

Allegheny County Community Services Advisory Council (CSAC) Meeting Minutes

March 11, 2024

The March 11, 2024 meeting was held virtually on Microsoft TEAMS.

Welcome and Call to Order

Lynn Tatala welcomed all in attendance and called the meeting to order at 12:03 pm. CSAC members in attendance included Lynn Tatala, Dillon Moore, Stephanie Eson, Andrea Horton-Mericli, Michael Selep, Elayne Masters, Laura Zinski, Tom Baker, Bill McDowell, Crystal Lehmeier, James Ritchie, Dee Lanier, and Richard Pirozzi attending for Mary Frances Pilarski. A quorum was achieved with 13 of 14 CSAC members in attendance. OCS staff John Litz and Mara Schwabenbauer attended the meeting.

Approval of December 11, 2023 Meeting Minutes

Lynn Tatala asked CSAC members for any corrections or additions to the December 11, 2023 meeting minutes which were posted in Govenda for review. There were no corrections or additions to the minutes. Lynn Tatala asked for a motion to approve the minutes. Dee Lanier made a motion for the minutes to be approved. Bill McDowell second the motion. The vote was unanimous, and the minutes were approved.

Membership Update

Dillon Moore nominated Crystal Lehmeier for a two-year term as representative for persons who are low income. Bill McDowell made a motion to approve the nomination, Andrea Horton-Mericli second the motion. The vote was unanimous, and the nomination was approved.

John Litz shared there is still a vacancy for an appointed member. A person we were talking with decided they were not able to pursue the position. We have made contact with an additional person and are waiting for them to submit their application. Once an application has been submitted, the background and experience of the person will be reviewed, and if approved by the DHS, the application will be submitted to the Office of the County Manager to go through the process for County Council approval. Hopefully by the June meeting we will have a new appointment.

Member Update

Dee Lanier provided information regarding an event Kentucky Derby Gala sponsored by Turtle Creek Satellite Rotary which will provide college scholarships for those who fall on hard times. Some of the funds will also support a family that lost their home. The event is on Saturday May 4th. Dee will forward a flyer.

Stephanie Eson provided information that the VITA tax site at Human Services Center Mon Valley is open until April 10th, and their appointments are filling up very quickly. Income guidelines are 45K for an individual and 60K for a household. Call 211 to schedule. Or go online to pa211.org. Stephanie will share a flyer.

Tom Baker discussed his work with John Litz and Mara Schwabenbauer while at North Hills Community Outreach which led to the expansion of transportation services by establishing a satellite office located at the Human Services Center Mon Valley in Turtle Creek to serve Mon Valley and eastern suburban communities. Tom also mentioned that Jackie Boggs is the Acting Executive Director at North Hills Community Outreach as Tom is in a new position as the CEO of Variety the Children's Charity which provide bikes, strollers, and adaptive equipment for children with disabilities. Families can be at 500% FPL for income and still qualify. Always feel free to reach out to Tom to help in any way.

John Litz mentioned we would like to share information on Variety the Children's Charity with our provider network and with CSAC members.

Elayne Masters shared two items of importance from her recent visit to Washington DC that are in need of being authorized by Congress: the Farm Bill and the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Act. The Farm Bill, is looking at doubling the amount that goes into Emergency Farmers Assistance Program. It provides additional food to food banks to supplement fresh items from farms. Often food pantries run out and might have limited choices. The bill proposes to double the funding, so those resources are not depleted, and people have the food they need. Also looking at strengthening SNAP-- one thing hinted at is limiting SNAP, by putting restrictions on what they can purchase with SNAP. A key point is what seems like healthy foods for some people might not be in the health network for what is needed for others due to someone with diabetes or other health conditions which might limit what people eat. This is coming up soon and needs to be extended. The bill to reauthorize the TBI Act seeks increased funding to support individuals living with a traumatic brain injury and to designate brain injury as a chronic condition. Brain Injuries are a chronic condition, as people may live with it for the rest of their lives. This bill will help people remain in their communities as they are/can be considered nursing home eligible, so these services keep people out in the community being productive citizens. Please reach out to Elayne if you want more information on this.

Richard Pirozzi from Pittsburgh VA Healthcare for Homeless Veterans shared information about an upcoming VA Challenge Event. This is an educational and networking event to be held on May 16. Information about the event will be shared with CSAC members.

Program Update

John Litz reviewed the Community Action Report for 2023. The report was posted to Govenda prior to the meeting for review by CSAC members. The report included a review of financial information, program services, program outcomes, and updates on professional development and other news.

Financial information included the full expenditure of \$151,264 in unspent carry-over funds from 2022 and 95.1% expenditure of 2023 allocated funds or \$1,169,678, resulting in \$60,697 in unexpended 2023 funds which will carry-over to 2024. The reason for carry-over funds is largely due to the funding allocated to contracted community partners not being fully expended, primarily due to staff vacancies. CSBG funds expended in 2023 supported self-sufficiency case management services, basic needs services, transportation services, employment assistance services, VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) services and financial education and empowerment services. CSBG funds also supported staff who administered and managed the funds and program services, operating expenses, information technology expenses, and administrative expenses.

