

Minutes
Vermont Council on Homelessness

February 27th, 2014

2:00 – 4:00

Pavilion 4th Floor Conf. Room
State Street, Montpelier

Present: *Rich McInerney (SSHP), Calvin Smith (VCRHYP), Linda Ryan (Samaritan House), Justin Henry (VCEH/VAHC), Lily Sojourner (AHS), Shaun Gilpin (DHCD), Deborah Hall (RCHC), Rita Markley (COTS), Susan Bartlett (AHS), Jan Demers (CVOEO), Amy Perez (CVCAC), Morgan Brown (N/A), Jack C Kearnan (VIA), Erhard Mahnke (VAHC), Auburn Watersong (VT Network Against DV & SA), Liz Whitmore (DOC), Daniel Blankenship (VSHA), Richard Giddings (DCF), Brian Smith (DMH), MaryEllen Mendl (211), Rachel Batterson (VLA), Chris Curtis (VLA and Pathways from Poverty Council), Angus Chaney (AHS)*

Angus called the meeting to order at 2:02.

Public Comment:

No one offered public comment.

Current Issues: Homeless Single Adults – Jack Kearnan

Council member Jack Kearnan delivered his first-person account of experiencing homelessness in Vermont and illustrated the plight and anxiety experienced by single individuals on the street and entering the shelter system for the first time.

Emphasized the predicament faced by people outside all day in wet clothes, the importance of shelter space being welcoming for people who need it, and the need for proximity to services. Offered that he can see the progress the council and nonprofits have made in improving the situation since the time that he was homeless. Recommended establishing shelters that are more apt to promote an atmosphere conducive to self-worthiness, achievability and hope for a future that awaits their arrival. Suggestions included:

- Upgrading facilities by painting murals and furnishing a more cheerful interior design.
- Relocate the shelters, placing them in close proximity to other available services.
- Make them more energy efficient by attaching Smart Meters.

“It is demoralizing and creates a situation of hopelessness to be without a home. Our facilities and services need to help restore individuals’ dignity, confidence, and sense of significance as well as put a roof over their heads for a few nights.” – Jack Kearnan

Discussion:

Morgan: (to Jack) Would having people working at the shelter who had lived experience of homelessness have made your experience easier?

Jack: Not necessarily for him. Did not want to speak for others.

Linda: COTS employs people who were formerly homeless.

Rita: COTS is stuck in their current Waystation facility because of municipal zoning restrictions around homeless shelters. They're only there because they are grandfathered. Their housing at Canal Street and Smith House offer better longer-term alternatives. Asked if they are able to invest in Daystation space would that help improve the overall experience for people?

Linda: Samaritan House was able to make improvements to their shelter space and resource center a few years ago with grants funds.

Rita: Discussed opportunities available through General Services budget line.

Auburn: Described the Domestic Violence Network's "Art For Shelter" initiative among the domestic violence shelters. 30% of art sales go to improving the shelter aesthetics at the DV shelters. They have framed artwork in the shelters.

Brian: Discussed the sensitive balance between making emergency shelter space so desirable that people never want to move on.

Morgan: Shared other challenges of people who are unsheltered being in wet clothes all day; basic needs such as new, clean clothes, appropriate footwear and foot care, access to laundry and showers.

Erhard: Discussion around desirability of facilities comes up often in housing as well as in shelter context.

MaryEllen: Money set-aside for capital expenses. Schedule for applications has shifted from fall to spring so timing might be good.

Lily: Is it the same application?

MaryEllen: Yes.

Angus: Aesthetics matter. Importance of space which lets people feel optimistic about their future. Asked if shelters include people who are homeless in the design of space, finishes, lighting.

Rita: COTS involves homeless people in their designs. Other shelters do as well.

Brian: Described other examples of programs where clients are involved in design.

Morgan: Importance of their still being funding for affordable housing.

Brian: Could a group form to look at this? Could there be a way to access local donated goods and services to improve shelters?

Angus: This happens at every shelter, though it is ad hoc and grassroots.

Linda: Samaritan House also has 5 or 6 efficiency apartments for single adults that are more like home.

Auburn: In rural parts of the state, transportation – to things like laundry - is just as critical an issue.

Morgan: Even where there is public transportation, the bus may not let people on if they appear dirty.

State Plan: Reviewing Progress and Planning for the Annual Update

Process: Angus reviewed Council's charge around the five year plan and one year updates. Suggests allowing more time this year so the process is not rushed. Presented a draft timeline to get us to July 1 and walked through process. Wants to stand up a work committee to shepherd this which is balanced by sector and region. Some work can be done by phone or electronically but we will need in-person meetings as well. Suggested when we get to comment that we solicit more input from housers, people experiencing homelessness, private sector partners, and additional sectors of government not represented on the Council such as labor and health. Meetings for the five year plan were held in Burlington so for this next round they should be in a more central location. Wants volunteers who can see this through until the end but not seeking hands today. People who are interested in being part of the Council's annual update work committee should review the proposed timeline and email Angus re their interest and availability. Angus will also contact members who were out of town this week.

