

CITY OF BELLEVUE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

December 2, 2024
6:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Commissioners Gonzalez, Imfura, Phan, Rashid, and Vice Chair White

COMMISSIONERS REMOTE: None

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Chair Singh

STAFF PRESENT: Christy Stangland, Toni Esparza, Ruth Blaw, Saada Hilts, Andrew Ndayambaje, Gysel Galaviz, Department of Parks & Community Services

COUNCIL LIAISON: Not Present

POLICE LIAISON: Not Present

GUEST SPEAKERS: Deyanita Armenta Gonzalez, Consejo Counseling and Referral Service; George Conzalez, Harborview Abuse and Trauma Center; Lalita Uppala, Indian American Community Services; Patrick Martin, Lifewire; Tulika Dugar,

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER and ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order at 6:01 p.m. by Vice Chair White who presided.

At the roll of the call, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Chair Singh.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

October 21, 2024

A motion to approve the minutes was made by Commissioner Imfura. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Gonzalez and the motion carried unanimously.

3. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Gary Samson with Family Law Casa thanked the Commission for serving vulnerable persons in the community and for supporting the organization financially. The organization represents children from low-income families in King County Family Court and advocates for secure home

lives and equity. In Bellevue, the organization serves approximately six cases a year, and 17 Bellevue residents have benefited from the services so far this year. Currently, there are three active cases in Bellevue. The advocates are trained to evaluate allegations, write detailed reports, and make recommendations to judges about the best interest of children. Advocates testify in court. Judges refer cases to the agency that are complex and in dispute. One goal of the agency is to provide a voice for children in court, especially those from low-income families, new immigrants and refugees, people of color, people with limited English skills, and those persons who represent themselves in family court. All of the advocates receive training in how to assess domestic violence among intimate partners, including physical violence, sexual violence and intimidation.

Alex Tsimerman began with a Nazi salute and called the Commissioners dirty damn Nazi fascist pigs and garbage rats and in a confrontational tone, expressing grievances about the Bellevue Police Advisory Council, labeling it a Gestapo meeting due to restricted public access, and compared it unfavorably to Seattle's police meetings, which were claimed to be more transparent. Also criticized was city governance. Political views were expressed along with support for Donald Trump in calling for systemic changes.

4. COMMUNICATION FROM CITY COUNCIL, COMMUNITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS – None
5. STAFF AND COMMISSIONER REPORTS – None

Commissioner Gonzalez noted not having been available to participate in any activities in lieu of a second Commission meeting.

Commissioner Phan noted having participate in a site visit to Bridge of Promise and elaborated on the organization's work, describing it as a program serving young and older disabled adults transitioning after high school. The program's two-to-one ratio allows for drop-off hours, offering caretakers respite. While there, members were observed engaging in activities like painting and creating a haunted house. The program differs from others in Bellevue by providing care services directly, unlike adaptive programs requiring caretakers to remain present. The executive director spends the majority of their time fundraising. The Commission would benefit from hearing directly from an agency representative about what they do for the community. The organization collaborates with businesses like Harley and Honda of Bellevue who have hired some members to work as greeters or in the merchandise area. Washington State ranks 40th in the nation for supporting individuals with disabilities. Depending on the school district, there may be great support for students with disabilities during K-12. However, after high school, funding changes, and parents and caregivers experience shifts in the resources available for support. Transition programs are limited because many members are not pursuing college or careers. Fifteen percent of their members are employed. For example, one member works at Trader Joe's, and another at a movie theater. Next year, they plan to focus on sustainability, addressing concerns about aging caretakers and parents. They aim to secure legal help and prepare plans for members in case their caregivers are no longer available to support them.

Commissioner Rashid noted having attended a few events, including one for the youth

community. It was exciting to hear students share their ideas and express gratitude for the support given by the City of Bellevue. They discussed issues students face, such as drugs, depression, and mental health challenges. Also attended was an event in Redmond showcasing Indian art. The artists displayed beautiful and expensive photographs and other art pieces. The Indian food served was very good. Someone from King County joined the event and shared their insights. It was a wonderful experience.

