

CITY OF BELLEVUE
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MINUTES

February 15, 2022
6:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Virtual Meeting

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Vice Chair Amirfaiz, Ma, Mansfield, Mercer, Phan

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Chair Piper

STAFF PRESENT: Christy Stangland, Toni Esparza, Department of Parks and Community Services; Deputy Mayor Nieuwenhuis

GUEST SPEAKERS: Jonathan “Ace” Asencio Reyes, Judith Mercado, Tina Morales, Latino HEAT; Melisa Shafiee, Mia Trenbeath, Patrick Alina, Youth Link; Trisit Gessesse, Rehana Kajani, Bellevue School District

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m. by Vice Chair Amirfaiz who presided.

2. ROLL CALL

Upon the call of the roll, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioner Mansfield, who arrived at 6:04 p.m., and Chair Piper who was excused.

Vice Chair Amirfaiz welcomed participants to the February 15, 2022 meeting and stated that this evening’s meeting and future meetings will be held remotely via Zoom.

3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. January 4, 2022

A motion to approve the minutes as submitted was made by Commissioner Ma. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Mercer and the motion carried unanimously.

B. January 19, 2022

A motion to approve the minutes as submitted was made by Commissioner Ma. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Mercer and the motion carried unanimously.

C. February 1, 2022

A motion to approve the minutes as submitted was made by Commissioner Ma. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Mercer and the motion carried unanimously.

4. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS – None

5. COMMUNICATIONS FROM CITY COUNCIL, COMMUNITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

Deputy Mayor Nieuwenhuis reported that he had been appointed by the Mayor to the Eastside Human Services Forum. He also noted that a large number of candidates for the open position on the Human Services Commission were received and is currently being winnowed down to those who will be interviewed. Staff and the Commission Chair will be involved in the interviews and a selection will be made as soon as possible.

6. STAFF AND COMMISSIONER REPORTS

Department of Parks and Community Services assistant director Toni Esparza informed the Commissioners that the hiring process for the Human Services Manager position met with success in the hiring of Leslie Miller who is currently the human services supervisor for Kirkland. She will be joining the city team on March 16.

Ms. Esparza also noted that on January 24 Human Services Planner Christy Stangland and Parks Director Michael Shiosaki presented the Human Services Needs Update to the City Council. There was an excellent conversation that followed the presentation. Immediately following that presentation that Council was given a presentation on recommendations regarding 1590 capital funding. The revenues are estimated to be about \$9 million annually. The guidelines for their use require that between 60 percent and 100 percent must be spent on construction or preservation of affordable housing or behavioral health facilities for specific populations and their ongoing operations. Any remainder, but no more than 40 percent, can be used for behavioral health and housing related services. In 2021 the Council allocated \$1.8 million of the revenues to a behavioral health and housing related services RFP and those services are currently being provided in the community. A separate RFP was issued for the capital use of the dollars and the recommendation made to the Council was to fund a contract with Lifewire for its relocation and expansion of their shelter and emergency housing services. The recommendation was approved by the Council.

Ms. Esparza said the remaining meetings scheduled for alternative days in 2022 have all been moved to Thursdays, specifically July 7 and September 8.

The Commissioners were reminded of the need to verify the serial numbers on their city issued iPads.

7. INFORMATION FOR THE COMMISSION

A. Youth Panel on Human Services Needs in Bellevue

Ms. Esparza explained that the panelists were all informed in advance that the Commission was seeking their expertise and viewpoints in regard to four specific questions: 1) What are the most significant human services needs impacting youth in Bellevue? 2) What systemic inequities exist in human services in Bellevue? 3) What other barriers exist for youth to access human services resources in Bellevue? and 4) What human service agencies are reliable, accessible, and equitable sources of support for Bellevue youth and their families?

With regard to the first question, Melisa Shafiee commented that during the pandemic the need for human services have been emphasized. The most prevalent need has been around youth mental health. She said one of her teachers recently spoke about seeing a visible increase in youth reporting issues of anxiety and depression. There has also been an increase in the acceptance of mental health issues because it has become so much more common.