The number of people served across all our services combined is greater than the overall number for the same period last year. The number of people served by specific services was reviewed with a comparison to the previous year and to the targets for each service. All service types achieved 80% or more of the target, whereas self-sufficiency case management came in just shy of 80%. Financial education and empowerment and VITA exceeded targets for persons served.

Racial equity across our services is good; we are seeing an increase in the number of black persons who received transportation services with the expansion of this service to Mon Valley and eastern suburban communities. There are more females served as primary clients compared to males and single parent female headed households are the most common household type across all our services except for employment assistance.

Client outcomes across the life domains of income and asset building, employment, health, housing, education and cognitive development and civic engagement and community involvement revealed several findings. The domain income and asset building showed more people working on outcomes than any other domain. Under employment, fewer persons who are unemployed and obtain employment are securing jobs which pay a living wage compared to persons who obtain jobs up to a living wage. Under health, we are seeing more activity supporting people with

disabilities. Under housing, our community partners continue to assist people with obtaining safe and affordable housing and avoiding eviction.

A couple of items of note from the summary of activities for the year included provider staff participation in the CAAP Infinity Basics course- alternative training to Intro to ROMA, the expansion of transportation services in the Mon Valley and eastern suburban communities with 12 cases open before end of 2023, and Mara Schwabenbauer was appointed as principal DHS staff for Allegheny County Financial Empowerment Center.

John shared that reporting out at the end of the year and this first meeting at the beginning of the year is his favorite. “Our work is hard and difficult; partners have lots of challenges to maintain every day. It’s hard work supporting staff, maintaining staff, and sometimes we don’t pause enough to look at what kind of progress, what kind of impact we are making. When I’m compiling the data and see the results, I can’t feel anything but good. This work never ends, but there is still progress, and I’m happy to be a part of it.”

John shared 2024 Community Action Financial Information – as of today, due to a series of Federal Continuing resolutions, we have confirmed CSBG funding that amounts to 36% of the allocation from last year. This is slightly above 1/3 of the funds we will need for 2024, and spending is on pace to spend all of what we spent last year and a bit above it. Essentially, we are operating in good faith but must be conscious of the fact, if something happens in DC, if funding is paused or cut, we will have to take a look at what we are doing. We want to be very transparent and upfront about this as it makes it difficult when trying to take on additional projects.

John also shared information regarding the upcoming Community Needs Assessment (CAN)- that we are in the early stages of planning for 2024, targeting a draft by early September. This will include a survey, or interviews for each of you as CSAC members, as we value your insight and participation. A CNA is required every 3 years, the results will help form and shape our work for 2025, 2026, and 2027. It is a significant undertaking and we are working with staff in the Analytics, Technology and Planning (ATP) Office, who will be our primary support to carry out the CNA.

Mara Schwabenbauer shared information regarding the Allegheny County Financial Empowerment Center (FEC). Key points included:

- A review of the FEC expansion for Allegheny County by the Department of Human Services (DHS), Neighborhood Allies, and Advantage Credit Counseling to provide free one on one financial counseling
- How people can connect with the FEC: new website (www.myfinancialpower.org) monthly virtual informational sessions, schedule an appointment online, call the FEC for more information
- Review of Partnership Expansions: vision to integrate FEC services across key DHS programming through partnerships (Office of Community Services Family Strengthening programs focus at this time and then work towards other key areas), FEC and Tax Prep Sites, and CCAC Campuses (and other potential post-secondary settings to intersect with students for cross referrals through Financial Aid offices)
- Review of current FEC Co-locations and vision for expansion into other locations across the county
- Review of who is welcome at the FEC: anyone in Allegheny County, 18yrs and older, and no income restrictions for people to receive services. Also, people can attend as many FEC counseling sessions as needed to address financial goals.

Other Announcements

Andrea Horton-Mericli shared information about World Refugee Day – any clients who are immigrants, artisans, singers, dancers, refer them to Hello Neighbors. This event is usually in June so she will have more information at the next meeting, but if you know anyone who is interested you can refer them to Simone who is the point of contact for Hello Neighbors, and visit ISACPittsburgh.org.

Mike Selep shared his upcoming transition from Duquense Light, by the June meeting, so this may his last meeting with all of us, he will be grateful for this time, if John decides he can stay until the end of his term, if someone else who is eager, then this would be his goodbye to all of us in this meeting. He is not fully retiring but has held two jobs, so will focus one job, he is a priest in a little parish in McKees Rocks, so will be more full time in this ministry in McKees Rocks area- but they work closely with the FOR center there and food banks, they do a lot of work with low-income families in the area. There was group response to Mike that will be thankful to have him stay on, and John agreed, and can talk more with Mike on what will work for him, and Mike shared he is happy to participate until the end of his term.

Next Meeting

The next quarterly meeting is scheduled for Monday, June 10, 2024, beginning at 12 noon.

Adjournment

There being no further business, Lynn Tatala asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Bill McDowell motion for the meeting to be adjourned. Stephanie Eson second the motion. The vote was unanimous. The meeting was adjourned at 1:08 pm.