

City of Alexandria, Virginia
Department of Community and Human Services
Social Service Advisory Board Meeting Notes
December 18th, 2023

Present: Abby Horrell (Chair), Matthew Walsh (Vice-Chair), Allison Greenleaf, Ann O’Hanlon, Shawna Gary, Lesa Gilbert (DCHS Staff), Angela Almonte (DCHS Staff), Christine Levine (DCHS Staff), Cathy Bartholomew (DCHS Staff)

Absent and excused: Paul Almeida, Stephanie Kanwit, Samantha Pedrosa, Rachel Dienna

Call to Order/Welcome: The meeting was called to order by Abby Horrell (Chair) at 7:04 p.m., and SSAB members were welcomed to the December meeting.

Guest Speaker: Christine Levine, Holiday Sharing Program updates

- Holiday sharing ended on December 18th, 2023. Six hundred sixty-three families participated in the Holiday Sharing program. This number also includes families that participated in the toy drive.
- Families were allowed to sign up within a 3-hour time slot during October and November. One hundred sixty-seven people signed up for the first slot within 10 minutes. The slot openings were rescheduled due to the demand, and two hundred and fifty people applied for a slot.
- More than half the children received sponsors. Those not sponsored could participate in a toy drive sponsored by volunteer Alexandria.
- The toy drive included pictures with Santa and allowed parents to shop while children made photo frames. The toy drive served three hundred and forty-one families. Each child received four gifts. Children 10 and under received gifts, and children eleven and up received gift cards. Also, the toy drive included diapers up to size seven for the first time. The spare gifts from the toy drive are still available for families who missed the opportunity to participate in the program.
- The Holiday Sharing program received thirteen thousand dollars donated in gift cards. Some of these gift cards were gifted to the older youth. Three hundred twenty-one families participated directly in the Holiday Sharing program. The breakout number of people served equaled over one thousand two hundred children, including fifty-one foster teens. One hundred twenty-five seniors also received grocery gift cards.
- 94 Emmanuel Church on the Hill held an additional community drive that provided bedding, towels, and other essentials unavailable at the toy drive.
- The number of families served this year was more than last year.

Challenges

- A lot of families were unaware of the program, and by the time they logged on to apply for a slot, the opportunity was closed. The Holiday Sharing program can have a larger impact on families in need.
- There is food insecurity within the community, and more needs to be done. Because of the amount of gift cards donated, they can be used throughout the year to help address this.

- People are eager to sponsor foster children and seniors, but those sponsor spots fill up quickly.

General updates

- Next year, staff would like to increase the number of sponsors and continue to increase the number of families served.
- Spring to Action will be held sometime in Spring. This will be a partnership with Neighborhood Health to provide pack-n-plays to families.
- There are plans for a new community closet to provide clothes for families in need.
- There will be no gala this year, but we will continue looking at other ways to fundraise and make a more significant impact.

Guest Speaker: Cathy Bartholomew, Foster Care updates

- The department's goal is not to have children in foster care. Foster care is highly dependent on CPS not to bring children into foster care. Foster care is supposed to be temporary, but it rarely is.
- Currently, seventy-four children are in care, and each caseworker has a caseload of about twelve. Thirty-nine are in foster homes. Nine youths are in the care of private agencies that provide therapeutic foster care. These agencies charge a fee for the oversight of the youth. There are six youths in supervised independent living, and four are in the process of closing the case but must complete trial home visits before. Three sponsor residential and receive services at the home. Two youths are in group home/shelter care. There are two youths in detention. One youth is in a medical hospital. One youth has been AWOL since July 2023. Eighteen-year-olds are not included in the statistics because they have aged out of foster care.
- Demographics of youth in foster care:
 - 40.5% are male identifying.
 - 41% of the youth are between the ages of zero through twelve.
 - 12% of the youth are people over the age of eighteen.
 - 58% Black, 26% Latino, 8% Multiracial, 8% white.
 - White children are underrepresented. The National Adoption Agency (NAA) has devised a strategic plan to address disproportionality. One reason this may be occurring is that the main callers to CPS are police and school systems, which have historically been shown to over-surveil children of color.

Foster Care Challenges

- Staff retention is low for foster care workers. The quality assurance position has been vacant since August. There are 8.5 employees in foster care, and there are currently three vacancies.
Every worker has a large caseload because foster care is not fully staffed.
- The resource families do not match the race/ethnicity of children that come into foster care. As of November 2023, there were twenty-one white, fourteen Black, 5 Multiracial, 2 Latino, and 1 Asian resource families. To address this, foster care is looking at ways to increase youth in kinship care.

- The benchmarks are also difficult to meet with the challenges. The length of time that children are in foster care is twelve months. Adoption is supposed to happen within twenty-four months. Youth must consent to adoption if they are over fourteen years old.

DCHS updates

Safety Incident in the building: A participant elbowed staff in the elevator. There is more security at 4850 Mark Center Drive than any other prior DCHS building. Security has a plan to address incidents that include violence in the building. The next steps include ensuring the Department has one incident reporting system versus program-specific incident reporting.

Budget: DCHS met with the City Manager's office to discuss budget reductions and supplementals. The City Manager's budget will come out in February.

SSAB feedback on the DCHS website

With the caveat that the SSAB members may not be the target audience, SSAB members who reviewed the site stated that compared to the other parts of the City's website, the DCHS website is very logical and easy to navigate.

SSAB officer nominations and election

- This meeting will be Matthew Walsh's (Vice-Chair) last meeting. Matthew said he will still share the budget letter with SSAB members as his last deliverable.
- Abby Horrell (Chair) announced that the SSAB seeks volunteers to Chair and Vice Chair. This will be further discussed during SSAB's January meeting. The positions require a few extra meetings, forwarding emails to SSAB members, and writing letters or other sorts of advocacy around SSAB-identified issues. There is a quarterly Boards and Chairs meeting and a monthly agenda planning meeting.

Approval of minutes: The minutes from November 27th, 2023, were reviewed and accepted with changes by SSAB members, with a motion to approve by Ann and seconded by Abby Horrell.

Upcoming meeting dates: Monday, January 22 – Lesa will line up guest speaker to address homelessness in the City. Monday, February 26

The meeting adjourned at 08:22 p.m.