Students are far more willing to express that they are feeling anxious or depressed. While that is a good change, it is still very important to address those needs and help the youth overcome their mental challenges. During the pandemic there was an addition to the counseling program, called the Mental Health Assistance Team, which is staffed with school psychologists. All students have access to the free service, whereas previously only freshmen and sophomores had access to it.

Ms. Shafiee called out the need for more guidance and mentorship programs. Due to the pandemic, many youth feel lost in school. During the school year during which all classes were held virtually, many youth lost track of how the system works. That emphasized the need for more guidance and mentorship programs. School counselors do a lot and are not able to pay attention to every single student.

Mia Trenbeath agreed. She said one of the greatest human service challenges facing Bellevue's youth is mental health. She said the Human Services Needs Update indicates that the number of youth across multiple grade levels who have contemplated suicide in the past 12 months has increased since 2016. That goes to show the issue is increasingly difficult and important. Equally important is the need to address the root causes associated with mental health. Mental health is one factor that impacts school performance and other things. The isolation triggered by the pandemic only made the issue worse.

Ace concurred as well. Ace said many teens are struggling and need help with mental health issues. Some do not even know what it is, and others have parents that say mental health does not exist. There is a real need for therapists of color to help kids from the same backgrounds. The pressure parents put on their kids, especially immigrant parents, is impacting the mental health of their kids. It is a good thing that kids have access to mental health therapy. Too many kids have turned to drugs and the like to deal with the impacts of the pandemic instead of reaching out to someone they can trust.

Trisit Gessesse said she agreed with the comments made by the others. She said the point made about the need for guidance and career counselors is very important. Having such counselors can take a lot of pressure off of students, especially upperclassman who are faced with having to decide the course of their lives and what classes they should take to reach their goals. Having a guidance counselor to talk to is very important in determining next steps and the big picture. She agreed that students have been falling into bad circumstances when they feel the need to get away from school. The number of extracurricular and after-school programs offered to students is quite high. A number of students are involved in sports, which is a healthy get-away for them. Sports and mental health are top issues. Food is another major issue. Many students during the pandemic relied on the schools for food. Access to food is important, but equally important is food quality. There is a clear need to see cafeteria food improve by including healthy options.

Addressing the second question, Ms. Trenbeath said there are many factors that contribute to mental health. Something that needs to be addressed relative to systemic inequities is evident by the graduation rates. According to the needs report, the overall five-year graduation rate from the high schools in the district was 95 percent. However, for those who reported themselves as being homeless, the rate fell to 75 percent. That points to an inequity tied to student background, not necessarily to a student's academic capabilities. Equitable access to programs to assist those students is difficult to come by. Many students do not even know what diverse services are offered in Bellevue simply because they have not heard about them or because they do not think those types of things are available to help them. It is also important to acknowledge that youth as a demographic have limitations on what they can do, especially given familial situations and possibly not having the means to physically get to where the services are offered. With regard to food inequity, she said many students rely on

food and meals from the school, and that was true even before the pandemic. In the district, 2.9 percent of the currently enrolled population is black. However, in the food price reduction programs in the cafeterias, black students account for 69 percent of the total. It is important to acknowledge that inequity. It has been shown in multiple data that not having consistent access to healthy food negatively affects school performance.

Ace pointed out that a lot of people from Central and South America are coming to the Bellevue school system. Ace said many of them are being pushed into AP classes even though they need more help. If they do not have good teachers to help them, they will not thrive, especially if they lack English proficiency. Many of those students live in low-rent areas and depend on school food even though it is not the best. Jubilee Reach has done a lot to help distribute food to those in need, but many families who need help do not know that help exists. Ace suggested more should be done to facilitate kids getting to know and have better connections with police officers. Students need adults they can trust, especially when in danger.

Ms. Gessesse emphasized the point made about youth mobility and awareness. She said more needs to be done to even explain what human services are. If more students knew what was available to them, they would opt in. Having services in places where youths are commonly found would help address the mobility issue.