Commissioner Imfura reported on having attended a meeting of the Parks & Community Services Board on November 20. At the meeting updates were shared regarding various projects, including Park CP, a mental health initiative, and the Bellevue Botanical Garden. The meeting was on Zoom, but the network connection was poor, making it difficult to follow. It was learned that the Bellevue Botanical Garden, a non-profit organization that began in 1992, operates with ten partners in the city and focuses on connecting people with plants. They use technology like QR codes to provide information about plants, and they offer the garden as a venue for educational events, not for-profit activities. The garden attracts around 400,000 visitors annually, and it has seen an 18 percent growth over the past two years.

Vice Chair White noted having participated in Painting a Better Tomorrow through the Master Builders Association of King County. The project included a sprucing up of the Bellevue Boys and Girls Club, including classrooms painted with colorful and vibrant tones. It was a great experience.

Senior Administrative Assistant Gysel Galaviz said additional opportunities are being explored for the month of December.

Department of Parks and Community Services assistant director Toni Esparza reported that on December 7 Eastside For All would be holding a community gathering potluck at the Together Center. On December 21 Pride Across the Bridge, an organization that supports queer individuals and allies, will also hold a community gathering potluck.

Human Services Manager Ruth Blaw reported that there remains a vacancy on the Commission. Interviews to fill the slot are coming up soon and a new Commissioner should be appointed by the Commission's first meeting in January. New Commission officers will also be elected at the first meeting in January.

The Commissioners briefly reviewed their experiences as part of the experiment of having one meeting per month instead of two. Several commissioners expressed their support. They noted enjoying being able to visit organizations and engage with the community. The approach allows for a better understand of what is happening in the community. The consensus was to continue with the approach. To that end, the January 27, February 24, and March 17 meetings were canceled. Staff will continue coordinating site visits and virtual activities, especially during the winter months and flu season. Any Commissioners interested in visiting a specific agency or exploring a topic should let staff know so arrangements can be made.

Toni Esparza remarked that staff absolutely support Commissioners deciding not to attend meetings in person if they are not feeling well or are not comfortable being in a room with

others. Staff should be informed by noon the day before the meeting. If notice is not given by noon the day prior, Commissioners may still attend, but cannot be counted as present, and will not be able to participate as a Commissioner.

The Commissioners were reminded that during the funding season, it will be necessary to return to holding two meetings per month, but that will not be until next year.

With regard to the city's budget, Toni Esparza reminded the Commissioners that the city operates on a two-year budget cycle. The council adopts the budget for the next two years through a long and detailed process. Over the past year, the Commission has been heavily involved by reviewing applications and forming recommendations. In October and November, the council held many meetings focusing on the budget. As part of the process, the Commission's recommendations for three different funding sources were presented, including the city's Human Services Fund, the Housing Stability Program — sometimes referred to as 1590 funds — and the Community Development Block Grant, or CDBG. All of the Commission's recommendations for those funding sources were adopted by the council.

Additionally, the Commission provided recommendations in case the council allocated additional funds for human services. The council decided to allocate an additional \$9 million across two years, which amounts to approximately \$1.39 million per year. That is a significant investment compared to previous funding levels. City Manager Diane Carlson, in consultation with the council, identified funding priorities for those funds, including youth services, specifically behavioral health, childcare, and supportive services; rent assistance; shelters; and housing. The Commission's recommendations guided the allocation amounts for each agency.

6. NEW BUSINESS

A. Panel Conversations: Service Trends and Challenges in the Areas of Domestic Violence and Survivor Support

Human Services Planner Saada Hilts stressed that the topic is both difficult and emotional. A video was shown that outlined the fact that domestic abuse is a hidden crime, often occurring behind closed doors. It affects people of all genders, sexualities, and walks of life. Victims may not recognize the abuse or feel safe to speak out. The video emphasized that abuse takes many forms, including verbal, financial, sexual, and physical, and encouraged victims to seek help.

Saada Hilts said Washington State law defines domestic violence broadly, encompassing various forms of abuse committed by one family or household member against another. Efforts are ongoing to address the issue, but more resources and support are needed.

