

CITY OF NEWTON

IN BOARD OF ALDERMEN

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES COMMITTEE REPORT

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2014

Present: Ald. Sangiolo (Chairman), Rice, Baker, Norton, Blazar, Hess-Mahan, Leary and Kalis  
City Staff Present: Dori Zaleznik (Commissioner, Health and Human Services), Karyn Dean (Committee Clerk)

**REFERRED TO PROGRAMS & SERVICES AND FINANCE COMMITTEES**

#50-14      HIS HONOR THE MAYOR requesting authorization to transfer the sum of one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) from FY2015 Budget Reserve to a Health & Human Services Mental Health Services Account for the purpose of developing and implementing a Risk Identification and Suicide Intervention Program with Riverside Community Care and other appropriate organizations.  
[02/10/14 @ 6:47 PM]

**ACTION:**      **APPROVED 7-0-1 (Ald. Sangiolo abstaining)**

**NOTE:** Dori Zaleznik, Commissioner of Health and Human Services addressed the Committee. She explained that prior to the last teen suicide, several initiatives were underway to address the needs of the community. The requested money is for additional programming and the City is still at the stage of formulating the type of services that would prove best. They have received advice from a number of experts and learned that it is probably too early to start some of the healing-based steps that were previously planned. They will still be doing those, just not at this time. Other communities that have faced this issue have sometimes applied for federal grants for screening for at-risk children; education and support programs for the adults in the community to recognize the issues; and support groups for kids in the schools. The City could apply still apply for grants, but it takes a fair amount of time for that process and to receive funds. They were feeling they needed some more immediate emergency funds to put things in place as soon as possible to address the urgent needs, and the Mayor felt strongly that this is an issue that required urgent attention.

Though there is not a detailed budget at this time, the money will be used for several different approaches over the next 6 months. A large portion of the money would be to pay Riverside Community Care to provide a full-time person to coordinate these efforts; receive more counseling assistance from their group; and assist in QPR training which is a program of educating gatekeepers (teachers, clergy, fire, police, etc.) in the warning signs that someone is in need of help. There would be training for a series of people in the City who could then train more adults in the community. In addition to these steps, the plan is to have more resource materials available as well such as the orange plastic cards that were handed out to every high school student in the City. The card contains relevant phone numbers if help is needed. There is also information on the website but more will be added as they find more that is relevant. Materials and resources, to be determined, will be placed in the schools as well as off-campus locations.

Commissioner Zaleznik explained that this is a concerted effort of the City under the auspices of the Department of Health and Human Services, working in conjunction with Riverside Community Care as the City's contracted mental health service provider. The locations for programming will be determined, but the idea is to have places in schools as well as off-campus. She noted that it is recognized that some students might not want to be seen going into a resource room or counseling room at school, so having options off-site is very important. Riverside has worked with a number of communities in the state on these same issues, and the City has been working with experts in the field and other communities to draw on their experiences and determine best practices. She explained kids' at-risk status can change in a moment. Perhaps one day a student is fine but has a break-up with their girlfriend or boyfriend the next day and suddenly is in crisis. And that is often how things work with teenagers. Therefore, the goal is to create a culture in which people can ask for help and not despair in a moment of crisis alone, build resilience to counter the feeling of bleakness, and be able to bounce back.

#### Committee Questions and Comments

A Committee member pointed out that according to the Massachusetts Youth Risk Survey, Newton has a lower rate of suicide attempts and depression than many other communities in the state, so it was important to keep things in perspective. Suicides can happen in clusters and not necessarily be brought on by some pervasive underlying cause in the community. Having said that, the focus on suicide prevention and mental health is the right tone to take. Counseling after the fact is important but the prevention side of things seems imperative.

Commissioner Zaleznik noted that social media is playing an important role. While it's general wisdom in the mental health community to not "glamorize" suicide, the fact is kids are talking about it all over social media and it would be naïve not to recognize that and address it in a responsible way. Teenagers can be very impulsive and a moment of impulsivity could trigger suicide. Each response is individual in these cases of suicide and one might never know what the triggering event was, or what the underlying issue or issues may have been. However, there needs to be a focus on mental health and work on suicide prevention programming as there is good literature to suggest that it is helpful.

Some Committee members asked for more specifics about what kind of prevention programming might be implemented and what "root" causes might be contributing to the problem.

Commissioner Zaleznik said she has heard from a number of experts in this field that working with teenagers in large groups is not particularly effective compared to identifying students who need to talk and giving them an opportunity to do so. Big assemblies are more effective for adults, but not kids. They are talking about ways to identify ever-widening circles of kids who are thinking about these issues, but in smaller groups or individually. Providing opportunities for everyone to feel more connected is a better strategy than looking for particular societal stressors.

