

## **ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES**

### **NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING**

#### **SUBJECT:**

Homeless Services

#### **PURPOSE:**

To examine the implementation and effectiveness of the Solutions to End Homelessness Program (STEHP) and the New York State Supportive Housing Program (NYSSHP), and explore best practices among homeless services across the state.

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#### **COMMENTS BY**

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I'm Tracy Neitzel, the executive director of Joseph's House, an agency dedicated to meeting the needs of our community's homeless in Troy, NY. I have been with Joseph's House for more than 20 years and in each of those 20 years Joseph's House has been the recipient of at least two, sometimes three, and on rare occasions four of the contracts consolidated under the new STEHP and NYSSHP programs. In addition to these contracts our agency regularly manages another 14 or so. All with different start dates. Different reporting requirements. Different regulatory requirements. Different claiming processes and different fiscal and recordkeeping standards. Given the burden of reporting and recordkeeping imposed upon our agency by juggling these multiple contracts I often wonder how and when we find the time to actually serve the homeless.

And we are not unique, or different, or greedy. Agencies all over the State who work with the homeless and disenfranchised must negotiate the same patchwork quilt of funding sources in order to meet even the most basic needs of those we serve. The homeless don't have a lobbying group. Strong parent advocates have been a driving force developing an effective and cohesive set of services and supports for folks with developmental disabilities. A network of men and women in recovery has successfully fought for humane and effective interventions and treatments for people who struggle with addiction. Dedicated and impassioned "peers"--recipients of mental health services work with (and sometime against) the Office of Mental Health to ensure that people with a diagnosed mental illness are treated with dignity and respect. Sadly, people who experience homelessness don't have a natural cadre of cheerleaders and advocates. They are not a constituency that people are fighting to represent.

Odd as it may seem though, the homeless and the agencies and programs that serve them do have a group of advocates in the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. The Bureau of Housing and Support Services has been challenged with the unenviable task of developing programs that work to end homelessness for thirty years now. They never have enough funding to do it right. During each funding cycle they are faced with difficult, often agonizing decisions about how to distribute these scant resources. I have always been impressed by the passion and intelligence with which they undertake this task. This very small bureau is filled with people who 'get it', who care and who are smart and have done their homework. They do the research, they track trends, they are in constant touch with the provider community, they even ask for our advice!

Their decision last year to consolidate six different homeless programs into two distinct funding streams is a huge step in the right direction. They did much more than consolidate--they thoughtfully combined combinations of Federal and State funding in ways that will give NYS providers an opportunity to closely align their programs with the requirements of HUD's HEARTH act. This will not only improve service delivery, it will reduce some of the administrative burden we all struggle with.

I found it to be much more sensible, efficient and effective to respond to two requests for proposals rather than the normal three or four I would have been writing. And I appreciated that they were combined with thought and care. As a provider of both emergency shelter and permanent supportive housing, I was relieved to see both of these service arenas given equal weight and importance.

The requests for proposals were carefully crafted. Written with an unusually high understanding of the needs of our State's homeless I found them to be thought provoking and insightful. Doing the research and reading necessary to successfully respond to these requests probably improved the quality of services our agency will provide in the coming year.

I particularly appreciated the coordination of available Emergency Shelter Grant Program funding with NYS funds in the new STEHP procurement process. This will make integration with our County's HUD Continuum of Care funded programs much more natural. I won't say seamless yet, but I can hope!

I further appreciated the ability, albeit on a very small scale, to duplicate some of the homeless prevention and rapid re-housing (HPRP) activities that were recently funded with one time Federal ARRA dollars. While prevention and rapid rehousing services certainly won't meet the needs of everyone who experiences homelessness, they have proven to be remarkably effective in ending homelessness for some folks--particularly households with children--a demographic that has reached an all time high and uses an increasingly larger proportion of the funding and resources available to address the crisis that is homelessness in this country.

Sadly, these consolidations took place during a time of unprecedented economic challenge. I'm concerned that a good process will be tainted by the scarce resources available to fund these new initiatives. Whether or not these funding streams had been consolidated, this would have been the most challenging funding round in my memory. I worry that some providers without the benefit of the long relationship I share with the Bureau of Housing and Support Services may blame the combination for funding reductions. I believe, however, that this coordination and combination will actually help these reduced dollars go further. Joseph's House is a very small, consumer centered agency. Everyone at Joseph's House, no matter the job title, provides direct service. I can guarantee you that every hour that is not spent on contract management, and multiple contract report preparation is an hour that will be spent providing potentially life changing direct services to someone who is experiencing homelessness. Our little agency accross the river serves more then 1,000 folks each year. I can only imagine the potential impact if we multiply this effort by the other providers of these desperately needed services accross the State.