

**City of Worcester Accessibility Advisory Commission
Tuesday, January 16, 2024, 4:30 PM Meeting Minutes**

**Virtual Meeting with ASL interpreters
Staff present at City Hall, Levi Lincoln Chamber (3rd floor)**

https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19%3ameeting_MTJhNDdmNjQtMGZlMy00ZWVlLThhZWQtZiQ0MjVhMjBhNTVh%40thread.v2/0?context=%7b%22Tid%22%3a%22f25998dd-1be6-42c6-a44c-8785f3e6deb6%22%2c%22Oid%22%3a%2202af705d-5ebe-4000-83cf-64efc45b8c33%22%7d

Meeting number: 271 185 130 443 Password: SEg7KZ

**Join by phone: 469-998-7682 Access code: 397 384
563#**

Attendance:

Members Present: Robert Bureau, James Delage, Darya Karuna, Elizabeth Myska, Joseph Prochilo, Stephen Stolberg

Members Absent: John Finn, Jr.

Staff: Victor Perez, Dawn E. Clark

Guests: Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission - Commissioner Toni Wolf and Director of Learning and Community Engagement Amanda Baczko

Southern Middlesex Opportunity Council Managing Director for Greater Worcester Housing Connection Vanh Phommasinh

**City Commissioner of Emergency Communications and Management
Charles Goodwin**

Call to order, instructions for virtual meeting, introductions

Chairperson Bureau requested Director Perez provide the technology instructions for public access to the meeting. A unanimous roll call vote was taken to start the meeting at 4:40 pm. Chairperson Bureau welcomed Commissioner Joseph Prochilo as a member of the Commission.

Approval of December 19, 2023 meeting minutes

Commissioner Prochilo moved to approve the December 19, 2023 minutes as written and seconded by Assistant Commissioner Delage. The motion was unanimously approved on roll call.

Conversation with Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC)- Commissioner Toni Wolf and Director of Learning and Community Engagement Amanda Baczko

MRC now has one front door to access all services. Prior to the past couple of years each program had separate intake processes. Application is on-line or one can call in. People can ask about programs and referrals will be made to other agencies when appropriate. They often get a lot of calls about Social Security that will be sent to Social Security Determination or as mentioned other agencies. We have Eligibility Screeners that will help a person fill out the application if needed.

The bad news is there have been about 800 applicants a month until recently. Now there are 1000 to 1500 hundred a month. The reason for this increase in the labor market is robust. MRC is doing more marketing. People are looking into getting back into the workforce. Every week this data is being reviewed. MRC is exploring a technology tool that might help speed up this process.

Our NextGen Program supports people ages 18 – 30. We spoke about this Program last year and would be happy to come again and update the Commission. We see this Program as a career entry point for higher paying jobs. The program focuses on primarily those who are on the spectrum and those interested in STEM but not the only disability factor. Higher paying jobs and changing. The new trends are being followed to benefit the people in the program. Only 20% fall in the higher paying category right now.

On the Independent Living side, MRC is working with nursing homes, rehab centers and hospitals to see if people need to be there and work to transition them into independent housing units. There is a new pilot program targeting people with mental health issues that do not qualify for DMH services.

The Governor will be filing legislation to rename Mass. Rehabilitation Commission that will better reflect the Commission's mission and vision as well an opportunity to market the services offered.

Questions:

What is the wait time to receive services?

Commissioner's response: Because of the high applications there are two systems in place to see which one works best. The average is about three to four weeks and for at least one person she got assigned to a counselor within a week.

What is the most requested service?

Commissioner's response: 87% vocational rehabilitation services and then home care services

Where are the jobs?

Commissioner's response: Across the board example- cybersecurity training just completed. There were a number of jobs that graduates could apply for. Maybe retail jobs for long term. The GenX Program was talking the other day with hospitals about Program Manager positions.

Is there a difference between education requirements of older people and those younger?

Commissioner's response: She did not want to stereotype. She did say there is a trend toward job specific training with Certificates. This is across the younger person and meets the employer's need.

Is the wait list closer to three weeks or the six-week time frame?

Commissioner's response: There is no pre-pandemic data for this. During the pandemic the intake was about a 100 a month. Through the Listening sessions we learn that intake was a problem. Now intake is about 1600 a month. Depending on how one comes in the door depends on the time frame because the system has been improved.

Amanda Baczko shared the high-level work being done at MRC. She is Director of Learning and Family Engagement. This program has two objectives: 1) To Train and retain staff, and 2: To Embrace the disability voice and feedback in the design and delivery of MRC's services. Ways in which this is done include a quarterly community forum is offered virtually with 150 to 200 people attend. Each forum is different featuring an MRC service and a participant's perspective. In addition, give a broader lens on disability services. Other agencies are invited to present their services. Feedback is requested and received at each forum. A quarterly newsletter goes along with this.

