

Cambridge Human Services Commission
Minutes of Meeting 10/10/2013
5:30 – 7:30pm
Citywide Senior Center
806 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge

Commissioners present: Christine Elow, Katharine Thomas, Khari Milner, Christopher Hall, Nan Stone

Regrets: Lori Likis, Rev. Lorraine Thornhill, Ayse Atasoylu, Kati LaBraico

DHSP staff: Ellen Semonoff, Janice Alger, Jose Soares (recorder).

Presenters: Maria Melo, Program Coordinator, and Jean Jeune, Haitian Services Coordinator, Cambridge Multi Service Center

Maria Melo started her presentation on the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG), a federal grant to the City of Cambridge to assist residents with housing issues, by explaining that the ESG has three components: Rapid Re-housing, Homeless Prevention, and Support for Tenants at Risk (STAR) program.

Rapid Re-housing assists individuals currently living in shelters in Cambridge to move into apartments by providing security deposits, first and last month rents, and moving costs up to \$4,000 total. If the individual is moving into subsidized housing, the program will assist with just moving costs. So far, 38 individuals have moved from shelter into subsidized apartments. The case manager looks for sustainability, where rent and utilities should not exceed 50% of income; and also provides post placement intensive stabilization by meeting regularly with clients to make sure rent and utilities are paid. Given the high rents, placements in Cambridge are mostly in subsidized housing. In lower rent communities such as Everett, Chelsea, Revere people are placed in market rate apartments.

The Multi Service Center (MSC) collaborates with HomeStart, which provides housing search for stable and affordable apartments. The program may also provide a small subsidy for a limited time. For the Rapid Re-housing component there is no income guideline.

While in stabilization, clients are referred to job search services, rent payee services, food programs, budget counseling and money management, legal services and, when appropriate, receive assistance with the applications for public benefits. At the three month mark, the case manager will do an assessment to make sure clients are complying with their stabilization plan and are stable. If clients become over income, stabilization services stop.

The Multi Service Center also manages homeless prevention funds to assist clients to pay up to six months in rental and utility arrearages. The income guideline eligibility is 30% of the Area Median Income (AMI). Please see attached chart. In order to qualify, the household has to be facing court eviction (Summary Process and Summons and Complaint). Most referrals come from schools, property managers, and other providers. Most households coming to the MSC for rental assistance are in subsidized housing. If the household is found to be unable to keep the current apartment, they will receive assistance with lease up costs and moving expenses into a more affordable apartment.

Most people facing eviction are highly stressed and when asked to provide income documentation and other relevant paperwork are overwhelmed. Maria spent two months assisting a family to gather all required documentation from various sources. Staff see a lot of people with mental health and behavioral issues coming for assistance. Last year, the program prevented 39 evictions; among these, a 90 year woman with failing mental health was not able to keep up with her section 8 rent recertification at the Cambridge Housing Authority. The Housing Authority pulled her section 8 and she ended up having to pay market rate rent. When she was referred to the MSC, she was behind 6 months in her rent. Funds earmarked for prevention paid the full arrearage and secured the section 8. Now she receives stabilization services including rent payee services and monitoring.

Part of the prevention funds, the Cambridge Housing Assistance Fund (CHAF) originated out of a long term collaboration between the Multi Service Center, HomeStart, and Cambridge realtors, who organize an annual fund raising event. These funds are then shared by the two agencies to secure housing and prevent homelessness. The MSC also receives \$90,000 in City funding for eviction prevention.

The STAR program is a collaboration with the Eliot Community Human Services, which provides clinical services, HomeStart, which provides housing search, Shelter Legal Services, and Cambridge and Somerville Legal Services. The STAR program is coordinated by the Multi Service Center. Most clients have mental health and behavioral problems and meet the Department of Mental Health guidelines. The Eliot Community Human Services clinician has Thursday hours at the District Court. As Cambridge eviction cases come up, she asks the court for an extension to allow for referral of the client to the collaborating agencies. In the past three months, the program has assisted 11 households. Please see attached the Eliot Community Human Services' brochure for income guidelines for the STAR program.

Maria stated that most evictions are seasonal: at the start of the school year when families use money for school supplies and clothes, after Christmas, and after the utilities moratorium when utility shut off notices are sent out. Faced with limited income, people will pay their utility bills to avoid shut off rather than pay rent.

Jean Jeune started his presentation by giving a brief history of Haiti. Haiti gained its independence from the French in 1804 after a series of slave revolts and Napoleon's brutal repression. Due to the unstable political history in Haiti, Haitians have been coming to the United States at different times. Over the past forty years, they have settled in Cambridge.

The Cambridge Haitian American Association (CHAMA) was founded in the late 1970s to assist and integrate Haitian immigrants. In the late 1980s, CHAMA was replaced by the Haitian Services Collaborative with the University of Massachusetts in Boston providing interns. Through advocacy, the Haitian American Public Health Initiative was founded in Dorchester with state and federal funding to address the HIV/Aids crisis by doing outreach and education.

Over the years, the Haitian Services Collaborative has evolved to meet the needs of a growing community by providing English as a Second Language/ESOL and citizenship classes, family reunification assistance through immigration, assistance with public benefits, information and referral to housing, jobs, schools, and local resources. After the January 2010 earthquake, which decimated Port- Au-Prince, there was an increase in immigration to Cambridge. As a result of the earthquake, Haitians, who arrived at that time, were given temporary protected status and priority in subsidized housing.

In Cambridge, most Haitians reside in north and east Cambridge and area 4.

Cambridge has a sister city relationship with Les Cayes in the south of Haiti. Recently there was an organized fact finding sister city trip to Les Cayes to look at three areas of focus: environment, education, and public health.

Deputy Superintendent Christine Elow mentioned that the Cambridge Police Department needs to recruit Haitian females. Currently the Department has three Haitian male police officers.

Commissioners discussed topics of particular interest for future presentations including an update from Food For Free's efforts in meeting the demand in the community and to meet its new Executive Director. In the past, we had a presentation about Baby U. We could have an update of its most recent efforts.

Ellen would like to hear from Commissioner Katharine Thomas from the Institute for Health and Recovery on her agency's work with substance abuse among youth and families.

Nan Stone, in her work with funders, is faced with the re-occurring assumption of the duplication and overlap of services and would like a discussion on where the possible gaps in services might be.

The next Human Services Commission is scheduled for November 14th, 2013.

Meeting adjourned.