



GENERAL ASSISTANCE ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, July 13th, 2022, at 2:00 PM

PRESENT: Erin Koehn, Vicki Ellison, Danielle Rodriguez, Jena Maloney, Kelly Foresman, and Kristi Tisl

STAFF: Ashley Balias and David Thielen

INTRODUCTIONS & CALL TO ORDER:

Ashley called the meeting to order at 2:00 P.M.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

GA Advisory Committee reviewed the minutes of April 13, 2022. Kristi Tisl made the motion to approve and accept minutes as presented. Vicki Ellison seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW

Ashley stated that since there were quite a few new members joining the General Assistance Advisory Committee, she planned to start this meeting with an overview of the General Assistance department. She stated that over the next year, she hopes to bring a series of policy changes before the Advisory Committee and thought it would be a good idea to provide an overview of where we have been and where we are going.

She began with an overview of the staff. She started by stating that she is the Director of General Assistance but is only on a 'part-time' basis/ She stated that 20% of her time is focused on General Assistance whereas the other 80% is focused on Community Outreach. She then added that there are three staff in General Assistance all with unique strengths which when we come together makes us a strong team. She added that one staff, Janean, has been in the department since 1992 and brings a lot of historical knowledge and expertise with her. The second staff, Laura, has been with the department since December of 2019 and is our 'super user' for our data management system. Ashley also noted that unfortunately for Laura she started in the department right before void and when we had budget challenges and so she has never known 'normal' in General Assistance. The final staff is Nicole, who just started with us in February 2022. She joined us after another long-standing Linn County employee retired.

Ashley then spoke through the mission of the department which is "to provide temporary assistance to low-income Linn County residents who are ineligible for or awaiting approval from federal or state assistance programs according to Linn County Ordinance." She stated that often when we are looking at changes to the General

Assistance policy, we are constantly trying to take the 30,000-foot view – what will both best meet the needs of low-income Linn County residents but also be the best possible use of taxpayer dollars. Additionally, Ashley added that there are a few overarching goals for Linn County which include to align with the overall Linn County Strategic Plan and with LC3 which is the Linn County Customer Centered Culture. Ashley also stated that central focus of this department is to ensure that we are working efficiently – both in ensure that we are processing applications and administering payments as quickly as possible but also ensure that the services that we provide and the way we operate internally is efficient. Part of this consideration is to ensure that the services provided by GA makes sense for GA – that we are uniquely positioned to do that work. Finally, Ashley stated that since she started with the department, a central focus of hers has been to make sure that GA is collaborating with other rent and utility assistance providers in Linn County. She added that this has really ramped up since the beginning of the pandemic when we knew that we would have significant demand and needed to ensure that residents made it to the best possible assistance available to them. This led to the Rent & Utility Assistance Collaborative as it currently exists. Ashley then provided an overview of the existing General Assistance Policy including, lines of service, eligibility, and products offered and discussed how it has changed over time.

BUDGET & PROGRAM UPDATE

Ashley presented information regarding budget utilization for all FY22. She added a note that per the Linn County Community Services Director, they were still working to close out year end and some of these numbers were subject to change. Though, she also noted that the Finance Director was comfortable with these numbers and thought any change would be minimal. The total expended is at 97% of total budgeted. Ashley noted that this is not 97% of what General Assistance was originally allocated. The budget was amended to be less after making projections in the spring about what would be reasonably spent down. Ashley noted that in a 'normal' year GA spends down its entire budget but over the last few years there has been significant federal aid available for rent and utility assistance which has reduced demand for GA. The budget utilization breakdown by line of service is 95% of the amount budgeted for rent, 103% on lot rent, 86% on utilities, and 109% of funeral expenses. Ashley also added that GA received 137% of the budgeted expectation in Interim Assistance Reimbursement which totaled \$34,191.

The Waypoint statistics from 2021 from local providers reflect 1446 referrals with an average of 2 referrals per household. The average income was \$775.50/month. 36% of families had no income. Ashley then noted that Waypoint looked up the eviction record for each of these 1,446 households to try to get a sense of the effectiveness of the collaboration. Ashley noted that of the 1,446 households, 587 had formal evictions filed against them but only 33 or 6% resulted in an eviction going through. Ashley stated that the collaborative believed that this success is largely due to the collaboration and rent and utility assistance providers coming together to ensure residents get the best

possible assistance available to them and in some cases, this means multiple providers assisting at the same time to ensure landlords receive a full month of rent. Ashly stated that the collaborative also includes Iowa Legal Aid and the Help Desk that they have set up at the Linn County courthouse which has been a huge advantage as well. It means that assistance providers and Iowa Legal Aid had effective open communication about the needs of clients.

POLICY DISCUSSION

Ashley then reiterated, that she is hopeful to bring additional policy changes to this Advisory Committee over the next several months. She stated that there are quite a few things that the Department is hoping to address but there are a few key priorities that she wanted to share today. The first and foremost, is to modify our funeral/ burial policy. Ashley noted that this policy has not been addressed since 2011. She added that the payment amount is at \$1,000 and is required to be accepted as payment in full for any service the Funeral home is willing to provide. This means effectively that our customers receive cremation. Ashley stated that to get this work going she tried to identify the average cost of cremation which from a relatively quick google search appears to be about \$3,000. This means that if it costs that much locally, Funeral Homes are doing this work at a big loss. Additionally, Ashley noted that she tried to look across the state at what other General Assistance Departments provide and found that Linn County pays the lowest amount except for Polk County who pays \$775. Finally, Ashley stated that they have also started to encounter cultural challenges with this service as well. We have learned that for different cultures and religions cremation is not acceptable and so we do not effectively serve those residents, which is important, because to the extent that we are aware we are the only service provider in this area.

The next priority of Ashley's is to look at increasing the amount we pay for rent & utility assistance knowing that currently cover approximately half of what the median rent is for this community. Along with this, we need to identify a strategy that might work better for families knowing that they are likely to have more expenses and a reduce ability to pay for rent and utility assistance as a result.

Ashley then added that the General Assistance Department has been looking at a few other policy changes as well including a review of the existing eligibility criteria, remove the food/ non-food service, correct the ongoing policy language, and assess what other gaps in community exists that GA may be able to fill. We have currently brainstormed the following gaps that may be useful for GA to add car repair, medical bills, gas cards, and homeowners or renters' insurance.

MEETING SCHEDULE:

Next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, October 12, 2022, at 2:00 p.m.

The meeting adjourned 3:03 p.m.