MRC contracts with Inclusion Leaders & Ambassadors. These are people with disabilities and family members who sit in on hiring panels and policy development meetings They are thinking about ways to build new initiatives. They spearhead planning the annual in-person conference "Explore Possibilities" with many workshops related to disability along with gathering feedback. Most have experienced MRC services themselves. Attendees are provided with professional head shots for their resumes etc.

There has been work making MRC accessible particularly in the technology field. They are working with a vendor "Level Access" to assist with real time learning with staff around items like screen readers and speech software. Every couple of months there is a training about how to think about accessibility when working with people and developing documents or programming. This vendor is also assisting in the writing of policies for the work being done.

Question: Is there a difference between how MRC provided services pre-COVID

and after?

Ms. Baczko's response: COVID forces us into providing services virtually and now services have been developed so they are hybrid and people can choose which mode they wish to use. People have found having a choice helpful. This was a huge shift and MRC will probably keep this model. With the equipment that was purchased at the beginning of the pandemic participation in Councils etc. is easier increasing numbers of people involved compared with using transportation which has its own issues.

If the Commissioners or members public have additional questions the Chairperson will direct them on to MRC.

Review of Temporary Shelter in former Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) Main Street location for accessibility items with SMOG Staff, Managing Director for Greater Worcester Housing Connection Vanh Phommasinh

This temporary shelter has been opened for about a month with 60 beds. Recently the number of beds were increased to 82. Everything is accessible in terms of getting into the building. However, the shower facility is not accessible. Anyone who may have a challenge in this way. They can be transported to one of the other permanent shelters for this purpose. (25 Queen Street and 237 Chandler Street). This shelter will accommodate anyone presents themselves and if need be, will be brought to the Queen Street shelter for accessing the need.

Concern raised: There should be accessible showers available at this site. Accessible transportations already a problem in the city.

Vanh Phommasinh Response: Agreed; due to RMV is temporary this service is not able to be available. People needing accessible showers can be transferred to one of the other permanent shelters that do provide this service or transportation which is available.

Question: Referring to the last response that transportation can be provided. How does this play out day to day in real time?

Vanh Phommasinh response: SMOC has a van that can be used for this purpose. The quest is encouraged to use before 5:00pm when the driver leaves for the day. If needed after 5:00pm staff will arrange for another driver should the need arise. This has not happened, if this need does, they will make it work for the quest.

Question: A bit out of the area of accessibility. There have been news media and a visit for a person last month about issues at this shelter, how are the shelter operations now and going forward?

Vanh Phommasinh response: There are a lot of personalities and quests are active. Sometimes when rules are enforced, there can be backlash. Running a shelter is challenging and staff tries to put in place appropriate services for the quests which sometimes are unwelcomed.

Question: What is the staff ratio between staff and guests and what expertise does the staff bring to the shelter?

Vanh Phommasinh response: During the day the three program managers, second shift – three program managers and third shift two program managers. Security for second and third shifts; Worcester police detail on second shift. Most of staff are skilled in behavioral health, housing and/or case management. Program advocates are trained in understanding trauma. These are the staff that work to onboard quests and understand there needs.

Question: When the administrators leave, there are three staff present for 82 guests?

Vanh Phommasinh response: Yes, we just increased the number of beds, so we are planning to increase staff.

Question: Has anyone been redirected to one of the other shelters and has not been places in a shelter?

Vanh Phommasinh response: This has not happened to date. We are not at capacity right now.

Question: Beside the showers, are there other issues and trend related to disability quests are identifying to the staff?

Vanh Phommasinh response: There is a trend for people needing a higher level of care. We are a no touch facility. If a person is not able to take care of themselves this is not where they should be. All people who have presented themselves, SMOC has been able to refer to appropriate resources including the housing portfolio first floor apartments in the case of a person with a mobility issue.

Question: Has anyone with limited vision or blind reached out to use the shelter? In the past working for the Commission for the Blind we had situations where shelter staff were not aware of sighted guides to lead around the shelter. If you have this situation occur, please reach out for this assistance.

Vanh Phommasinh response: In her experience, there has been no one in this situation. She will reach out if this is needed.

Vanh Phommasinh response: Please reach out if there are further questions. Thank you for having me!

Discussion of Emergency Preparedness and the ADA Transition Plan for Emergency Shelters with Commissioner of Emergency Communications and Management Charles Goodwin

Commission Goodwin began by reminding all to have an emergency plan in place with family, friends, and neighbors. It is so important to have emergency numbers written down. We use cell phones so much now numbers are stored there and if the phone is not charged or lost there is no way to anyone, including safety personnel could quickly retrieve numbers.

