



FITCHBURG CITY CLERK

Feb 12 2021 12:07 pm

Public Meeting Human Rights Commission

Meeting Minutes

Fitchburg, Ma 01420

Date: January 12, 2021

Time: 5:30pm

Location: via Zoom

In attendance were:

Commissioners: Barbara Nealon, Hafsa Asfa, Jamie Darcangelo, Martiza Knight, Maryam Ashraf, Senovia Bolivar, Mariah Pridgen, and David Roth. Guest Presenters: Susan Christensen Fitchburg Public Health Department, Lt. Jeffery Howe, Chief Ernest Martineau-Fitchburg Police Department

- Meeting called to order at 5:30pm
- Welcoming and Introductions conducted*
At this meeting we experienced an unusual growth in attendees which made it difficult to manage during the meeting as people were coming in and out of the meeting and assuring their attendance. During this meeting we had a total of 51 attendees noted on the Zoom attendance report :
Sheldon D, Yvonne Andrews, Mickey Guzman, Brandon Robbins representing Rep. Kushmerick, Fred Hutchings, Jim Ayres, Mark Moran, Lauren, Tara Rivera, Restoration, Neddie Latimer, Susan Buckholz, Sam Squallia, City Councilor at Large, Fitchburg Resident, Susan O'Brian, Carrie Saldo, Stephen Adams, Ray Watson, Fitchburg Resident[2], Maryanne Fangules, Lori-Ann Tessier, Jackie Buckley, CIT Spanish Language Practice, Susan Chailifoux Zephir, Irene Hernandez, Roxiam Bones, Julia Armstrong 2 phone numbers 19072296219, 19783539571 *duplicate entries for several attendees noted for J.Buckley, J.Ayres, R.Bones. In addition, one participant coordinated members of the homeless community to share their individual experiences with being homeless.
- Review of previous meeting minutes for November 10, 2020 and December 8, 2020.
Meeting minutes were approved and accepted as written.
- § 3-238 **Appointment of Chair.**[Amended 6-3-2014 by Ord. No. 100-2014] A Chair shall be appointed by the members to serve for a term of one year. Nominations for appointment as Chairperson were made. Barbara Nealon was nominated as the Chairperson for 2021. She was unanimously approved by all the Commissioners.

New Business-Addressing Homelessness within the City –Informational

- CHNA 9 {Community Health Needs Assessment #9 Representative concerns for homeless population}
What efforts are being made to address homelessness within the City:
 - a. City of Fitchburg Public Health Department-Susan Christensen
- Sue Christensen spoke on behalf of the Public Health Department about how her department is addressing the homeless. She reported that Fitchburg receives an Overdosed Caption grant of around \$30,000 that is focused on individuals who are active drug users, are at risk of overdosing, and/or are homeless. The Department uses this grant to provide around \$550 a week to pay for a meal program at the YMCA. The funds are also funneled towards treatment plans and distributing information about possible resources that are available to the participants.
In collaboration with Worcester, they also reach out to people who may be in need of their services and hand out hygiene kits or other basic materials necessary to survive.

The Northstar Family Shelter also donates money under the CGB grant to the homeless population through the health department. Inspectors within the health department occasionally monitor numerous areas around the city as well. If they

encounter an old building that is being occupied by an individual but find that the building is not fit to reside in, the department will reach out to the Fathers House and multiple other shelters to arrange other options for that person.

b. Fitchburg Police Department Lieutenant Jeffrey J. Howe, Community Engagement Unit

Lieutenant Jeffery Howe and Chief Ernest Martineau from the Fitchburg Police Department explained the resources that they provide for homeless individuals. Through a partnership with the Fathers House, Action Health Services, Community Health Connections, The Salvation Army, and several other institutions, the police are able to provide multiple options for the homeless.

- Once an officer encounters a homeless individual, they are required to reach out to their team. The team will then inspect the reported area to evaluate whether the individual is in immediate danger before offering possible resources to them.
 - Many are sent to the Action Health Center for hygiene kits and other materials they may need but there are many other options open as well.
 - Breakfast is offered to the homeless, in which the officers discuss the homeless individuals' personal situation so that they can provide them with the best resources and also ensure that similar problems can be avoided in the future.
- A crisis intervention team with officers that are specially trained in de escalation and crisis intervention is made available to ensure that nothing gets out of hand and that even the most serious situations are properly addressed and handled in a civil manner.

c. Our Father's House-Kevin McLean, Director of Homeless Services-unfortunately was unable to attend. Barbara received notification from Juduth Pasierb Executive Director for Our Father's House that they would not be attending this evenings meeting due to other meeting conflicts.

d. Homelessness and receiving mail. Councilor- at- large Samantha Squallia shared concern from a resident re: access to receiving mail service within the city -" I work with many homeless folks in our area. One constant issue is that they cannot receive mail anywhere. They're unable to get a post office box without a physical address and Fitchburg post office only allows for a 1 time, 2 week use of general delivery. Today I've learned that Leominster post office allows for general delivery all of the time and that each city determines what they allow for this service.

My question is: who do I contact to push for the time limit to be reconsidered? My hope is that even if I cannot convince USPS to change this, maybe I can work on a resolution with the powers that be. Maybe a general delivery P.O. box that the city and/or community could pay for."

Susan Chalifoux Zephir and Brandon Robbins responded and said that it has not been a serious issue in their city but problems in regard to where to send certain benefits has come up.

Chief Martineau agreed to follow up with the Post Office directly re: this issue.