The Council did not raise any objections to the proposed process or proposed timeline.

Substance: Angus noted that the 2013 recommendations were well received by the Governor. Attributes part of that to the fact that our requests were clear and focused. Discouraged a long laundry list of strategies and recommendations. Also suggested that strategies and recommendations can go beyond conventional issues such as shelter, prevention and housing and get to upstream issues such as the safety net and economic issues such as wages.

Morgan: Not intending to support any plan that says Vermont has made progress, unless it also frankly discusses challenges.

Linda: There has been exciting progress made. This is an exciting time for the council. Pointed to federal challenges like section 8 sequestration and the impact it is having on homeless families and kids all across the country, not just in Vermont. We need to challenge people who say rapid rehousing isn't working. Suggested the council take a stand on issues like this.

Rita: What's the scope of economic recommendations? Could examples include items such as TIF districts?

Angus: Sure. If it would help end homelessness it's in the council's purview.

Auburn: Still familiarizing with the intersection between the five year plan and a legislative agenda.

Angus: The primary vehicle established for us in the executive order is built around our annual updates to the plan. This is submitted to the governor in July so that recommendations can be reviewed and adopted by the administration before the legislative session begins. We did have specific legislative requests in the 2013 update that were adopted by the governor in his budget recommend.

Updates from Council Members

Morgan: Recapped the Homeless Marathon Radio Broadcast held in Brattleboro earlier this month.

Erhard: The legislature has formed an inter-committee housing group using an RBA approach and meeting on a weekly basis. Budget testimony is wrapped up. VAHC has generally been supportive of the administration's recommendations.

Morgan: A Pathways legislative report is available on the legislative website.

Angus: The Joint Committee on Tax Credits met twice over the past few months and has revised the state's qualified allocation plan such that there now exists a meaningful incentive for developers of affordable tax-credit units to set aside 10% of units for people who are homeless or at-risk. A good compromise was worked out with developers which allows them to identify the units somewhere in their regional portfolio convenient to services.

Linda: Thanked Angus for his work on this issue.

Daniel: Shelter Plus Care and importance of identifying people who are chronically-homeless. Referenced Housing First model and 100,000 homes campaign. Targeting to hardest to serve is highest priority.

Approval of Minutes

Angus determined there was now a quorum present to review the December minutes. Morgan moved to accept the minutes. Rachel seconded. No discussion. All voted in favor. The December 2013 minutes were accepted by the Council and will be posted to the Council website. <http://humanservices.vermont.gov/boards-committees/vermont-council-on-homelessness/vch-2014-minutes/>

Poverty Council: Exploring Common Goals – Co Chairs of the Pathways from Poverty Council

Angus emphasized connection between poverty and homelessness and introduced Chris Curtis, co-chair of the Governor's new Pathways from Poverty Council. Chris co-presented with co-Chair, Linda Ryan of Samaritan House.

Chris and Linda: Explained the history of the creation of the Poverty Council. Instead of looking at problems of poverty - such as homeless - in a silo, council looks at poverty as a whole. The council is an advocates-only group which has become a Governor's advisory group.

Chris: Two big issues arose last year over administration proposals related to the Earned Income Tax Credit and eligibility changes to the Reach-Up program. Chris referenced the work of the Reach-Up work group

established by the legislature. GA rulemaking process also opened the door for broader conversations around poverty. The Poverty Council sees itself as a vehicle for getting information to the administration. There were originally 19 organizations represented. That number will be expanded to 30.

Morgan: Important to have two members of the faith community.

Lily: Would be helpful to see list of who is on the Council.

Chris: We're looking at a website. We have a 3-year charge to:

1. Determine the nature and causes of poverty in Vermont.
2. Collaborate and communicate with other agencies and councils.
3. Make recommendations – primarily on state policy but potentially federal as well.

Erhard: Poverty Council may be at 30-member limit. Executive Order is on Governor's web site.

Discussion around who was on the council, who should be on the council, and what regions were or were not represented.

Chris: Summarized three bills of interest.

- H.790 – Earned income disregard.
- H.699 – Eliminate requirement for people in state-funded motels to pay any money toward housing.
- H. 620 – Hold harmless families affected by food stamp processing errors.

Chris: Administrations investments made have been very important, including caseload reduction in Reach-Up. \$2.5 million in new state funds targeted to poverty issues, becomes \$4 million when federal match considered.

Richard Giddings – Clarified details on historic percentage paid by people in motels. Explained administrations concerns about setting precedent on 3squares repayments. No other states or programs do this. Families are given workable plans to slowly repay the value or a portion of the values of the overpayment.

Discussion on historic percentages of income required in GA temp shelter program.

Morgan: Unconscionable to fine food stamps recipients for processing errors.

Link to more information on the Pathways from Poverty Council:

http://governor.vermont.gov/boards_and_commissions/pathways_from_poverty

Other Business:

Angus asked if anyone who had not spoken all meeting wanted the last word.

Meeting adjourned at 4:02

Respectfully submitted: *Angus Chaney*