Programming has been in place with grant money to address stress in students. The upcoming Youth Summit will feature a 20-year old comedian activist who suffered from depression and had thoughts of suicide. He will be addressing these issues in a way kids can relate to. Grant money is allowing middle school teachers to be trained in relaxation response exercises to help students deal with stress. So, there are initiatives underway but it's not wise to think there is just

one cause. There is also a program called Connect that is being explored. There will be coping drop-in groups both in the schools and off-campus to engage kids. The risk behavior survey is something that addresses connectivity as well. It was pointed out that the survey shows middle and high school kids are feeling more connected than they were five years ago.

A Committee member noted an article in *The American Scholar* about military suicide. The head of the psychology department at West Point has written a book about this issue and the Army has been doing a lot of work on suicide prevention. It was felt that it might be good to look at that as it focuses on the positive psychology movement and developing conditions under which people can thrive. Commissioner Zaleznik said they are looking very hard at the prevention side of things and have pulled together a group of people from Children's Hospital, Newton-Wellesley Hospital, Harvard University and other places, and having a conversation about the range of things people have tried and what the best practices have proven to be.

Ald. Rice said that Commissioner Zaleznik has been working with the various organizations around the City that have contact with kids such as the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, and church groups together with the City to keep in touch on these mental health issues. He asked what would happen after the initial 6 months. Commissioner Zaleznik said they are concentrating on this initial period to see what else might be needed and what they would like to continue with. They would come back to the Board for any further funding for continuing programs.

Commissioner Zaleznik said they have been very successful in involving the kids in planning of events and programs on the issue of suicide prevention. They have learned that a coalition of community organizations is very important and she will be attending the next Newton Clergy Association meeting to bring this information to them. The Newton Clergy Association is part of Newton Cares.

It was asked if bullying is being addressed. Commissioner Zaleznik explained that there is a state mandated bullying curriculum but some changes were made this year. It was found that kids were finding it tedious after a few years.

A Committee member mentioned that there was no information on the School Department website about any suicide prevention programs, but there is information on the front page of the City's website. It was also noted that The Samaritans was a very good program with extensive training and well-worth the time and effort to be trained.

A Committee member asked if there was an uptick in visits to the drop-in centers. Commissioner Zaleznik said not this week because it was vacation week. However, it wouldn't otherwise be surprising as a similar trend happened after the Marathon bombing. People did convey, however, that they were happy the resources were available and thought the City was doing the right thing by providing them. After the H1N1 outbreak a few years ago, the City sent out updates even when there was little to report after the initial outbreak. They had heard from people though, that it was comforting to get the updates. They will be sending out similar communications to keep in touch with the community and hopefully provide some sense of continuity and reassurance that work is ongoing.

A Committee member noted that much of the counseling and problem-solving is being done in secret because of the stigma involved. So when a teenager reaches a crisis point, they might feel like they're all alone and there is no hope because they don't know of the success stories. If kids can come forward and tell their success stories, the stigma can fall away and more kids can feel comfortable asking for help and becoming more hopeful. Commissioner Zaleznik said they are looking at having students become involved in groups and take on that role.

Ald. Sangiolo said she was going to abstain on this vote. She went to the Newton South forums and it felt to her that many of the students and parents were not feeling a sense of connectedness. She also didn't feel confident in the response she heard from Riverside. She was on the Board when the youth officers were done away with and Riverside was brought on the mental health care provider. There has been a stigma related to having Riverside staff in the school and it makes kids wary of seeking them out. She would really like to see more specifics on what will be recommended and then she could support this request.

The Committee voted in favor with Ald. Sangiolo abstaining.

#398-13      ALD. BAKER & DANBERG requesting a discussion of a possible ordinance, regulations or otherwise, to complement zoning regulation of any licensed Registered Marijuana Dispensaries to respond to any secondary impacts so as to make the operation of such dispensaries as successful as possible.

[10/28/13 @ 10:00 AM]

**ACTION:**    **HELD 8-0**

**NOTE:** Ald. Baker addressed the Committee. He explained that a Registered Marijuana Dispensary (RMD) has been approved by the state Department of Public Health to locate in the City of Newton. Garden Remedies is preparing a Special Permit application to go to Land Use Committee. Ald. Baker was interested in the idea of some complementary regulations, independent of the zoning that has been approved, for RMDs. Boston has promulgated guidelines and Brookline has passed a zoning ordinance, a licensing provision and draft regulations.

