

Princeton Human Services Commission Minutes

Monthly Meeting

August 17th, 2016

Monument Hall-East Meeting Room

One Monument Drive, Princeton, NJ 08540

Present

Board Members:

Ross Wishnick, Chair
Leticia Fraga, Vice Chair
Elizabeth Bidwell Bates
Robert Hackett
John Heilner
Heather Howard
Anastasia Mann
Thomas Parker
Larry Spruill

Staff:

Elisa Neira, MSW
Melissa Urias
Michael Soto
Ben Strauss

Guests:

Wilma Salomon

Absent

Board Members:

Laura Encinas

I. Call to Order

At 7:07 PM, Chair Wishnick called the meeting of the Princeton Human Services Commission (PHSC) to order by reading: "This is to affirm that the regularly scheduled meeting of the Princeton Human Services Commission has been duly notified and is being conducted in compliance with all provisions of the New Jersey Open Public Meetings Act."

II. Public Comments/Guests

Seeing no guests (one guest arrived later in the meeting), Chair Wishnick moved to the next agenda item.

III. Approval of July Meeting Minutes

Commission members complimented outgoing PHSC Secretary Soto on the great minutes he wrote during his time with them. Vice Chair Fraga motioned to approve the minutes without modifications. Mr. Heilner seconded. The Commission members voted unanimously to approve the minutes.

IV. Director's Report

General Assistance (GA)

Director Neira reported Human Services had 27 GA cases at the end of last month. The number will increase after they approve a few more by the end of the current month.

Summer Youth Employment

Director Neira reported everything is going well with Summer Youth Employment. There were no terminations in the program and it was a successful summer. Chair Wishnick reasserted the importance of the program giving jobs to kids who have not experienced jobs before and, consequently, have not experienced the expectations of jobs before.

Welcoming America

Welcoming America awarded Director Neira with one of ten SPARK fellowships. The two-year fellowship will start this fall. The goal of the fellowship is to look at racial justice and immigrant inclusion work and policies throughout the United States. She will attend the kick-off conference in mid-October in Atlanta, Georgia.

Commission members congratulated her. The Commission will send out a press release announcing she received the fellowship. Council Member Howard will announce it at a Council meeting.

Welcoming Week

The Commission continued its discussion from last week on Welcoming Week (September 16th through September 25th). Vice Chair Fraga is planning a cultural exchange night and has received confirmations of participation from families from Mexico, Guatemala, Turkey, Korea, Denmark and Poland.

Ms. Urias, former intern and newly hired Temporary Administrative Assistant for Human Services and Affordable Housing, and Mr. Estrada have been connecting with immigrant-owned businesses and will be coordinating interviews with the owners. Two students from Stuart Country Day School have also conducted interviews and have already submitted some stories. Director Neira shared a write-up about the owner of the Little Chef Pastry Shop, an immigrant from Haiti.

Director Neira gave an overview of the media participants, and will send out a press release September 1st. There might also be an opportunity to document the events during Welcoming Week and create a short video for Welcoming Princeton. The Commission gave ideas on how to make that happen.

V Committee Reports

Civil Rights

The Commission discussed a draft ordinance-and accompanying consent form and policies, guidelines, procedures document-to formally establish a Civil Rights Commission. The

ordinance had been introduced at the Princeton Council meeting on April 25, 2016; however, it was tabled as the request of the committee members.

Council Member Howard clarified that the consent form and policies, guidelines, procedures document do not appear in the ordinance. The Council can, thus, more easily change them.

Commission members discussed a few areas of concerns:

1) The disclosure statement: Some Commission members worried the consent form could discourage residents from reporting alleged civil rights violations. The Civil Rights subcommittee members stated that the waiver was not factual and too broad. They will share research from two civil rights lawyers they have been working with to assist with revising the waiver.

2) The process' first step/intake: The guidelines, policies and procedures document currently assigns the intake process to one municipal staff member. There was a discussion about the Director of Human Services participating in the intake process of alleged complaints. Some of the committee members expressed their concerns with that and would like to explore other options.