Vice Chair White said the Needs Update points out that in 2022 Lifewire supported Bellevue resident clients with 4974 bednights, and 8172 total bednights. To date in 2023, the organization has provided 3534 bednights for Bellevue residents, and 7961 bednights total. Additionally, Lifewire provided 1282 hours of advocacy services for survivors of domestic violence in 2022. Consejo provided 555 hours of crisis intervention services and safety planning in Spanish and English. The King County Sexual Assault Resource Center provided 852 hours of

comprehensive crisis and advocacy services in English and Spanish for Bellevue residents who had experienced sexual assault and abuse. Harborview Abuse and Trauma Center provided 215 hours of counseling service in 2022 to Bellevue residents who had experienced trauma. The city allocated approximately \$943,000 for domestic violence support services for 2023-2024.

The panelists introduced themselves and provided a brief overview of the services provided by their respective agencies.

Deya Armenta with Consejo Counseling and Referral Services said the organization serves the Latino community primarily, but not exclusively, by providing advocacy, therapy, and mental health services in English and Spanish. The organization is working to expand its offerings to include medical and homeopathic care.

Patrick Martin with Lifewire said since the founding of the agency in 1982, Lifewire has served over 162,000 survivors in King County and beyond. The focus is on survivor-driven advocacy, legal services, and housing stability, including emergency and transitional shelters. Additionally, the agency emphasizes prevention through community outreach and education, including domestic violence training for employers.

George Gonzalez with Harborview Abuse and Trauma Center said the services provided by the organization include counseling and support for survivors of domestic violence and trauma. The representative noted personally having more than 25 years of experience in child welfare, working with domestic violence survivors, perpetrators, and the impacts on children and families. The clinic, which is based in Factoria, provides trauma counseling for individuals who have experienced sexual assault, domestic violence, and other traumatic events. The clinic's licensed clinical social worker provides therapy and also helps clients navigate the complex systems involved with domestic violence cases. Beyond providing counseling, the focus is on providing survivors with the supports they need to rebuild their lives.

Lalita Uppala, Executive Director, Indian American Community Services, said the organization serves the needs of the Asian Indian immigrant and refugee community in Bellevue, King County, and beyond. There is a misconception that the Bellevue community is solely made up of tech workers. This year, the agency provided over 360 legal clinics for crisis survivors, including 321 domestic violence clients, 211 of whom were Bellevue residents. The clients come from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Tulika Dugar, Crisis Coordinator for Indian American Community Services, said the agency is just a call away for those experiencing domestic violence. The services provided include legal, family, and immigration clinics, often requiring 12 to 30 sessions per person to address their needs. The wraparound services include job security, counseling, mental health care for families, and rental assistance. Thanks to the city's support, the program has helped many survivors begin their journey toward independence and sustainability. However, the scale of current need far exceeds the available resources.

Commissioner Imfura asked the panelists about the common misconceptions regarding domestic violence.

Deya Armenta said one common misconception is that domestic violence only involves physical abuse. In fact it also includes emotional, financial, mental, and sexual abuse. More non-physical cases are seen than physical cases. It is also a misconception that survivors can easily leave an abusive relationship. Many face barriers such as immigration status, financial dependency, or concerns about their children's safety. It is also wrong to think that domestic violence only affects certain demographics. Abusers and survivors come from all backgrounds, genders, and ages. It is also a misconception that domestic violence is a private matter that should remain an issue only for those involved. It is in fact a public health issue that requires community awareness and action.

Patrick Martin noted having previously worked in the shelter and food bank systems in Minnesota. Domestic violence intersects with various needs, including housing, food insecurity, and legal issues. Prior to a recent domestic violence awareness training session for a major national bank, only nine percent of the participants believed they or someone on their team had experienced domestic violence. After the training, the number rose to over 30 percent, highlighting the importance of awareness and support.

