

Minutes

SITING INCENTIVES COMMITTEE Legislative Office Building, Room 1A Hartford, CT September 25, 2008

Members Present: Brian Austin, Jr, statutory member as Undersecretary, Criminal Justice Policy and Planning Division, Office of Policy and Management, and Committee Chair; Rep. Penny Bacchiochi, statutory member as Ranking Member of the Planning and Development Committee; Woody Bliss, First Selectmen, Town of Weston, appointed by Senate Minority Leader John McKinney; Theresa Lantz, statutory member as Commissioner, Department of Correction; Sally Schenk, representing a community-based facility, appointed by House Minority Leader Lawrence Cafaro; Maureen Price-Boreland, representing a community-based facility, appointed by House Majority Leader Christopher Donovan; and Jeffrey Wright, Mayor of Newington, appointed by the Governor.

In addition, John (“Jack”) Brooks attended for William Carbone, statutory member as Executive Director, Court Support Services Division, Judicial Branch; Rep. Karen Jarmoc attended for Rep. Michael Lawlor, statutory member as Co-Chair of the Judiciary Committee; and Laneka Thomas attended for Sen. Andrew McDonald, statutory member as Co-Chair of the Judiciary Committee.

Chair OPM Undersecretary Brian Austin convened the meeting at 9:40am; the Committee members then introduced themselves.

Minutes: Minutes of the June 26th meeting were approved; Mayor Wright abstained.

Committee Correspondence: There was no correspondence.

Public Comment: There was no public comment.

Presentation and Discussion:

Three (3) planned presentations were:

- Reverend Peter R. Powell, President and CEO, Interfaith Housing Association, Westport, operates 9 halfway houses for the homeless
- Bill Gluck, member of the Board of Finance, New Britain, represents people who live in a neighborhood that has a halfway house

- Woody Bliss, First Selectman, Weston, Siting Incentives Committee member, and Board member of the Board of the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities and the Council Of Small Towns, and Chair of the South Western Regional Metropolitan Planning Organization, will share his thoughts and experiences. He initiated surveys to CCM and COST member municipalities.

Reverend Peter R. Powell

The Interfaith Housing Association (IHA) operates emergency shelters, transitional housing and permanent housing for the homeless in 9 different locations in Westport in partnership with Wilton and Weston. They recently had a groundbreaking for a 6-unit supportive housing facility for the mentally ill, and worked with DMHAS, DSS, CSH, CHFA, and HUD. IHA has:

- 15-unit 24-hour emergency shelter for men
- 4-unit shelter for women
- 4-family 'family' shelters
- 8 units of supportive housing
- Now building a 6-unit facility
- Have plans for a 12-unit facility
- Budget is \$1.2M; largely privately funded
- Westport owns most of the facilities
- 90% of clients are addicted
- 66% of the clients are mentally ill
- About 50% have been incarcerated for non-violent crimes
- Fairfield Hills Hospital closed in 1996; at that time, clientele was 66% addicted and 25% mentally ill; thereafter, increased the professionalism of the staffs (all must have a Master's degrees)

Good community relations is very important. Invite the police officials and selectmen to talk with the neighbors prior to siting a facility. Show the neighbors the community track record of the organization as well as the number of calls (lack of) to police to demonstrate program success. Give shelter occupants 'privacy' - doors that lock to keep the family as a whole to work out their problems in private. Give the person integrity, privacy, and surround him with people who care - "put the community" around the client - the more likely s/he will succeed. The shelter needs to be seen as a 'resource' to the town, not a problem. The shelters provide housing to offenders coming out of DOC. The program provides job training - there are jobs available at Shaws, CVS, Stew Leonards, etc. The client is also educated in self-presentation skills. In the future there will be an influx of Iraqi war veterans.

As a priest, he has had great success in preaching to Sunday churchgoers; convince the community you are solving its problem, not that its tolerating your problem. The group leaders need to be active in regional activities and issues. The program needs to be designed to ensure the safety of the community. Communications with the community must be full, frank and continuous. The Kiwanis Club hosts a monthly dinner at the community room in the supportive housing center so that neighbors can see what the program does; the police chief is present to respond to any questions.

Although the major funding is private, all of the IHA facilities are 'public'. *"If you have good truth to tell, tell it repeatedly."*

There was some discussion about the locating of a domestic violence shelter in Enfield. It is now not so much NIMBY (Not In My BackYard), but BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone). Although there is community fear that property values will decrease, there are studies that show that property values do not decrease. *Although no one wants us right next door, everyone wants us in Westport.*

IHA is a small program - less than 60 residential clients in 9 facilities. As such, IHA is too small to qualify for RFP funding. If you want to locate a program in a small community, the program would need to be small. Per capita costs will be higher in Westport/Weston/Wilton than in a major urban setting. Urban cities recognize that Westport, Weston and Wilton are doing their 'share' of programming. IHA will not undertake a program for 15-20 because it is too big and will not 'fly' in Westport. To make the program financially do-able, would need a higher per capita cost.

