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TO: Mayor Chelminiak and City Councilmembers

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SUBJECT: Bellevue Conflict Resolution Center Update

The purpose of this memo is to provide an update on the Bellevue Conflict Resolution Center (BCRC) program. This memo is for information only, no Council action is requested.

Policy Direction

The Neighborhoods Element of the Comprehensive Plan highlights the importance of building up the community's capacity for problem-solving.

Policy N-7: Support the capacity of local neighborhood communities to actively engage and respond to changing internal neighborhood needs and external stresses

BCRC's mission is to increase the problem-solving capacity of the community of Bellevue and strengthen the capacity of local neighborhood communities to actively engage and respond to changing needs and external stresses. The program accomplishes this mission by providing trained mediator and conciliators to support the resolution of neighbor to neighbor disputes, teaching skill-based classes and providing neutral facilitators and notetakers for public meetings.

Background

BCRC (formerly known as the Neighborhood Mediation Program) began in 1996. The objectives were to:

- Foster a renewed sense of community within City neighborhoods by encouraging neighbors to build relationships with and increase tolerance toward one another.
- Decrease resident reliance on government to resolve disputes and build constructive problem solving within the community.
- Regain credibility in the neighborhoods and restore faith in government.

BCRC is a dispute resolution center formed under Chapter 7.75 of the Revised Code of Washington. Services provided are:

- Confidential, voluntary, and free;
- Available to people who live, work, or go to school in Bellevue; and
- Provided by trained volunteers from the community.

BCRC operates from the understanding that people in conflict can often *resolve it themselves*, if they have a safe, neutral forum and the right guidance. This philosophy is put into practice, as staff and volunteers are taught to avoid “telling residents what to do”. Instead, the program works to help residents uncover their underlying interests and create agreements that work for everyone.

In 2018, BCRC handled 284 cases with the majority being neighbor to neighbor disputes. The average resolution rate of closed cases was 82 percent.

Program Elements

For the past twenty-three years, BCRC has offered a range of services, including conflict coaching, phone conciliation, mediation, meeting facilitation, public participation design and facilitation. Volunteers who help provide many of these services receive training, mentoring and certification in both conciliation and mediation.

The nature of the typical conflict resolution case varies. Typical disputes include issues such as left out trash cans, dogs barking, property lines, fence maintenance, and HOA conflicts. The program also provides case assistance for foreclosures, multi-family disputes, landlord/tenant disputes, parent-teen conflicts, and business-consumer conflicts.

Beyond case management, BCRC has created a “Facilitation Cadre”, volunteers trained in table facilitation and chart writing. The Facilitation Cadre assists with increasing public participation at community meetings. Recent examples include Transportation Demand Management, Affordable Housing, Sound Transit Eastlink construction issues, Homeless Shelter LUCA workshop, Muslim Safety Forums, Neighborhood Leadership Gatherings and Neighborhood Area Planning.

Adapting to the needs of our community

As Bellevue’s community has become increasingly diverse, new skills in cross cultural communication and approaches to cross-cultural conflict resolution have become increasingly important. Research has shown that most of the people in the non-Western world handle conflict through an intermediary, indirectly. Today, over 80 percent of client cases are handled through phone conciliation, an intermediary process via the phone.

In addition, the volunteer cadre has become increasingly diverse, sharing language skills in fourteen languages, including Mandarin. Volunteers are trained in cross-cultural communication, learning how people in differing cultures communicate, especially when in conflict.

BCRC also teaches skill-based learning classes for the community, in partnership with King County Library. Classes include lessons in the Art of Listening, Resiliency, and Cross-Cultural Communication. These classes are often filled to capacity and have been widely praised for their practical usefulness in improving communication.

Trends

In the past couple of years, the type of disputes has again shifted. The number of foreclosure cases has diminished with the rebounding of the economy. Current cases increasingly involve:

- Cross-cultural tensions;
- Tree disputes;
- Landlords and Tenant disputes; and
- Vacant houses, creating an issue in a community or danger to another homeowner.

As the services provided by the program are confidential, the impact of the program can remain hidden.

However, it is not uncommon for the program to receive feedback from community members or clients:

"I am very grateful the City of Bellevue has a Resolution Center for situations such as mine. I will not hesitate to use your service again let alone tell others about you. My family will be sleeping much better from here on."

-- Conflict Resolution Center client

BCRC works to fulfil Council's vision priority to "build trust with government" by engaging with all residents and stakeholders and continuing to be a community that cares for all people.