

West Des Moines Human Services Advisory Board
139 6th Street, West Des Moines, IA 50266
November 21, 2023 Minutes

Members Present: Karen Cortez, Dan Crew, Becky Cunningham, Will de Blois, Clarissa D’Souza, Victor Dutchuk, Betsy Happe, DeAnn Howard, Sheila Nelson, Greg Nichols, Bill Solawetz, Eric Tabor, Bill Crane and Council Member Doug Loots.

Members Absent: Taylor McDonald, Mike Frandsen.

West Des Moines Human Services (WDMHS) Staff Present: Althea Holcomb, Director.

WDM Human Services Friends Foundation Board Members Present: Joe Happe and Kavitha Makayee.

Citizen Participation: State Senator Claire Celsi and MJ Hoag, citizen of West Des Moines.

Call to Order: Victor Dutchuk, Chair, called the meeting to order at 5:31 p.m.

Approval of Minutes: Eric said the September minutes had been amended by striking the paragraph regarding new gift card policies and by adding a sentence that the October minutes correctly outlined the new gift card policies. The Board approved the amended September minutes.

Betsy moved to approve the October minutes. Seconded by Bill Solawetz. Approved by Board.

Director’s Report: Althea presented the Director’s report. She asked if there were any questions. Clarissa noted that emergency assistance numbers were down. Althea said LIHEAP (utility assistance) had begun on October 1 and this may have helped.

Victor asked when expenditures from the Fuhrmann Fund will be approved. Althea said later in this fiscal year. She noted that the Fund likely will be exhausted in two years.

Althea said that it was a “busy, busy month.” She said 501 coats were distributed in 10 hours on October 24 and 25. She said LIHEAP registrations had started. Thanksgiving gift cards totaling 456 were distributed to clients. The Food Pantry numbers hit a record in October with 526 households served – about 40-80 individuals served every day. She commented that more and more folks are migrating to poverty and that it is a “crazy time.”

Althea said the “mow and snow” services provided by WDMHS were being discontinued. An organization named “Rebuilding Together” is going to provide similar services to existing clients, although the exact nature of the services is unclear.

Althea said Polk County Supervisor Matt McCoy delivered 250 gift cards from Fareway, valued at \$6,250, to be distributed to WDMHS clients during the holiday season.

Department Redevelopment Committee (“Committee”) Update: Althea said the City Manager’s Office (“CMO”) has drafted a Request for Information (“RFI”) to outsource the Clothing Closet and the Food Pantry to a non-profit organization or church. Victor asked if the RFI would be available to the Board. Althea said “yes” and she would send the draft. Victor said sending the final version of the RFI would be fine. Althea said the plan was to issue the RFI the following week.

Greg said the Committee had offered suggestions to improve the RFI with regard to accountability and maintaining standards with a diminished staff. He said the CMO had been open to the feedback. Althea said the oversight of the Clothing Closet and Food Pantry would not be with the citizens, but the entity overseeing them would have to file reports with WDMHS. Victor commented that the Board would lose control.

Council Member Loots said the WDM General Fund budget is \$31 million and WDM is at risk of running out of money in 2025. He said fighting for the status quo won't work. He said nothing has been definitely decided and the goal was to do things differently and better.

Victor said there had been a lack of transparency by the City Manager, Tom Hadden, at the last Board meeting. Victor said that Mr. Hadden's goal of cutting the staff of WDMHS by 50% had not been raised at that meeting. Victor claimed that Mr. Hadden was not a fan of WDMHS. Victor said the Board was being misled and the CMO had a hidden agenda. He said full transparency was necessary to make sound decisions.

Senator Celsi addressed the Board. She said the "train has been coming down the track for a long time" before HF 718 was passed by the Legislature in 2023. She stated that HF 718 caused none of the asserted budget problems. She distributed an analysis of property tax implications for the budget of WDM prepared by a senior research analyst on the Senate Democratic Caucus Staff. (It is attached to these minutes.). She said the major cause of budgetary concerns was the impact of corporate tax cuts.