George Gonzalez commented that in past years it was common practice to separate the perpetrators from their families without addressing the root issues. Today, the focus is on empowering survivors to lead the way in finding solutions. Believing survivors when they make reports, and providing them with support, is crucial. Domestic violence is no longer an automatic referral to CPS unless it directly involves child safety concerns. Survivors need support to envision a way out of their situation, and it is not the role of professionals to impose solutions.

Lalita Uppala said it is a misconception that educated people do not resort to domestic violence. A Bellevue mother, whose husband was arrested for solicitation and subsequently avoided any serious impacts, was awarded full custody of the children. The mother is fighting for custody of the children and is struggling financially, working two jobs, and qualifies for emergency rental assistance.

Tulika Dugar added that immigrant survivors face additional barriers, such as visa dependency on their abusers. Non-physical abuse often escalates to physical violence, but survivors fear filing reports due to cultural and systemic challenges. Building trust and providing sustained support are critical for empowering survivors.

Commissioner Gonzalez asked about the most significant service needs and barriers for domestic violence survivors.

Deya Dugar said the needs are vast and include housing, legal support, mental health services, and community awareness. Barriers include cultural stigma, financial dependency, and systemic gaps. For immigrant survivors, visa-related fears are a significant hurdle. More comprehensive and sustained funding is needed to meet the growing needs and ensure survivors have the tools to rebuild their lives. One significant challenge clients face is the lack of available resources. Consejo prioritizes Spanish-speaking clients because there are not many providers who speak Spanish. It is very hard for someone going through something as sensitive as domestic violence

to face a provider who does not understand their language or cultural background. Providing services to people who share cultural experience is essential. Another barrier is economic dependence. Many survivors cannot work because their abuser does not allow it, or they lack a safety net to leave. Offering financial support, such as job placement or rent assistance, is critical for the survivors. Many clients fear retaliation and worry that reporting abuse will lead to something worse happening, which is especially terrifying if children are involved. Emotional abuse often escalates to physical abuse quickly. Additionally, in the Latino community, there is a cultural stigma around domestic violence. The traditional roles of women—cooking, cleaning, and so on—are normalized, but they can quickly evolve into abusive situations. There is a clear need to support survivors who are brave enough to ask for help.

Patrick Martin stated that about two-thirds of agency funding comes from various government sources, including city, county, federal grants, and regional authorities like KCRHA. Each funding source has its reporting requirements, often stringent, and operates on different timelines, making it challenging to plan strategically or address emerging needs effectively. For example, innovative initiatives like training on coercive control often have to come out of general funds, which also are needed to cover emergency needs. The dynamic forces the agency into a constant scramble for resources, limiting the ability to scale services sustainably. Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in the state of Washington. The agency works with families from emergency shelter to transitional housing, but when they emerge into the most expensive housing market in the country, their rental assistance funds do not go as far as they should. Big esoteric planning decisions relative to more housing have very real front-line impacts on those in desperate situations.

George Gonzalez said many domestic violence survivors are navigating the system as they would a corn maze. They must determine what they qualify for. They may not have mental health and domestic violence issues and as such they do not qualify for a certain program. Or they may have substance abuse and domestic violence issues which means they do qualify for a program. Having someone help domestic violence survivors navigate the system is essential.

Lalita Uppala stressed the need for wrap-around support. Many experiencing domestic violence and other crises are living in the United States on a dependent Visa. Many are employed with do not earn enough to pay rent from their own paycheck. It takes a tremendous amount of strength to walk out of unsafe situations under those circumstances, and what is needed is a safe space in which to receive help. Indian American Community Services provides legal clinics, but when they seek representation in court, the average retainer fee is \$35,000. That does not always assure getting a good attorney, it may take even more money as the case progresses, and in the end yet another case can be registered against them, resulting in an endless journey of trauma for domestic violence clients. Abusers can file for domestic violence protection orders, and if they do it first, they often get it. Agency's struggle to fully meet the need given their limited resources; there is a need to seek corporate support beyond governmental support.

Tulika Dugar said it is often the case that by the time a domestic violence client seeks help from the agency, they already have two or three charges filed against them. The abusive partner often has corporate lawyer representation, and that is a huge barrier.

Commissioner Rashid asked what challenges the Commission should be aware of.