- *Public Comment Period-Opportunity for the public to speak during a Commission Meeting*
Chairperson or designee will ask if anyone in the audience wishes to speak on any matter appearing on the agenda. If you wish to address the commission, raise your hand, when recognized, you must stand state your name and address and the reason for your speaking: . An attendee coordinated members of the homeless community to share their individual experiences with being homeless. The following information was obtained.

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

- Stephanie reported that there is no longer a place to take showers or charge any electronic devices, which limits the amount of contact between homeless individuals and possible resources.
- She also explained that she had spent 2 years building up a small area near the railroad, but it was recently bulldozed. She was not given the chance to go back and collect her belongings and was forced to start from the beginning all over again.
 - The railroad is not directly related to Fitchburg, however it must be monitored nevertheless to ensure that it remains respectful to the citizens.

- Angel took part in some regrettable acts and had been jailed for a certain amount of time because of it. However, even though he has been released, he keeps getting rejected from jobs and Our Fathers House denied his application. Fortunately, he went to Leominster and found a job there but the problems he faced in Fitchburg still exist and affect other people in similar situations.
- Angela has been in and out of multiple shelters but she was not made aware of any of the rules each of these shelters upheld. Due to this, she was recently forced to leave a shelter and was reportedly ridiculed for her current situation. Eventually, she found a means to help herself, but the shelter had no part in helping her get to that point. Both her and her children are struggling because of this mistreatment and she wants it addressed.
- Michael expressed his concern about how the COVID 19 pandemic is being used as an excuse to shut down necessary programs such as the food stamp office. Homeless people don't have access to beds, warming stations, charging stations, and many other facilities that were previously available.
- Angel is currently partially homeless, but when he was fully homeless before, he set up a tent in the woods somewhere. He, and multiple other homeless individuals, didn't want to disrupt the city so they built small tents away from it. However, the police came by after discovering it and reportedly destroyed the place and harassed the people who were residing there. They were forced into the city by Kevin and the police officers but were not given any reliable resources. He was forced to go door to door, asking for help from random individuals now that he no longer had a small place to stay.
 - Chief Martineau responded to Angel's claim, saying he does not believe that his officers are harassing people. His officers do the best that they can to ensure that the situation is addressed without inciting violence. However, he encouraged to talk to him directly about an officer if he actually witnessed any direct police issued abuse.
 - Chief Martineau also expressed disappointment that a representative from the Fathers House was not present to explain the situation.
- Jacob managed to pull himself out of homelessness but he wished to express that his success was not attributed to Our Fathers House. He claims that there are several things wrong with the system in place at the Fathers House and that numerous people do not feel comfortable and safe enough to consider Our Fathers house as a plausible option. He expresses that there should be a solid cushion for people in case anything bad happens in their lives. A place where they can stay for a month while they get back on their feet while also receiving some type of mental health service to aid them in improving their situation.
 - Our Fathers House doesn't answer phone calls and they did not attend this meeting either. When Jacob reached out to them, they did not return the call and also claimed that he had never even called in the first place when confronted.
 - He wanted people to look into where Our Fathers House funds are going because they don't seem to be going to the homeless like him.

In response to the public comment section, Commissioner Ms. Asfa asks about the demographics of homeless and how many beds are currently available for the homeless. Ms. Christensen, Ms. Buchholz, and Ms. Rivera responded and said that they do not have direct demographic data. However, they did report that Our Fathers House has 30 beds and that Days Inn is also being used as emergency shelter options.

Additional Comments noted:

Mickey Guzman reportedly heard a lot of negative things about the Fathers House and believed that it is important that people are educated about the other services that exist.

Susan Buckholz noted the problem is the fact that people choose not to go to Our Fathers House due to the treatment they've received there. Many of the residents who came to the meeting and people who've been in contact with Our Fathers House have repeatedly complained about the staff there and it's manager, Kevin McClain. This comment was supported Yvonne Andrews, Therapist. Ms. Buchholz explained the complaints she's heard in regard to Our Fathers House and mentioned a supposedly biased investigation that was conducted on Our Fathers House that ignored problems that were occurring in the Fathers House.

Lieutenant Howe emphasized people to come forward and report these occurrences when they occur so that evidence can be gathered and a proper investigation can be launched.

The Board of Directors from the Fathers House did not attend the meeting and Commissioner Dr. Knight suggested that the HRC offer to attend their meeting instead of inviting them to the HRC.

Other areas noted in general:

- Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, beds available for the homeless have lessened but Leominister is working to receive a grant to use a nearby hotel as a temporary homeless shelter.
- Resources for obtaining an individual's ID, birth certificate, and other identifying documents are also made available to the homeless
- Panhandling signs and other anti-homeless sounding signs contribute to the stigmatization of homeless people and should be regulated accordingly
- Old Business-
 - Follow up with previous meetings resident issue-currently working on a potential wrongful termination on a Fitchburg resident . Adrian was following up on that.
 - Education Racial Justice Group/SURJ subgroup reports: Hafsa and David-attended
 - City of Fitchburg Diversity & Inclusion Committee-Dr.Maritza Knight-no meetings yet scheduled.

The Chair, thanked the residents for sharing their comments and the Commission will review further and did note due to the number of presentations this evening she has scheduled Mass Support to come and address the resources that they may be able to offer during the pandemic at our next meeting.

Meeting adjourned: 7:20 pm

Meeting minutes submitted by:

Maryam Ashraf and Barbara Nealon