The basic thrust of both of these communities' regulations is that while the state application is quite thorough, given the degree of controversy around the facilities generally, it might be helpful to have complementary regulations for an extra layer of protection. For instance, Brookline passed an ordinance to allow all the staff to be fingerprinted so a national background check can be run, beyond CORI checks, which are state-wide only. This step was recommended by the police department. Ald. Baker invited Chief Mintz to the meeting, but he said he was going to speak to the security consultant for Garden Remedies to get some information and then come in if necessary.

The infused products for the medical marijuana dispensary are something Brookline was concerned with since they are not in the conventional form of a prescription, so the manufacturing and distribution issues were more complex. Commissioner Zaleznik said that state is not looking at the infused products as "food". The only inspectional tool the City would have would be to inspect those as food, so they would need to leave that to the expertise of the

state. She was not sure how Brookline would be able to address that. Ald. Baker had questions about how home delivery is handled. There was also a reference to a sliding scale of cost. Commissioner Zaleznik said it was in the state regulations as one of the requirements. Ald. Baker stated that the finances as shown in the application for Garden Remedies are broken out in an unusual way which shows a potential loss. Ald. Baker wondered how the company could subsidize indigent clients if they don't have the money.

Brookline also wanted to be able to inspect the facility under its own jurisdiction independent of the state inspection. The local licensing fee can go toward the estimated cost of the extra regulation and security. Brookline is polling their departments such as fire, police, building, etc. to get an idea of what those costs might be and then they can legitimately ask for that as a regulatory expense.

Ald. Baker felt the state application was quite thorough, but the question is whether or not there is benefit in assuring the minority of residents who may not be in full support of having an RMD in the City, that the City is providing all the appropriate safeguards and is not doing less than neighboring communities in this regard.

Commissioner Zaleznik said she is not in favor of local licensing. She does not see anything in either of the other communities' regulations that cover a missing element in the State regulations. Hospitals, nursing homes, pharmacies or any other type of medical facility are regulated by the state (except for Boston which re-licenses some facilities) and are not done locally. She felt that if the extra local regulations were bridging some gap in the state regulations, then that would be different. She also felt that a licensing fee would not buy any kind of expertise, or police detail or anything significant to additionally protect the community.

#### Committee Comments

It was suggested that the City look at other communities around the country for their example. Commissioner Zaleznik said New Jersey was a good model and they have looked at that.

Some Committee members stated that this is a medical product to be provided for people with illnesses. Liquor stores provide a drug with no medical benefit. It was expressed that no additional burdens should be placed upon an RMD than would be placed on liquor stores. It was also pointed out that drug stores sell very powerful drugs as well.

Some felt that the state regulations provided ample security and regulations and there seemed little else to do on the side of the City. If problems do arise, they can be dealt with in a more specific way at that time but this seemed premature and overly cautious.

Commissioner Zaleznik met the lawyer who is representing Garden Remedies in their special permit process. She is not involved in the special permitting, but she felt the things they most needed to address were parking, traffic and security with what is essentially a cash business. The banks are opposed to credit card payments. The Justice Dept. just put out a directive which they hoped would allow banks to feel more secure but the banks are not taking that statement to read that they have to. She heard that the Newton RMD is looking at using credit cards, but she is not sure how that would work.

The state regulations relative to security are very carefully written and detailed. The owners of the dispensary did have some ideas to add more security including the way people enter and exit the facility, and how many people they have in the facility at any given time by perhaps scheduling pick-ups by appointment. Operational issues of concern to the neighborhood could be laid out and addressed during the special permitting process.

Ald. Baker said the Massachusetts Municipal Association has shown considerable concern over this and it seemed appropriate to find out what is going on in the neighboring communities. Having a complementary local ability to ensure things are going as the state would want them to, seemed like a good idea as DPH may not always be available. Ald. Baker said that Ald. Gentile was also concerned about this issue. Ald. Baker asked that the Committee look at the other regulations in the neighboring communities and come back to Committee with comments.

The Committee voted to hold this item.

#144-12      ALD. HESS-MAHAN proposing to repeal the time restrictions for filing special permit applications/site plan reviews for Major Projects during July and August in Article X Section 5 of the Rules and Orders of the Board of Aldermen.

**ACTION:**      **NO ACTION NECESSARY 7-0 (Ald. Hess-Mahan not voting)**

**NOTE:** The current Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Land Use Committee related to the Committee Clerk that they would be in favor of the Zoning & Planning Committee voting No Action Necessary on this item. The Committee voted in favor of No Action Necessary, with Ald. Hess-Mahan not voting.

Respectfully Submitted,

Amy Mah Sangiolo