Deya Armenta said Consejo faces a number of ongoing challenges, including language and cultural barriers. There are a number of non Spanish-speaking clients in need of services and the agency is striving to expand to other languages. Funding and resource limitations are challenges being faced as clients present with more needs. There is a clear need for more qualified and willing counselors, advocates and medical professionals. Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of both clients and staff is a constant concern. All facilities and outreach programs need to be safe environments, especially for individuals dealing with high-risk situations. Many court-mandated services aggressors are being asked to participate in involve the same services and locations their victims attend.

Patrick Martin agreed and stressed the need for flexible funding. When a client calls late at night and indicates a need to be out of their situation immediately, the agency does not have a lot of flexibility to figure out which grant dollars can be used to address their immediate needs. Reducing the barriers to entry and being able to connect with survivors as quickly and efficiently as possible has been a priority for Lifewire, and that requires flexible funds.

George Gonzalez said there are growing opportunities around how things get funded differently. It has been growing in the private sector where instead of an application or interview process, things are handled almost like a job interview, with a general conversation. Instead of printed outcomes, questions are asked about the work that is done. The Harborview Abuse and Trauma Center is part of a huge bureaucracy that has systems in place that allow for hiring someone to build an application system that will spit out data. Someone else can be hired to make sense of the data and put it into different reports. There are, however, small agencies that cannot afford to have systems like those to tell their story. Institutional racist practices still exist and they disproportionately affect people of color. When seeking funding, the agency must look at who the competitors are and decisions must be made about even going after specific funding. What is needed is a culture that focuses on helping people rather than competing for funding.

Lalita Uppala said Indian American Community Services stretches every dollar to the extreme in anticipation of having clients come forward with needs, especially at certain times of year. Rental assistance funds from ARPA will end in 2024 and how the needs of the community will be met going forward is largely unknown. Research needs to be done about who else can partner with the city, and how else they can partner with the city. There are any number of individuals from the community that have good jobs and who contribute to the wealth of the corporate sectors, and there must be some sort of partnership that comes to the city. New sources of funding are needed to provide rental assistance, and mental health counseling, and for the cross cultural healing circles being done with IWCC. Family law attorneys need to be encouraged to volunteer some of their time to assist in legal clinics.

Vice Chair White asked how many incidents of domestic violence typically occur before someone reaches out for help, and if any treatments have been found that help rehabilitate the abusers. Deya Armenta said it often takes years before survivors speak up. Many reach out after what they describe as the 'last straw,' but the abuse may have been ongoing for a long time. Others come forward after one incident but then disappear for months, only to return later. The

door is always open for them, but it takes time to build the strength to say they have had enough. Experience has shown that perpetrators served in court are often required to undergo treatment. It certainly is hoped that such treatment helps them understand their actions and make changes for the sake of future partners. Deya Armenta noted, however, not having any direct evidence of the effectiveness of the treatment programs.

Patrick Martin said the work is fundamentally about breaking cycles of generational trauma. Many abusers have experienced abuse themselves, often in childhood. Addressing that requires flexibility and the ability to meet people where they are when they decide to seek help or leave a situation. The stakes are incredibly high when survivors attempt to leave. Research shows that 85 percent of women who have experienced severe but non-fatal violence tried to leave within 12 months, and 75 percent of domestic violence-related homicides occur after the survivor tries to leave. This creates a critical and narrow window for providing the wraparound services needed to ensure a successful transition.

George Gonzalez said how someone responds to domestic violence varies by individual. For some, the first incident might be enough. For others, they rationalize it, comparing it to past experiences and rationalize their experience. Relationships often have positive moments that keep people holding on, even if they are infrequent. There is something that brought them together initially, and survivors might cling to those memories, even if they occurred a long time ago. There are effective treatments for perpetrators, but the most important approach is focusing on prevention. The agency is working with the Bellevue School District on programs around sexual assault prevention and creating a culture of consent, especially among teenagers. Building self-esteem in young women and teaching the values early is critical. Prevention does not produce quick, measurable results like some other programs.

