

City of Alexandria, Virginia
Department of Community and Human Services
Social Service Advisory Board Meeting Notes
February 26th, 2024

Present: Abby Horrell (Chair), Allison Greenleaf, Ann O’Hanlon, Samantha Pedrosa (Vice-Chair), Rachel Dienna, Lesa Gilbert (DCHS Staff), Debra Evans (DCHS Staff)

Absent: Paul Almeida, Shauna Gary, Angela Almonte (DCHS Staff)

Call to Order/Welcome: The meeting was called to order by Abby Horrell (Chair) at 7:00 p.m., and SSAB members were welcomed to the February meeting. SSAB members also welcomed new member Karen Carter to the board.

Debra Evans updates on the Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Program.

Background:

- Domestic violence is defined as a pattern of abuse of coercive and control that may include but is not limited to physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, and financial abuse, reproductive coercion (e.g., forced pregnancy by tampering with birth control) experienced in a relationship with anyone above the age of eighteen with an intimate relationship component. Domestic violence is about power and control over an individual and can happen to anyone.
 - Including dating between people who do not live with each other.
 - Children who witness or hear violence at home are a part of the domestic violence umbrella.
 - Anybody under eighteen years old but in a dating relationship that meets this definition is referred to domestic violence services versus child protective services.
- Services are delivered under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), and the center has strict confidentiality policies.
- On average, it takes about seven to ten attempts to leave before a person leaves an abusive relationship.
- There are three phases in the domestic violence cycle. Tension building, acute explosive stage (any forms of violence/abuse), and the honeymoon stage.
- Sexual assault: any act of sexual aggression that occurs when a person is forced, threatened, or coerced into sexual contact without consent. Sexual assault can happen to anyone. Service is provided for child sexual assault when the perpetrator is not a caregiver. If a caregiver (e.g., parent) is involved, then they will be referred to CPS. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 26 men have experienced some violence or attempted rape in their life. Sexual assault is also about power and control. Most sexual assaults happen by someone the survivor knows, and sexual assault by strangers is rare. Rapes are underreported, and this can be because of fear or being believed.

Overview of services:

- Virginia law requires that there is a domestic violence program in every jurisdiction.

- This includes a 24-hour hotline, emergency shelters like safe houses and hotels, providing counseling for adults and children, and accompaniment to court (e.g., protection order, custody, spousal support but do not testify)
 - Accompaniment is also provided when in need of specialized nurses who can detect internal factors for cases that have a strangulation aspect and sexual assault forensic exam.
 - Two staff therapists offer in-house short-term therapy.
 - To provide services in different languages, the center uses a language line for interpretation and staff/volunteers who speak other languages.
- In 2023, the domestic violence hotline answered three thousand four hundred and twenty-nine calls.
- Sixty-six women and seventy-four children were accepted into the Domestic Violence safe house. The Safe House program does accept both men and women who are victims of domestic violence. Men do not come to the safe house but are provided a safe space to stay. If the person is a transgender female, she will be placed in the program's safe house, and if the person is a transgender male, he will be placed in a safe space.
- The safe house has twenty-four beds, and after the pandemic, there has been an increasing need for service. In the last four months, the shelter has been over capacity and has had to use other locations.
- There were one thousand six hundred and fourteen adult service contacts. Service contact is defined as safety planning, providing resources, providing information, and court accompaniment.
- The sexual assault hotline received eight hundred ninety-one calls, and two hundred and twenty-four clients received services. Virginia sexual assault data shows there were nine thousand hotline calls answered in the state.

Staffing:

- There are currently twenty staff members for the domestic violence and sexual assault program.
- The City's domestic violence and sexual assault program relies heavily on volunteers.
 - Volunteers require 40 training courses before engaging with clients. Staff members are always on backup to support volunteers. Volunteers are essential to keeping the program running twenty-four hours a day. Volunteer schedules for the domestic violence hotline are usually from Friday night until Sunday night. Volunteer schedules for the sexual assault center are daily from 6 pm-6 am and on the weekends.

Partners:

- Police have a directive to reach out to the domestic violence/sexual assault center to connect with an advocate right away. Crisis intervention, safety planning, hospital accompaniment, and placement in the safe house are provided immediately and if necessary.
- The City's animal shelter will provide safekeeping for pets if necessary.
- In 1988, a coordinated community response to domestic violence was started called the Domestic Violence Intervention Project. Over twenty agencies participate in bi-monthly meetings to examine community trends and coordinate outreach, education, and other

responses. There is also a Sexual Assault Response Team that has quarterly meetings with core agencies.

On-going efforts:

- The program is working on training a curriculum for what healthy relationships are.
- various activities are planned to raise awareness of the needs of survivors.
- A silent vigil is held every other year at Market Square to honor victims who have died because of domestic violence in Alexandria.

Current Challenge:

- The funding for the program all comes from grants, which can be a challenge.
 - SSAB members can advocate for more funding at the state and federal levels.
 - The additional funding will allow a focus on more prevention work.
- The center is always looking for additional volunteers to continue staffing the hotline.

Approval of Minutes: The minutes from January 22nd were reviewed and accepted with changes by SSAB members, with a motion to approve by Alison Greenleaf.

DCHS updates:

- The City's budget will be released on February 27th, 2024.
- The recommendation to overhaul the system for determining eligibility for programs such as SNAP and Childcare benefits received strong support in both the House and Senate. Hopefully, it will be included in the final budget announced by March 9th.
- There is a bill for the Percentage of Income Payment Program utility program that, if enacted, would use the budget to reimburse for the program's administrative costs rather than funding based on a local match.
- Virginia Residential Landlord and Tenant Act that impacts our local jurisdiction. It increases Pay or Quit Notices from five to 14 days, the mandatory period after serving a written notice of eviction before pursuing remedies for termination of rental agreements.
- There is an affordable housing bill that will allow localities to require affordable housing in new developments of assisted living facilities.

Employee appreciation and recognition updates:

On Valentine's Day, notes of gratitude were distributed in recognition of benefits specialists and social workers' month. At a later date, bagels and donuts were dropped off for staff to enjoy.

Discussion of continuation of employee appreciation and recognition efforts:

The SSAB members would like to continue their efforts by focusing on different departments and will consider using meeting times to create materials that will be distributed.

Upcoming guest speakers and potential outreach efforts:

- SSAB members discussed potential food insecurity discussion based on the February report. Additionally, SSAB members inquired if there were updates around the Guaranteed Income Pilot. Lesa Gilbert will look into whether there are any updates to provide.

- SSAB members voiced interest in learning how other boards and commissions are engaging with the budget and exploring opportunities to collaborate.

Upcoming meeting dates

- Monday, March 18
- Monday, April 15

Meeting adjourned at 08:06 p.m.