Some Commission members fear the ordinance would codify a backdoor into the Commission losing its standalone entity status. They worry that, if the Commission lost that independence, it would lose its ability to effectively solve complaints. Other members thought the ordinance only codifies what happens already in the intake process. They thought the current process helped individual complainants by giving them quick resolution to their complaints.

Director Neira briefly talked about how some cases of alleged discrimination have been handled through the current informal process. Vice Chair Fraga mentioned that some residents did not feel their complaints had been adequately resolved by the current process. For instance, an individual came directly to her and she helped that individual resolve it. The Commission agreed that some residents would never feel comfortable making a complaint to a municipal employee.

The Commission, thus, agreed on the importance of having "multiple doors," both formal and informal, into the complaint process. Residents can make complaints to anyone, at any time. Those people then must direct the complaint to the most appropriate person. Commission members thought having multiple potential people to approach and phone numbers to call about complaints would make the most sense. They did not want to lose any channel for an individual to make a complaint.

Commission members agreed that members of its Civil Rights subcommittee should meet the town attorney, Ms. Maddox, and administrator Mr. Dashield to discuss these concerns further before the ordinance is introduced.

Immigration

There was a discussion about some children in the public school district dealing with anxiety and fear that their parents could be deported. Human Services had conducted “Know Your Rights” workshops for residents that were helpful; however there should be something put in place for children that are dealing with these fears. Parents also have expressed that they would like something available for their children. Ms. Mann mentioned an online tool designed for kids on this topic that can be made available to the schools. The Commission agreed that Director Neira will reach out to school officials and local family counselors that may be able to provide counseling/family therapy services.

SHUPP (Send Hunger Packing Princeton)

The Commission discussed the “Fill the Bowls” event, scheduled for Sunday, September 25th, 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm. The Commission knows that 63,180 supplemental meals have been served since the beginning of the program. Participation has been fairly level: around 115, 155. Mercer Street Friends has the full report. The PHSC members suggested Mercer Street Friends send the report on meals distributed and budget to the Commission on a monthly basis for their review.

There was a discussion about the program going forward and the need to have a meeting regarding the future of the program and how to improve the food quality. The program has expanded over the years. For instance, it recently started provided hot lunches for kids doing summer school programs (i.e., Jump Start).

VI Discussion: PHSC letter to Superintendent regarding student fund

The Commission discussed the letter sent to Superintendent of the Princeton School District Cochrane on funding for less-advantaged students to attend class trips. The Commission has so far heard no response.

There was a suggestion if members of the PHSC should go to a School Board meeting to get a response and start a dialogue about this issue. After some discussion, the PHSC agreed that, first, Director Neira will call the Superintendent.

VII. Updates

School Data

Ms. Mann wrote a note to Chairman Wishnick to discuss the Princeton School System collecting discipline data by race and reporting it to the state’s department of education. Ms. Mann is unsure of whether the school district is collecting the data and if they are why it is not publicly available. The PHSC members agreed that Director Neira will contact Superintendent Cochrane.

Credit Repair Pilot Program

Director Neira and Mr. Truscetti met with Pastor Troxel from Stone Hill Church. They agreed to work together on a credit repair pilot program that can be offered to individuals applying for

housing. One of the requirements to qualify for housing is that at least one person in the household has a good credit score. The goal for this pilot program is to refer individuals with poor credit scores to volunteer financial coaches that can assist them with credit repair. A Commission member was concerned about the training and qualifications of the volunteers. Director Neira will follow-up with Stone Hill Church to get specifics on that; she stated that the volunteer coaches do go through a training paid by the church.

VIII. Closed Session

The Commission did not enter closed session.

XI. Adjournment

Mr. Hackett motioned to end the meeting. Ms. Bates and Mr. Heilner seconded the motion simultaneously.

Meeting adjourn at 9:00 pm.