

Cambridge Human Services Commission
Minutes of Meeting 9/12/2013
5:30 – 7:30pm
Citywide Senior Center
806 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge

Commissioners present: Lori Likis, Rev. Lorraine Thornhill, Christine Elow, Khari Milner, Ayse Atasoylu, Kati LaBraico, Christopher Hall

Regrets: Katharine Thomas

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

Presenter: Binyam Tamene, Executive Director, Ethiopian Community Mutual Assistance Association (EMCAA)

Ellen Semonoff mentioned that Nan Stone, a former Commissioner, is back in Cambridge and would like to re-join the Human Services Commission.

Deputy Superintendent Christine Elow announced that the Cambridge Police Department hired a Director of Community Outreach and a Social Worker to liaise with the community at large.

Commissioners were polled to ascertain if we could change the current schedule of meetings from the second Thursday to the second Wednesday evening of the month. Several Commissioners mentioned a scheduling conflict and Ellen mentioned that the School Committee meets on Tuesdays impacting two Commissioners. So it was decided to keep the current schedule.

Binyam Tamene started his presentation with a brief history of Ethiopia. Ethiopia, located in the “Horn of Africa,” is one of the oldest nations in the world with a recorded history going back to 500 BC. Ethiopia had a running monarchy for over 3000 years ending with the overthrow of emperor Haile Selassie I after a revolution in 1974, which installed a pro Soviet military dictatorship. During the dictatorship, refugees fled to surrounding countries and eventually made it to the United States under the Refugee Act of 1980. Due to severe droughts through 1983-85, there were famines in the region, which also led people to seek refugee status.

There was another revolution in 1991 led by the Democratic Front which overthrew the military regime and instituted a fledgling democracy. In a 1993 referendum, the northern province of Eritrea attained independence leading to a border war which lasted until 2000. During this period, thousands of people on both sides were displaced and came to the United States.

More recently through the “Diversity Visa” lottery, with 25,000 visas allocated to Africa, Ethiopians have taken advantage of this opportunity. Between 750,000 to 1 million Ethiopians live in the U. S. in the metropolitan areas of Dallas, Washington, Atlanta, and the Greater Boston area with an estimated 1,500 in Cambridge. In Cambridge, most families live in the Walden Square apartments, Rindge Towers and North Cambridge, and 808-812 Memorial Drive. Through family reunification, extended family members come and join relatives, often doubling up in overcrowded conditions.

The ECMAA was founded in 1986 and its first site was at 1151 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, in the basement of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church. Currently ECMAA is located at 552 Massachusetts Avenue in Central Square. Its Information and Referral program is funded by the Community Development Block Grant. The agency also runs a regular Sunday morning radio program which covers social and cultural issues, local resources, and invites guest speakers to talk about community health, immigration, job training, and outreach.

Most Ethiopians work in the service sector as taxi drivers, garage attendants, and at housekeeping jobs in hospitals, hotels, and nursing homes. As most recent immigrants have outstanding debts back home due to the expensive airfare, job training is not a priority. Most people are anxious to find work immediately and work at two or three jobs to make ends meet and pay their debts.

When asked about basic needs in the community, Binyam mentioned affordable housing, the need for translation and interpretation services, assistance with filling forms, and health maintenance education and outreach. People only seek health care in emergency situations. Due to depression, isolation, and the stress of finding a home and a job and the added taboo of seeking mental health services, there have been some suicides in the community.

Dept. Superintendent Christine Elow asked about the Ethiopian community's relationship with the Cambridge Police. Binyam mentioned that historically people in uniform have been associated with the repressive arm of government and it would help to do some outreach and education in the community about police work. Binyam welcomes people on the radio program to open the discussion.

Khari Milner asked about the community's school involvement. Binyam stated that, given people's work schedule, it is unlikely they would meet with school staff and, furthermore, there is the expectation that the school is responsible for the academic education of the children and parents should not interfere. There are also cultural barriers in the community with people in authority and in official roles; for example, it is perceived as disrespectful to address someone without having been addressed first and to speak up is frowned upon. Youth, however, tend to be more engaged and open to the mainstream. The second generation of immigrants is doing better with some youth attending ivy league schools and feeling more integrated.

Lori Likis mentioned the possibility of the school department using the Community Engagement Team to do outreach to the Ethiopian community.

The next Human Services Commission is scheduled for October 10th, 2013.

Meeting adjourned.