Ms. Shafiee rose the issue of the digital divide. She said during the pandemic everyone was pushed to become virtual. Classes were done virtually, jobs were done virtually, and even human services were offered virtually. According to current data, people with disabilities have less access to technology than those who are not disabled. The digital divide means people with disabilities are being further marginalized. There is a need for more programs in the city to assist people with disabilities by providing them with technology and teaching them how to use it.

Rehana Kejani agreed with the comments made by the students about the issues currently impacting the youth. She agreed that mental health is at the top of the list. Overall, access to services is concerning. Many youth are not aware of the services Bellevue and the school district has to offer. Finding a pathway to reach those students is challenging but very important.

Patrick Alina added that food and housing security are primary issues. He agreed that students need assistance in deciding career paths. Just offering assistance aimed at getting kids into college is not enough; there should also be emphasis placed on trade schools and the like. Many students do not see themselves going the route of a full college education; for some, that will not even be an option.

Tina Morales with Youth Eastside Services said she works with Latino youth and families. She thanked the Commission for creating the opportunity to hear the youth voice. She stressed the need to look for alternative ways of collaborating, bringing more resources to the table, so that youth and families can have a voice in how services are delivered. The model of providing bilingual and bicultural services has proven to be effective because it develops trust. Trust cannot easily be developed in an online format. Trust is built on creating safe spaces for families and youth to open up and share what is going on in their lives. Institutionalized forms of challenges and inequality require providers working in communities of color to do twice the work. While possible, the work requires funding and resources.

Ms. Mercado said she grew up in Bellevue and attended school from kindergarten to twelfth grade and is proud to now serve as a provider in the community. There is a clear need for youth to connect with adults and to the community. That is how inspiration happens and that

is why the youth come back to serve the community. Relationships matter.

With regard to what barriers exist for youth in terms of accessing human services, Ace said the biggest barrier is lack of trust in adults. Ace said the first time he saw a Teen Link book was when he talked with his school counselor. Ace suggested the book and the hotlines teens can call when feeling down should be promoted much more. A lot of teens may want to see the resources available because they have not talked to their parents or trust them.

Ms. Gessesse stressed the need for teens to be aware of the resources available to them outside of the school. Teens are very familiar with the school district but not so much with the city. Mobility is an issue for many and having services provided at school and wherever youth are located would be very helpful. The timing of when the services are provided is also important. Students should not have to choose between seeing a counselor and studying for or taking a test.

Ms. Shafiee pointed out that the majority of teachers in the Bellevue School District are white, while 65 percent of students in the district are persons of color. Because students spend most of their time in school, they develop pretty strong bonds with the teachers. When students have issues, they tend to go to their teachers with whom they have a bond. There is, however, an inherent bias the white teachers have, and they will tend to color their responses and, in some cases, actually hinder the performance of students. If a student of color needs advice, the student may think the white teachers will judge them in a certain way and therefore they will not seek advice from a white teacher. If what they need is a human service, they will not seek it from a white teacher. The district needs to hire more teachers of color. Currently, twelve percent of the district students are Hispanic or Latin American, but only five percent of the teachers are in that category. That is a large disparity, and it can hinder the ability of students to access the services they truly need.

Ms. Gessesse suggested less attention needs to be given to the disparities in different areas as a negative thing. Bellevue High School does a very good job at making sure everyone has a place to go and a place to fit in. Most teachers make sure their students are comfortable. She said on her return to Bellevue from South Africa, where her school had students from all over the world, she found the district has students from many different cultures. She said she really liked how Bellevue did not put a big emphasis on race. The focus is on inclusion and affinity groups.

Ace agreed that while teaches should not be viewed through the lens of their race, it is still easier for many students to talk with people of their own race and culture because they feel safer or believe they will have a better understanding. Students may have needed services that cost money but might be able to get those services through the school for free, but they will need to ask someone to find out about the services.