IHA believes 'radical imagination' is important. A small (4 bed) unit for 16- and 17-year olds could be posed to a municipality as a pilot, innovative, cutting edge program - once successful, then it would be more attractive to other towns. Violence is not tolerated in the shelters.

Committee member Maureen Price-Boland asked about residential facilities with unrelated people and need for local planning and zoning approvals. Rev. Powell commented that IHA notifies the municipal authorities (including PZC) and keeps everyone informed about IHA intentions and activities via open dialogue. Further, IHA has been successful in re-writing zoning regulations that would allow for siting of their facilities.

There was some discussion about community fears that facilities will attract 'out-of-towners'. Rev. Powell explained that IHA abides by fair housing laws, and is not exclusionary. On any given day, more than 50% of the residents are not from Westport/Wilton/Weston; they tend to be minority and poor, and it is relatively easy to solve problems of poverty with housing and jobs. On an annualized basis, however, about 66% of the people are from Westport/Wilton/Weston; they tend to have substance addiction and/or mental health problems which are more complex problems and as such require a longer length of stay.

IHA has had a relatively easy time of finding facilities and getting approvals, because of the small numbers of clients. They prefer to own the facility; 3-4 of the facilities are owned by IHA; the others are owned by the town. Their facilities are well-maintained, and the clients behave so the police do not have to respond to telephone complaints.

Regarding a role of the State, the State should ask the non-profit how it could be supportive, and not to tell the provider how to run the program. The State does not provide adequate funding for a non-profit to hire quality professional staff. The State

should find a provider whose mission it supports; IHA is wary of applying for funding that does not meet its mission.

Committee member Jeffrey Wright asked for clarification about IHA's finances. Almost all of IHA's funding comes from private sources, principally from average-to-lower income people; the average donation is less than \$100. They ask for donations all the time; their properties are well-maintained so people are happy to donate because they feel they are 'part of the solution'. The properties have some tax abatements. Annual operating costs are over \$1.2M: this covers maintenance of all the facilities; 60-bed residential care; case work services for anyone who comes in; 30,000 meals per year including drop-ins; all totaling about 240 different clients (residential and drop-in).

Woody Bliss

Mike Johnson, legislative analyst for CCM (Connecticut Conference of Municipalities) was introduced. Surveys were sent to the members of COST (Council Of Small Towns) and CCM; the responses received were negative concerning halfway houses for ex-offenders - people are not interested in 'solving the problem'; many mayors and first selectmen have complained that there are many gaps in how the State manages halfway houses. The 140+ municipalities in CCM received the following questions and gave the following sample responses:

1. What kinds of State incentives would encourage your municipality to accommodate community-based facilities (eg, halfway houses) for people released from correctional facilities?
 - *We would be interested in the State providing funds for public transportation. In addition, we would ask for aid to compensate for increased usage of resident troopers and volunteer fire department staff (suburban first selectman)*
 - *We have been severely overlooked in the calculation of state grants. Our ability to manage another State initiative without significant funding is simply not feasible. Once Education Cost Sharing grant funding is addressed, we would be pleased to work with the State on its new initiatives. (urban chief administrator)*

2. What are some of the barriers that discourage towns and cities from accommodating these types of community-based facilities? Please recommend any State solutions to such barriers.
 - *I am concerned with the State forcing some of these people into housing that is not appropriate for their needs; age restriction, retardation, handicapped. Also, the housing cannot be owned by for-profit landlords and then be exempt from local property tax. Towns are required to provide services from town-funded social service departments*

without any reimbursement from the State. (suburban first selectman)

- *Concerns about property values and public safety can be allayed by funding initiatives to augment neighborhood beautification and safety. (urban community services administrator)*
- *Personal safety along with an increased demand on services provided by volunteers (suburban first selectman)*
- *Halfway houses should be based in a more urban community where there is public transportation available to get to work (suburban first selectman)*

3. Has your municipality had any experience (positive or negative) with halfway houses?

- *Our negative experiences with high rates of incarceration and homelessness provide a good argument for redirecting funds from incarceration to support for former inmates (urban chief of administration)*

CCM and COST members offered additional comments including: There is need for teamwork, coordination and communication between the State and municipalities. The municipalities do not trust the State to honor its commitments; for example: the Education Cost Sharing grants and PILOT (*see note below*) payments are not being honored at the level of commitment, which could be a key to the problem's solution. The closing of Fairfield Hills Hospital 'dumped' mentally ill into surrounding communities. Many people thought that the casino monies had been promised to go to education, but that has not happened. The municipalities are very concerned about unfunded mandates such as the new Freedom Of Information requirement that municipal minutes and agendas must be posted on the municipality's website within 5 days which is time consuming and may cost an average of \$50,000-\$100,000 for each municipality to implement. Nobody wants certain offenders in their towns: arsonists, sex offenders especially pedophiles, or career criminals.