Senator Celsi said Mr. Hadden wanted to get ahead of budget woes, but there were other approaches instead of cutting WDMHS. She said the poor are getting crushed with rising rents and food costs and that it was unfair to cut services to them. She said an outside vendor was not feasible and was a "head scratcher." She said the staff of WDMHS were professionals and not "widgets." She said she was "shocked" that Audrey Kennis, the WDM Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, was being considered as Director of WDMHS when Althea retires. She said DEI is not social work. She said she was a friend of Mr. Hadden, but claimed he has long wanted to get rid of WDMHS. She said she was proud of WDMHS and its great staff and volunteers. She said they should pull together and fight like they did with the Food Bank controversy.

Senator Celsi suggested an increase in the hotel/motel tax to cover shortfalls. Council Member Loots agreed that this was something to consider. He reiterated that the goal was efficiency and options would be examined before the budget was finalized in February.

Victor commented that Mr. Hadden had made omissions and fabrications at the last Board meeting. Victor said WDMHS was a "badge of honor" and that the Board did not need a "sales pitch."

Becky said WDMHS was the "gold standard." She asked "why take this away when other cities should strive to have a human services department?"

DeAnn asked if cuts are being considered across city government. Council Member Loots said "yes," that all department programs and services are being reviewed for efficiencies and improvements. Senator Celsi asserted a RFI was not necessary. Victor stated the RFI is just a screening process. DeAnn said we might see that no one applies. Greg said that a RFI and a RFP are very different and gather different information. Victor commented that oversight was needed regardless of who provides the services. Eric commented that WDMHS has 135 volunteers who may or may not stay with a contractor. Eric also questioned how the Food Pantry and Clothing Closet could be operated more efficiently at less cost.

Joe said time would be needed to ramp up fundraising and build up volunteers if changes were made. He said it should not be assumed contractors won't do this, pointing to Catholic Charities as an example. He queried about oversight going forward.

Will asked about what information would be collected in the RFI. Althea replied that the RFI would ask about previous experience, level of interest, and capability of the entity. She said RFI responses would be due the middle of January, reviewed and meetings would be scheduled. Will asked about the role of the Board. She said the Board would review the responses with the CMO. Bill S. asked whether the client numbers of WDMHS would be included in the RFI. Althea said "yes."

Sheila queried why an outside entity would want to do this, with the need to hire staff to replace city workers. Althea replied that there is "no good answer." Althea said the cost of the Food Pantry was primarily Larry's salary/benefits. She said a time study was being conducted to determine time spent by other staff performing Food Pantry related duties.

Althea stated that staff costs for WDMHS were about \$800,000. She laid out the proposed staff changes at WDMHS: (1) She is retiring next summer. Audrey Kennis, the DEI Director, will also become the Director of WDMHS. Audrey will begin to office at WDMHS starting December 4, 2023. (2) Shawna Rolph left WDMHS last August and her position will not be filled. (3) Tami Lange is retiring in December 2024 and her position will not be filled. (4) Kati Ross will spend 25% of her time with WDMHS and 75% of her time with other city departments. She will continue to office at WDMHS. (5) The CMO is looking at other city positions for Larry Stanley, if a new entity operates the Food Pantry.

Eric made the point that staff changes (without moving Larry from WDMHS) would result in a savings of about \$425,000, which is about half of the personnel costs. This was the stated savings goal articulated by Mr. Hadden. Sheila inquired about who would do the remaining work (if the Clothing Closet and Food Pantry were out-sourced). Althea said Rosalinda Solis, Whitney Summers, Stephanie Corbett, Pam Redford and Mindy Hotovec would continue to administer services to clients. Althea said Mr. Hadden wanted WDMHS to explore providing other services, including housing, workforce development, and financial literacy.

Greg asked whether services could be maintained with these personnel changes (assuming the Food Pantry and Clothing Closet were not out-sourced and Larry stayed at WDMHS.). He was particularly concerned with sustaining the services of the Clothing Closet and Food Pantry. Eric responded "yes" and asked Althea if she agreed. She said WDMHS had suffered cuts over the years and she was not certain services could be maintained. The staff were all working hard and reminded the Board of the growth in households being served. Becky expressed concern about staff burn-out with this growth.