Ms. Trenbeath clarified the data from the needs report by stating that it is not that 69 percent of the students enrolled in the FRL program identify as Black, it is 69 percent of the Black enrolled students are part of the FRL program. That still highlights a major discrepancy in representation. She agreed with the previous speakers, especially in regard to a lack of mobility for students, preventing them from accessing services. Participation in extracurricular activities, especially sports, has proven to boost mental health. However, with that also comes the need for students to be able to access those activities. A lack of transportation and after-school care limits student access to services and extracurricular activities in which they might be interested. With regard to the impact of parents on students' access to services, especially mental health services, she allowed that a lot of progress has been made in destigmatizing mental health issues, but that does not mean that all students and their parents are completely in support of accessing mental health services. Additionally, the

families may not be in an economic position to be able to pay for a personal therapist on a consistent basis, and they may not know how to access such services. It is very important to increase the awareness of the services available both to the students and their parents. The district needs an authoritative source that reports to parents the importance of mental health and the disparities in the community to increase awareness. That would be very effective. She reported that several of her friends have felt increased feelings of anxiety and depressive episodes, but they have not known what to do about it, especially those who believe their parents would not support their seeking mental health help.

On the question of what human service agencies are reliable, accessible, and equitable sources of support for Bellevue youth and their families, Ms. Gessesse stressed the importance of access to the public library. School libraries often close as early as 4:00 p.m. Students with nowhere else to go after that hour often do not get as much of their homework done as they need. It is valuable to have public libraries that close at 8:00 p.m. It is true that mobility is a limiting factor in that not all students know which bus to take to get to a particular library. There are buses that connect the schools to the libraries and for those who know how to use the buses find them to be very reliable. Bellevue does a good job of hosting community events, like the ice rink in the winter and movies in the park during the summer. Those events help to develop a sense of community.

Ms. Shafiee said Youth Eastside Services is a very reliable mental health program. The agency offers different options for various types of students. They are always actively creating new projects that are different from therapy and which are intended to bring students from different backgrounds together to discuss issues and build a sense of community. The programs are very accessible. The Bellevue Boys & Girls Club also is an excellent agency. They offer very interesting programs for youth. Hopefully the agency will be able to put a greater emphasis on hiring staff members.

Ms. Trenbeath said the services she and her friends appreciate the most are those offered by parks and recreation, especially during the summer months. She said during Covid she did not have the opportunity to go anywhere, and it did not feel safe to hang out indoors with others. She said she spent most of her time over the summer months outdoors even though she is not an outdoor person. Bellevue does a really good job providing safe community spaces outdoors for people to gather in and interact.

Ace shared appreciation for the programs offered by Youth Eastside Services. Ace described participation with Latino HEAT on the weekends and that it helps students in a number of ways. Ace also shared observations about participation in BGLAD, the LGBTQ safe space, and was welcomed. The Bellevue Boys & Girls Club Teen Center is another good program, and Jubilee Reach offers various forms of help, including getting food to families.

Ms. Gessesse underscored the positive statement made about the Parks department. She said during quarantine she grew to appreciate Bellevue's outdoor spaces. She said she lives next to Larson Lake and does not have to use a car to get there. She also stated that Bellevue's police department does a very good job of making sure the streets are safe. Youth in Bellevue for the most part do not have to worry about having unsafe encounters on the streets.

Ms. Morales pointed out that a long time ago the Lake Hills library stayed open until midnight. She suggested the city should think about increasing the number of spaces available to youth that are safe and managed by professionals. There used to be more spaces available to the youth overall and for longer periods of time. It would be good to get to the place where non-profit organizations do not need to compete with each other. That will only come about once there is a larger flow of resources available. There should also be more opportunities for young people to apply for mini grants to make possible their own youth-centered ideas.

Programs like Well Kept should be expanded across the city.

Mr. Alina commented that Bellevue's third places are the community centers. Pre-Covid the community centers offered a lot of recreation, sports and other activities but also served as gathering places for youth and families.

Ace said the Crossroads Community Center pre-Covid offered youth the opportunity to play pool and air hockey. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, the community center made dinners and handed out presents. Aces described good memories of that facility. There should be more places like it.