NOTE:

The Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant is the state's largest municipal grant which is distributed using an equity based formula.

The Payment In Lieu Of Taxes (PILOT) grant provides compensation to municipalities for real property tax losses due to exemptions applicable to state owned and private college and hospital real property.

Many comments were received that could spur changes and incentives. Getting a halfway house started is a long difficult process, and requires much dedication and persistence. Some halfway houses are not licensed, and this has caused problems in some towns; halfway houses need to be inspected. There are no professional qualifications required to operate/staff some halfway houses. A marketing/education program is needed to package the benefits of a halfway house, because it is not intuitively obvious that the halfway house has benefits for the community. The community needs to be convinced that the halfway house will solve the community's problems and not that the community must tolerate other's problems. An important benefit is the huge reduction in recidivism of someone coming out of jail/prison. Safety is a prime concern, and it is valuable to have the police chief as a supportive resource talking to neighbors. There needs to be thought given to public operation versus private operation of halfway houses. For **ALMOST???** certain 'second-timers' (eg, arsonists, sex offenders) it may not be possible to place them in communities, but in state facilities on state property. There needs to be consideration of a comprehensive process regarding local zoning regulations and property tax levy.

Discussion

Committee member Maureen Price-Boreland asked for clarification about the inspections of the halfway houses. First Selectman Bliss responded that the inspections would include health and building, as well as physical exterior appearance (including adequacy of parking) and mission/role of the program (including assessment of program successes of problem resolution, job placement and housing).

Mayor Jeffrey Wright expressed opposition to empowering the State to override local zoning regulations. A public meeting was held to discuss a home for 5 troubled adolescents that wanted to locate to Newington; the animosity from the community was so strong that plainclothes police were present at the meeting to keep order; the home was located in a residential community, and the community is still angry about it. Public safety is a huge concern. The community will not support halfway houses for violent offenders or sex offenders. The incentives to a municipality would have to be significant because taking taxable properties off the tax roles and giving $\frac{2}{3}$ tax abatements is financially difficult for some municipalities. Essentially, a town would be bringing in a public safety problem and losing revenues. The State has a poor track record in honoring fiscal commitments to municipalities - consider the ESC and PILOT programs, as well as unfunded mandates. Further, communities have their own problems - in Newington, 25% of the calls to the police department come from 8 motels on the Berlin Turnpike - this is an extreme pressure on the police. The community sees no benefit to having a halfway house sited there. Given economies of scale, it would be less expensive to locate a larger halfway house on state property. The research indicates that sexual predators cannot be cured, so there is no good reason to put them in residential communities.

First Selectman Bliss clarified that the State would not be overriding local zoning ordinances, but that an open dialogue about appropriate levels, standards, and types of zoning should occur.

Committee member Maureen Price-Boreland commented that urban communities believe that they are inundated with social problems and that these programs serve clients from their community and other communities. This is not just an urban issue, and it is not an isolated issue; we need to work collectively to make people aware that it is an issue for everyone; politicians should help educate their communities. People respond to this emotionally - they are afraid about their safety. Clients in halfway houses are supervised with proper management, while people in other types of housing may not be supervised and may create problems. It is far less expensive to have people in halfway houses than in prisons. Studies show that putting clients in large facilities does not succeed; best practices and best results are with smaller facilities with one-on-one relationships to restore clients to being 'good citizens'.

There was some discussion about models of procurement; the State contracts with the non-profits to provide needed services including residential care. If the provider first goes to the local planning and zoning commission, the chance of success is low. Approaching the local leaders first to discuss issues with siting could lead to good public relations - marketing a community education program would be key to success. The foundations needed for success include licensing, inspection, marketing the benefits for community acceptance, parking, and physical maintenance as well as education and open communication.

It was noted that most people in the court system are people who are having a problem(s) - your neighbor in the local lock-up, and the person on the sex offender registry - they are in every community, all around us. With proper services and proper management, these people will create less problems. Perhaps the question should be what incentives does the community want to accommodate these troubled people who are already in the community to become less problematic and 'good citizens'.

It was mentioned that Dr. Stephen Cox had made a presentation on recidivism to the Committee, and that those ex-offenders who went through a halfway house had significantly less risk of recidivism than those ex-offenders who did not go through a halfway house.

Meeting adjourned at 11:40am.

NEXT MEETING

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2008
LEGISLATIVE OFFICE BUILDING, ROOM 1B