Victor asked whether other property tax levies could be tapped. Council Member Loots said this might be part of the budget discussions leading up to February. He said a franchise fee is likely to happen and would apply to entities that don't pay property taxes.

Karen expressed concerns and said WDMHS staff should be kept. Council Member Loots said Mr. Hadden can do what he wants regarding staff changes. Senator Celsi said that was "wrong." Eric asked whether the City Council had to approve the staff changes and the out-sourcing of the Clothing Closet and the Food Pantry. Council Member Loots said "no" – it was Mr. Hadden's decision. Eric asked whether the City Council could block the changes. Council Member Loots said "yes," if the Mayor put it on the City Council's meeting agenda.

Victor suggested the Board should approach the City Council. Council Member Loots said, instead of going to the City Council, the Board should: (1) go to Mr. Hadden for a private negotiation, (2) provide Mr. Hadden with the Board's knowledge base and data, and (3) perhaps, go to the City Council subsequently.

Greg commented that it was important to give expected metrics, standards, and benchmarks to any contractor selected. Dan said this should be part of the RFP process.

Karen said having three different organizations operating the Clothing Closet, the Food Pantry, and the other services of WDMHS would be complicated and confusing for clients.

Joe said the Clothing Closet and the Food Pantry are services that appeal to donors and if WDMHS did not operate these services it would be more difficult for the Foundation to raise money. Althea agreed

Council Member Loots said the goal might be to find \$100,000 – maybe a hike in the hotel/motel tax. DeAnn asked why other variations were not being considered, such as tax increases. Victor said WDMHS can't be treated like other departments and it was putting "a square peg into a round hole." Council Member Loots said cuts are being made broadly – e.g. putting off new pickleball courts and new fire trucks.

DeAnn commented that the Board needed hard numbers and three possible solutions should be offered. She said emotions don't work and we need to determine what we want. Victor again raised the issue of accountability. Betsy agreed and expressed concern that if the contractor did not live up to standards, what would be done – the city staff and the services would be gone. Althea had a copy of the RFI and said it had adequate accountability provisions, including monthly reports. Will agreed the accountability provisions were sound. Althea said the contract would be for 3-5 years. Joe said any contract should specify hours of service, food rescue procedures, and sources of other food.

Clarissa asked what list is being used to disseminate the RFI. Althea responded the RFI was going to the United Way list, the city website, and food pantry partners. Victor commented that the contractor should not be handpicked. Will said the United Way list was broad. Greg commented the Board needed alternatives to serve its clients with the money and time parameters available.

Victor suggested that the discussion be tabled to the January Board meeting. In the meantime, the Committee can work on the issue. Dan said he and Stephanie will contact the Urbandale Food Pantry and Catholic Charities to arrange meetings to discuss fundraising and operations.

Adopt-A-Family. Karen reported on the successful drive to help the Board's adopted family. She thanked the Board and several Board members thanked Karen for organizing the effort.

Comments for the Good of the Order: Karen said preserving the services of WDMHS was a "cause."

Betsy said it was a good discussion and good people will arrive at solutions to maintain services.

Clarissa said good could come from these discussions.

DeAnn stated the Board needs to offer solutions.

Council Members Loots said there are multiple options and the Board should think strategically.

Bill S. thanked Council Member Loots and said there was not a single track but options and time for input.

Becky said the Board was on a path to figure it out with good hearts.

Will said it was a good discussion with a goal of maintaining services at less cost to taxpayers.

Eric thanked Council Member Loots for his time and interest.

Althea thanked the Board and said she was grateful for each of the Board members.

Victor thanked Council Member Loots for his involvement.

Adjourn: Motion to adjourn was made by DeAnn. Seconded by Eric. Meeting adjourned at 7:06 p.m.

Respectfully submitted, Eric Tabor