The plan should include where to go if one had to leave the home. When more than one person in the home, establish a meet up area so all are known if there is a fire, flood, etc. A go-bag should be ready to go with you. We are having more weather-related incidents that are resulting in emergencies and evacuations.

Other reminders: Sign up for “Alert Worcester” – Periodic important City messages will be announced on your phone, email, or text as you choose; currently translated into 23 languages. In the next few months there are plans to add 10 more languages.

Just, an FYI: Worcester has joined the Amber Alert System (or POD) and is one of five authorities at send MEMA messages out to radio, signboards, cell phones. No sign up is necessary.

Emergency Shelters

Staff is in the process of surveying new and resurveying older shelters for ADA compliance including shelters for pets. Data will be logged. Once a shelter is opened durable medical equipment is available. Generators available for elevators if electricity goes out, support cooking facilities or other or other essential needs. The city has access to accessible WRTA transportation for an emergency including a medical bus that will hold four patients for immediate assistance and can transfer people to the hospital if necessary.

Emergency Management works with Salvation Army and Red Cross to provide appropriate dietary needs.

The most important item during a stay in a shelter is to let the people in charge what one needs. Don't assume!

Question: If an emergency is declared, evacuation is necessary, and a blind person has no transportation, what does one do?

Charles Goodwin's response: Call 911, one of the emergency responders will assist.

Thank you, please feel free to reach out there are any other questions.

Discussion of a potential conference for more affordable, accessible housing with Commission Member Joe Prochillo

In Worcester and the State there is a 35-year backlog of need for accessible, affordable housing. When the Rehab Act came out in 1973 and the guidelines in 1977 that is when the standards for accessible housing was introduced. Disabled individuals were institutionalized and not in the community. There was never a determination if the 5% accessible housing in the 1972 Act would meet the need. So, what has happened over time the people needing accessible units have exceeded the supply. Due to the market rate affordable and accessible units at housing authorities and some private housing is limited.

He is working with a group at Center for Living & Working, Inc. in conjunction with a housing bond bill going through the State House the hold a conference in the spring. Date to be determined. We want to increase funds going to accessible housing units and have local, state, and federal politicians come together with the aim of securing funds for additional accessible affordable housing units to address this 35 year back log. The aim is to go from the 5% to 20% of new and renovated housing units.

Worcester has seen an increase in accessibility housing with the advocacy done over his past year, some market rate and some affordable.

- The Affordable Trust fund has agreed to increase the accessible housing units from 5% to 10%.
- 40 apartments at Worcester Public Housing Curtis Apartment complex.
- There has been some success in educating developers.

Worcester Housing Authority could adapt units to accessible units to keep residents in place as they need accessible housing by using the Affordable Housing Trust Fund which they already have used with the Curtis Apartment Complex.

We are hoping the Accessibility Advisory Commission would support this endeavor. While converting units from inaccessible units to accessible units. We want to see new accessible units as well.

One of the places the Commission would help with is WHA Lakeside Apartments.

Plans call for a whole new development making all the first-floor units accessible would go a long way for those on a 35 year wait list.

Question: Who would take the lead on this conference?

Joe Prochilo's response: Center for Living & Working, Inc. (CLW) and others with April/May timeframe. The more people asking the local, state, and federal legislators the better.

Request: We would like the Commission to be one of the groups to be involved in this. It would be good for the WHA to come to the AAC and discuss their work, and discuss Lakeside and Accessibility.

Chairperson Bureau's response: We certainly can certainly invite them back. They have been here before.

Commissioner Stolberg and CLW staff stated the people are in nursing homes because there are no available affordable housing units. Being in the community rather than a nursing home costs less.

Commissioner Prochilo made a motion that the AAC approve and support the work that the housing advocates at Center for Living & Working, Inc are pursuing in order to increase the number of affordable, accessible housing units being built in Worcester and across the Commonwealth through an increase of funding and incentivization to developers so that we can decrease a 35 year waitlist and assist those individuals who reside in institutions to enable them to come back into the community. Commissioner Bureau seconded to motion.

Further Discussion

Commissioner Delage suggested the federal government using the ADA had all the Regional Transit Authorities as a model to get accessible housing in communities.

Commissioner Stolberg wants to take this issue and advocacy strategy statewide through local Commissions on Disability.

Chairperson Bureau requested a roll call vote on the motion put forth by Commissioner Prochilo. Motion approved.

Suggestions for future agenda items

Request Worcester Housing Authority to come and discuss accessible housing.

Announcements:

- **Next Accessibility Advisory Commission meeting:
February 20, 2024 - 4:30pm**

Adjournment:

Meeting was adjourned at 6:04 pm by a unanimous roll call vote moved by Associate Commissioner Delage and seconded by Commissioner Prochillo. Approved by roll call.

*Material can be viewed at the Human Rights & Accessibility Office upon request.