Ms. Trenbeath said recently the Bellevue Youth Link Board talked about the building of the trail connecting Kirkland and Bellevue along the old rail line. One of the suggestions made was to incorporate youth art into the project. When it comes to community spaces, youth involvement should be encouraged, particularly in terms of youth art and creativity. The youth of Bellevue have a lot of passion for community and outreach and want to help others around them, but many of them have had trouble knowing about opportunities.

Ace agreed and noted that many youth choose to communicate through their art, including music, painting and even cooking. Ace described a specific art choice of cooking. Having a place where teens could get showcase their works in the community and in the schools would help to create community.

Ms. Shafiee agreed that youth feel strong connections to public spaces. The Bellevue Botanical Garden is a hidden treasure in the community and the youth love it. It is beautiful but also allows for becoming educated about nature and specific plants. It is a safe place and more such places are needed for youth to meet up with their friends and engage with the community.

Vice Chair Amirfaiz thanked the panelists for their participation and thoughtful responses. She said both the youth and the seniors in the community are largely underutilized. It would be great to see a project in the community that would bring the youth and seniors together.

Commissioner Ma noted that the panelists had each brought up accessibility as being a barrier to services. He pointed out that many of the agencies funded by the city include navigator and outreach positions that specifically include the youth. He asked what the best place and way for the navigators and outreach specialists would be to show what services are available outside the school system.

Ace said one way to get the word out would be through the Teen Link books. It would be good if the books were handed out at the beginning of each school year by the school offices. Flyers could also be posted around the schools.

Ms. Trenbeath said one thing her private school does is assemble a document with links to opportunities, particularly summer opportunities but also volunteer opportunities. The students receive emails with the information, which is also posted to the school website. She said digital access is very important. In-person presentations are also effective but can be emphasized via digital access.

Ms. Shafiee pointed out that students are at school for eight hours almost every day. The most effective way to reach out to the youth is through the schools, but that is not to say that is the only way to advertise to the youth via flyers, club fairs, at the malls or at Starbucks. On flyers, QR codes are more effective than just words.

Ms. Morales commented that cultural navigators are critical in the community. They work in-person and face-to-face as much as possible. There should be more collaboration and less competition. To accomplish that will require a larger pool of resources.

Ms. Mercado said adults have the responsibility of leading by example. She agreed that collaboration is needed rather than competition. Collaboration can make schools and communities better places. It takes everyone in a community to make it succeed.

Vice Chair Amirfaiz thanked the panelists and the staff for putting the panel together.

B. Planning for Upcoming Funding Process

Ms. Esparza explained that the supplemental application had a deadline of February 16. She said when an RFP is sent out asking agencies to apply for human services funding, it is done through a common application process with all of the shared cities. Each city can develop a document specific to its processes, and it is called the supplemental application. One item the Commission has in the past contributed to the document is a list of funding priorities. It is, however, the recommendation of staff to not develop funding priorities for the upcoming funding cycle. The city funds the continuum of services and in the past when priorities have been specifically named in the supplemental it has caused some confusion among the human services agencies. As an alternative, staff presented the Commission with draft equity principles for review and possible adoption in the supplemental application.

Commissioner Ma agreed with the suggestion, as did Commissioner Phan. Vice Chair Amirfaiz agreed as well, noting however that if the Commission already has some priorities in mind they should be discussed, but without printing them in the application.

Commissioner Mercer agreed also. She said it is always better when the Commission strategizes funding priorities beforehand. So much has changed. Trying to get out priorities before the Commission has had time to wrestle with them would not be a good idea. She asked to what degree folks who apply for funding depend on seeing priorities voiced by the Commission. Ms. Esparza said the feedback received has generally evoked confusion, particularly given that the Commission does not necessarily follow them. When priorities are stated in an RFP or application, agencies are essentially put on notice as to whether or not they should apply. There has been confusion on the part of some agencies about whether or not they should even apply. Commissioner Mercer said she also supported the recommendation of staff.

