they do not verify income carefully non-qualified individuals might receive services to the exclusion of qualified individuals. On the other hand, a food bank with an abundance of food, including perishable goods, may be less stringent about verifying income in its attempt to give away their food as quickly as possible.

Commissioner Stout suggested that a young lesbian just coming out may be reluctant to seek income information from her family, or a young person desperately seeking assistance from YES may not want their families to know their situations. A woman involved in a domestic violence problem may have means but have no access to it. In those cases the humane thing to do would be to provide the service, especially where the safety of the recipient is evident.

Commissioner Yantis voiced his support for continuing with the status quo. He pointed out that most agencies funded by the city are serving far more clients than they are contracted to serve, so if a few people are slipping through the cracks it all works out in the end.

Ms. Emily said the one exception would be programs funded with CDBG dollars. The city must show documentation that the providers are collecting income data from the clients of those programs.

Ms. Farwell agreed that the nature of the services provided by some programs truly prevents asking for income verification. However, where long-term counseling is being provided, asking for a Medicaid letter of benefits should not be a barrier to receiving services. The overall number of unqualified clients receiving services is probably very low, but is still something that should be addressed.

Ms. O'Reilly said it would be helpful to have guidelines to rely on in making allocations decisions. If one agency is offered the option of not reporting income data, another agency offering similar services should not be penalized by being required to report income data. The same standard should be applied to all who are seeking funding from the city.

Commissioner Yantis said he would not oppose establishing a policy that would allow for some degree of flexibility. He suggested the staff is in the best position to know which agencies should strictly be required to verify income and those which should be allowed not to.

Commissioner Bruels commented that there is a political element involved. He said there are some with certain political persuasions who feel government should have no role in funding services for people who should be able to pay for the services themselves. To avoid trouble with that element, the city should be able to address

the concerns. Having the flexibility to hold agencies accountable for their income verification practices would be a good way to do that.

Commissioner Bruels said there is some legitimacy to the claim that asking for income information could prove to be a barrier to services. He said at any given time if someone were to ask him to verify his income it would be difficult to do for a variety of reasons. Persons challenged either physically or mentally would find it even more difficult to do. That should not, however, excuse agencies from even asking for income information.

Ms. Farwell said in evaluating agencies the focus should be on fairness, not on the accuracy of the information given. Those agencies that do not seek income information should at least be asked to state their reasons. Ms. O'Reilly pointed out that agencies must include in their applications the percentage of very low-, low- and moderate-income clients they serve, which begs the question of how they know the percentages if they are not asking for income data.

With regard to the development of effective collaborations among agencies, Mr. Adriano noted that some agencies do not score well in the category. In the application process agencies are asked to describe to what degree they are collaborating or not. The agencies that are not based on the Eastside have the farthest to go in developing collaborative relationships with other Eastside agencies. The potential courses of action that could be taken include city staff continuing to nudge agencies toward working collaboratively, intensifying the application language regarding collaborations.

Ms. O'Reilly said the top argument offered by agencies with regard to why they do not seek out collaborations is lack of staff time. That is especially the case for agencies that have smaller contracts with the city; their staff time is put primarily into providing the services for which the city is providing the funding. Collaborations should, however, be made a priority at the management level.

Commissioner Stout commented that collaboration is the most effective way to get the biggest bang for the service provided.

With regard to the cultural competency issue, Ms. O'Reilly said she and Ms. Farwell have been following a new effort by ERIC that was designed to address the concern that people of color have been turned away from receiving services from agencies as the recession has progressed. She said even within nonprofit agencies some staff have perceived their fellow staff being less helpful than they could be to refugees and immigrants. ERIC is looking at a several-pronged approach that will offer agencies resources based on training. Of course, many who attend training seminars are the ones who already get it. The thinking is that in addition there should be training offered that looks at the issue from a risk management aspect, that not being culturally competent could open an agency to discrimination lawsuits. That angle might bring more executive directors to the table. Some agencies have taken on the

whole cultural competency issue as a priority, and many of them believe the funders should play a heavier role in setting a higher standards. The fact is cultural competency is not a product, it is a process.

7. OLD BUSINESS

Ms. Leslie reminded the Commission that the kickoff for the Eastside Month of Concern for the Hungry is set for September 25. A proclamation was made by the Council on September 20. Collection sites will be established at about five locations, including City Hall.

Ms. Leslie acknowledged that Ms. Farwell's internship with the city was concluded and would start school again soon. She thanked her for her good work.

8. NEW BUSINESS

Commissioner Stout said it was her understanding that the Veterans and Human Services Levy Steering Committee is short of human services people and that appointments are not being made. She asked what could be done to see those slots filled. Ms. O'Reilly said the King County Human Services Alliance has been working on the issue. The Alliance has brought names forward, but the Councilmembers have not been acting on them.

Ms. Leslie reiterated that the October 5 Commission meeting was cancelled.

9. PETITIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS – None

10. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Huenefeld Gese adjourned the meeting at 8:34 p.m.

Secretary to the Human Services Commission

Date

Chairperson of the Human Services Commission

Date