Lalita Uppala experience has shown abused persons will wait years before seeking help. That is true both for the youth and for women. Long-term efforts like mental health first aid sessions and quarterly programs focused on consent can have a meaningful impact. The programs are designed not just for youth but also for their parents, ensuring the conversation continues at home.

George Gonzalez said the Harborview Abuse and Trauma Center clinics focus on cognitive behavioral therapy and emphasize the triangle of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. For perpetrators, change must begin with their thought patterns before behaviors and feelings can shift. Many perpetrators attend treatment because it is court-ordered, not because they recognize their behavior as harmful. Without acknowledging their role, treatment is unlikely to be effective. However, when thoughts begin to change, it creates a ripple effect that improves their actions and emotions.

Toni Esparza shared that one aspect of the department is adult misdemeanor probation. For clients convicted of domestic violence, the judge can order them to attend a Domestic Violence Moral Recognition Therapy class. The six-month program requires weekly attendance, with extensions for any missed sessions. The program is offered in six languages: Punjabi, Mandarin, Russian, Spanish, Farsi, and English. While it is not open to the public, it is free for probation clients and provides an intensive, structured approach to addressing domestic violence behaviors.

Vice Chair White thanked the panelists for taking the time to help the Commission to understand the issues.

Before adjourning, the Commissioners and staff were encouraged to share a highlight from the past year as Commissioners.

Gysel Galaviz remarked on having been new to working with the Commission just one year ago. One highlight mentioned was around seeing all the new commissioners come on board and building connections with each other and the staff. Fostering open lines of communication has been appreciated.

Commissioner Phan highlighted seeing the enthusiasm around the table. Everyone involved is truly interested in what is happening in the community, which is inspiring.

Commissioner Rashid remarked on being nervous and unsure about being able to do the work of a Commissioner upon being appointed. Over time, however, confidence has been gained. The Commissioner noted being grateful for the support from everyone. It is a privilege to learn more about our community through the work.

Toni Esparza remarked that some new approaches were initiated during the year, such as hosting a retreat and involving additional voices in the process. It is exciting to see the Commission continue growing and responding to agency needs.

Ruth Blaw said going out into the community for site visits has been like a form of research, leading to a deeper understanding of the community and all that is happening in it. It has been an eye-opening experience.

Vice Chair White remarked about having felt supported since joining the Commission and voiced appreciation for how everyone is approachable and willing to help. The desire is to become more confident and involved in the coming year. The retreat was a wonderful experience. It is great to be part of a team of people who care about Bellevue.

Commissioner Imfura noted having enjoyed being a part of the Commission even though parts of the process have been scary due to a lack of experience. Confidence continues to grow and it is exciting to think about what the coming year will bring.

Commissioner Gonzalez said it has been enjoyable to be a part of such a supportive body. It has not been possible to participate in site visits by virtue of having a small child at home, not because of not wanting to go.

Toni Esparza reminded the Commissioners that they can report on their attendance at or participation in any event in the community related to human services, even if staff did not suggest them. During reports, the Commissioners can share any knowledge about human services experienced over the past month. It is a time for the staff and Commissioners to teach each other.

Human Services Planner Andrew Ndayambaje said it has been a joy getting to know the Commissioners over the past year, especially the new ones. One of the highlights for the year has been the diversity of the commission and learning about the different backgrounds and perspectives brought to the table.

Human Services Planner Christy Stangland highlighted two things from the year. First was the vulnerability in the group. It has been a respectful space where everyone is learning and growing together, which is so valuable. Second, the site visits and monitoring visits have been great. It is great to feel like COVID has finally been left behind, allowing for the Commission to function normally and reconnect with the community. The visits made with Commissioners strengthened the overall experience and will be incredibly valuable during the funding cycle. Hearing stories and learning about the impact of the agencies' work adds a depth that goes beyond just reading their applications.

Saada Hilts echoed those comments and thanked the Commissioners for their willingness to step into something new, for engaging with the staff, and for working to figure things out together.

7. ADJOURNMENT

Vice Chair White adjourned the meeting at 7:47 p.m.