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TO: Mayor Robinson and City Councilmembers

FROM: Marci McReynolds, Manager, 452-5288
Bellevue Conflict Resolution Center

Mike McCormick Huentelman, Assistant Director, 452-4089
Mac Cummins, Director, 452-6191
Community Development

SUBJECT: Bellevue Conflict Resolution Center Annual Update

This report is for information only.

The Bellevue Conflict Resolution Center's mission is "to increase the problem-solving capacity of Bellevue's community." This is accomplished by providing conflict resolution services that address community disputes between neighbors, businesses, and public entities. Due to COVID-19, the Center has experienced a 30 percent increase in cases over the last quarter of 2020 and is anticipating a larger increase due to rent arrearages and potential foreclosures.

Background

The Bellevue Conflict Resolution Center (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.
- Create an improved structure within which positive and productive outcomes can more readily be achieved.
- 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.

Bellevue's Conflict Resolution Center (the Center) is a dispute resolution center formed under Chapter 7.75 of the Revised Code of Washington; is an active member of Resolution Washington, a consortium of 22 other dispute resolution centers in the State; and its staff and volunteer mediators undergo an extensive certification process.

Services provided are confidential, voluntary, and free, available to people who live, work, or go to school in Bellevue, and are provided by staff and trained volunteers from the community.

In 2019, the Conflict Resolution Center closed 301 cases, with the majority being neighbor to neighbor disputes. The cases are referred by Code Compliance, Bellevue Police, Transportation, Utilities, Fire and Land Use, as well as, direct requests from the community. These cases address right of way, land use, noise, construction activity, boundary issues and the relationships between commercial and residential neighbors. The average resolution rate of closed cases was 82 percent. In 2020, the Center closed 356 cases, with 92 cases directly relating to COVID-19 and 112 cases being landlord/tenant disputes.

Program Elements

For the past 24 years, Bellevue's Conflict Resolution Center has offered a range of conflict management 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 from staff, who are certified and seasoned mediators.

The type of disputes varies. Most cases are neighborhood related, involving issues such as health and safety, dogs barking, parking, property lines, fence maintenance, and HOA conflicts. The program also provides conflict resolution for foreclosures, multi-family disputes, landlord/tenant disputes, parent-teen conflicts, and business-consumer conflicts. With COVID-19, there has been an increase in landlord/tenant issues, rent arrearages and safety concerns.

Beyond case management, the Conflict Resolution Center provides classes and training for City employees and Bellevue's community. Classes focus on improving communication and conflict skills, as well as, skills that strengthen our resiliency as a community. In partnership with King County Library, community classes are usually at capacity and receive excellent reviews. From January 2019 to December 2020, the Center has trained a total of 1,178 people in communication and conflict skills.

The Conflict Resolution Center relies on the dedication and skills of community volunteers. At present, 23 volunteers are trained and willing to serve the community as called upon, with 14 of these now actively engaged on a weekly basis. Volunteers are highly trained and mentored, becoming certified conciliators and mediators, meeting and exceeding the requirements of State-wide mediation consortium, Resolutions Washington.

Adapting to the needs of our community

Covid-19 Related cases: The Center has pivoted to handle conflicts involving Covid-19-related issues, particularly issues between landlords and tenants of both housing and business units. The Center has launched a Rent Negotiation program to help landlords and tenants make agreements about rental arrearages. Caseloads have increased by roughly 30 percent, and further increase is expected. The Center is now receiving referrals from King County's Dispute Resolution Center, as well as Bellevue human service agencies, to better serve our community needs and help landlords and tenants negotiate rent arrearages and agreements.

Preparing for Foreclosures: Bellevue may face an increase in the number of people in danger of losing their mortgages. The Center's Case Manager is a Department of Commerce certified foreclosure mediator and other certified foreclosure mediators have been contacted to assist as the need for foreclosure mediation increases.

Diversity awareness: 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 showed that most of the people in the non-Western world handle conflict through an intermediary, indirectly. Today, over 85 percent of client cases are handled through phone conciliation, an intermediary process via the phone.

Trends

In the past couple of years, and particularly in the past six months, disputes have increasingly involved:

- Need to negotiate rental payments between landlords and tenants in both residences and businesses.
- Covid-19 related issues impacting rentals, businesses, neighborhoods, and contracts.
- Cross-cultural tensions.
- Tree disputes.
- Right-of-way uses and abuses, especially due to staying-at-home.
- Vacant houses - creating a "social vacuum" in a community or danger to another homeowner.
- Sub-optimal housing situations.
- Increase in Bellevue Police Department-referred cases.

Next Steps

Bellevue's Conflict Resolution Center provides an essential service for our community and is proactively preparing to provide assistance for community members who need support to negotiate rent and mortgages. The Center is focused on training for volunteers and increasing the number of experienced volunteers to handle the anticipated upsurge in cases. Additionally, the program is anticipating supporting foreclosure mediations (and alternatives to foreclosure mediations) for our community beginning in the first quarter of 2021.
