

City of Alexandria, Virginia
Department of Community and Human Services
Social Service Advisory Board Meeting Notes
March 18th, 2024

Present: Abby Horrell (Chair), Samantha Pedrosa (Vice-Chair), Rachel Dienna, Shauna Gary, Karen Carter, Maura Miller (via Zoom), Esperita Bullard (DCHS Staff), Melissa Jensen (DCHS Staff),

Absent: Allison Greenleaf, Ann O’Hanlon, Angela Almonte (DCHS Staff), Lesa Gilbert (DCHS Staff)

Call to Order/Welcome: The meeting was called to order by Abby Horrell (Chair) at 7:00 p.m., and SSAB members were welcomed to the March meeting. SSAB members also welcomed new member Maura Miller to the board.

Guest Speaker: Melissa Jensen, Food Security Coordinator

Food Security report

DCHS funded the study using ARPA funds. The consulting firm SWIM was hired to conduct the study. The study assessed the reality of the food landscape and available resources. Additionally, the researchers spoke to people about their experience accessing food resources.

- **Methodology:** Surveyed two hundred forty-five residents with a focused-on people using services who are likely experiencing food insecurity. Seventy participants participated in 5 focus groups with targeted engagement of under-resourced populations.
 - Unhoused individuals
 - Older adults
 - Immigrant/Non-English Speaker
 - Subcommittees: African Immigrants and Hispanic population.
- **Demographics of participants:**
 - Race/Ethnicity: predominately Hispanic.
 - Age: Well distributed
 - Gender: predominately Female
 - 82% live in Alexandria.
 - 59% have children in the household.
 - Spanish was the second language behind English.

The report also includes a network assessment of eighteen organizations, city agencies, and departments that are involved in food security.

Main findings:

- 8% of households in Alexandria are food insecure, and 9% live below the federal poverty line. Capital Area, Food Bank Food report, shows that thirty-one percent of people live food insecure in the DC metro area. Discrepancy due to a larger sample size (DC metro area).
- The results showed a need for diverse outreach as each community has different communications needs.

- The participants have access to transportation, but 1/3 have difficulty accessing the food locations.
- Overall, fifty-six percent of participants were satisfied with the resources available. However, there is a desire for more variable hours and general knowledge about the available resources.
- Forty-four percent of individuals who are food insecure are ineligible for government assistance due to income.
- Network assessment shows that organizations that provide food resources have a small budget of fifty thousand on average.

Next steps: Share the report through community events. A workgroup will conduct strategic planning and create a plan to address food insecurity.

- Focus on addressing concerns raised during focus groups:
 - sale by date and quality of food.
 - finding other options for people who may not feel comfortable going to a government building or church.

Approval of Minutes: The minutes from February were reviewed and accepted with changes by SSAB members.

DCHS updates

City Budget Update:

- Personnel expenditure increases by 2% for non-collective bargaining employees.
- Residential Services Program Manager, Food Security Coordinator (1 year), Youth Safety and Resiliency Coordinator, and ten youth ambassadors were approved.
- Three hundred thousand dollars were approved in the budget for the Food Hub.
- DCHS general funds remain flat for 2025.
- The reduction in general funds for the operation of the energy assistance program provided through the benefits program was approved.
- The State will provide funding for Marcus Alert in the amount of one hundred fifty-seven to one hundred and fifty-nine thousand through VDBHS and Developmental services for the clinical and emergency services division program.
- Residential revenue for DCHS is sixty-thousand dollars through ongoing state revenue for case management.
- 1.3 million dollars allocated to the state biannual budget to support CSB operations.
- The Virginia State legislature approved joint health app funding and a training academy for benefits specialists that hopes to help retention.

Medicaid Unwinding

- Eight thousand cases are still outstanding, including regular Medicaid renewal cases.
 - The April 1st deadline is approaching, and many cases may be closed because of Medicaid Unwinding.
 - 70% of households have reenrolled in the program.

Housing Update

- Evictions remain high because of steady evictions and the sunset of ARPA and Emergency Support grants.
 - Rent arrears now equate to about three months of rent.
 - There has been an increase in calls, walk-ins, and rental assistance appointments. Appointment wait times are at an all-time high of 7-8 weeks.
 - Emergency services are still available for people with the sheriff's notice of eviction date. They can skip the wait and be seen on the same day.
 - Additionally, anyone with a utility cut-off eminent disconnect can circumvent the wait as well.
- The rapid rehousing fund intended for residents to permanently exit the shelter, help with the first month's rent and security deposit and can be used for 24 months, has been on pause since August. Fewer people exiting shelters cause longer shelter waitlists.
- Homeless services shelter waitlist is at an all-time high.
 - Alexandria Community Shelter is at 100% capacity.
 - The Hoffman Center (Emergency Shelter) is at 100% capacity.
 - Winter Shelter will end in mid-April, and an increase in shelter waitlists is anticipated.
 - Three weeks ago, Carpenter Shelter received six hundred thousand dollars and is hopeful it will help with exits to permanent housing and reducing the waitlist.

State Legislature Updates

Housing Bills

- Local authorities are given the authority by the State to enforce housing codes so that all property is habitable. Low-income populations are vulnerable to predatory housing.
- There is a bill that increases tenant notice of eviction court from 5 to 14 days, which may allow for a paycheck to come in between to pay the balance.
- There is a bill that requires the inclusion of domestic violence language in all leases that states that breaking a lease due to domestic violence will not result in retaliation or fines.
- There is a bill to ensure language access by requiring that legally binding contracts such as leases be offered in multiple languages.
- There is a bill stating that if a fire or hazard happens within the home and the tenant can no longer live in it, the landlord must meet with the tenant to offer a comparable unit. (pushed by Governor to 2025)
- There is a bill to ensure the use of plain language for eviction expungement process, to ensure more people are eligible.
- There is a bill to allow enforcement of unlawful retaliation. If the landlord retaliated against the tenant, the tenant could recover financial damages that have happened.
- There is a bill to include key points of the lease on a summary page and the option to have it translated to one of the five languages other than English on leases. The summary will include exhaustive fees to protect tenants from surprise fees.
- Bill prohibits landlords/property managers from charging fees for submitting maintenance requests. Proper notice of routine maintenance must be given, and the work must be completed within two weeks.

Boards and Commissions

Approval of fifty percent of electronic meetings for boards and commissions meetings increases accessibility as now anyone with a disability can attend remotely. Virtual votes can be counted.

Board Activity

SSAB members engaged in creating thank you cards for previous presenters.

Upcoming Guest Speakers

Office of Aging for April meeting

Upcoming Meeting Dates

- Monday, April 15, 7-9 p.m.
- Monday, May 20 7-9p.m

Meeting Adjourned: 8:29 pm.