Commissioner Ma said he would support not listing priorities but discussing them at the Commission level for planning purposes, as a standard practice.

Ms. Esparza suggested the proposed equity statements could be included in the supplemental application or not. She allowed that like funding priorities, they could be just discussed at the Commission level. She said the proposed equity principles were drawn from the Needs Update and from previous direction received from the Council. The intent would be for the Commission to keep the principles in mind during the funding allocation process. They are not intended to keep any agency from applying.

Ms. Esparza said the Needs Update highlighted inequitable access to services for residents of color. The data also shows the need for linguistically and culturally specific services. The Council has expressed a desire to see funding extended to small agencies and/or agencies that hold a specific expertise in serving a marginalized community. While the pandemic has had negative repercussions across the community, certain populations have been disproportionately impacted, specifically residents of color, individuals with disabilities and

low-income individuals. Additionally, human service agencies are experiencing staffing shortages, increased operating costs and increased demand for services. Adequate support for agency operating expenses is crucial to maintaining the safety net of services in the community.

Commissioner Ma asked if the equity principles would be posted with the application or if they would just be for the Commission to consider. Ms. Esparza said it could go either way. If they are to be posted in the application, they would have to be adopted immediately. Commissioner Ma said he leaned toward not including the principles with the supplemental application. He said he had no argument against the Commission using them in the deliberation process.

Commissioner Phan concurred. She said if having funding priorities included in the supplemental application proved to be confusing, having the equity principles included might also be confusing.

There was consensus not to include the principles in the supplemental application but to develop them for the Commission to consider during the funding cycle.

Ms. Esparza asked for comment about the principles themselves and asked if there were any that should be left out or added to the list.

Commissioner Ma said the fact that focusing on race can be a distraction stood out to him from the comments of the youth panelists. Ms. Esparza stressed that staff made every attempt to draw the principles directly from the data already gathered and presented to the Councilmember and the Council, rather than from broader observations.

Commissioner Mercer suggested it would be good for the Commission to continue discussing the principles at a future meeting. She said it is a good thing to have the equity principles but pointed out that the Commission also tries very hard not to disrupt existing sets of funding. Adopting prescriptive equity priorities might necessitate overhauling how the Commission approaches some funding decisions. The Commission should generally discuss how it wants to approach funding before being locked into a specific set of principles. Ms. Esparza agreed that the Commission's practice has been to start from the base of maintaining funding to prior funded agencies, not as a rule but as a practice. That has presented challenges to introducing funding for new agencies. In thinking about equity and the changing demographics of the community, and while the Commission strives to serve agencies that are inclusive of the entire community, that does not always mean they will have a trusted relationship or the cultural wherewithal to serve new and emerging members of the community, and that can prevent the Commission from supporting agencies that are responding to specific and newly developed needs.

Commissioner Ma agreed with the need for the Commission to discuss its overall funding views before adopting or locking into a set of principles.

Vice Chair Amirfaiz stated that much will depend on how much money there will be to allocate. If there is more, it will be easier to include new agencies and programs. If there is less, the decisions will be made more difficult.

Human Services Planner Christy Stangland note that the city has received a lot of extra dollars over the last year and a half in the form of Covid relief funds. That has made it possible for agencies the Commission has not previously funded to receive funding. It is likely that some of those agencies will submit applications.

Commissioner Ma suggested if the equity principles were to be published, the Commission should also make it clear to all that Bellevue funds the continuum of services. Ms. Esparza allowed that funding the continuum is city policy. She stressed that the staff were not recommending the adoption of any principle that would change or override existing city policy.

Ms. Esparza said staff would bring the equity principles to the next Commission meeting for discussion, along with a discussion of the application review process and the time commitments expected of the Commissioners.

8. OLD BUSINESS – None
9. NEW BUSINESS – None
10. CONTINUED ORAL COMMUNICATIONS – None
11. ADJOURNMENT

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made by Commissioner Mercer. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Ma and the motion carried unanimously.

Vice Chair Amirfaiz adjourned the meeting at 7:50 p.m.