



CITY COUNCIL
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Amber Waldref
Council Member District 1

Arlene Patton and Jerrie Allard
Board Chair and Director, Community Housing and Human Services

Cc: City Council Members, Jonathan Mallahan, Mayor Condon

October 19, 2014

Dear Ms. Allard and Ms. Patton,

I want to thank you for the opportunity to serve on the Community Housing and Human Services (CHHS) Board for the last two years. It has been a challenging task to help develop new process, new strategies, and new practices that combine the work of three previous boards (and two previous departments) to improve the lives of homeless individuals and low to moderate income families in Spokane. I truly appreciate the dedication of the volunteer members of the CHHS Board – it is one of the hardest working boards at the City. I also appreciate the CHHS Staff – the expertise they bring to housing, homelessness and community development is improving lives in our community.

Regretfully, I have made the decision to resign from the CHHS Board. This is a difficult decision because I have personally invested many hours into the development of this Board (like my dedicated fellow Board members!) and I am passionate about working to improve the lives of low-income people in our community. I came to this decision for several reasons, which I'll share below.

Communication & Transparency

When a new Board forms and two departments merge, there are many organizational growing pains that occur. It is certainly normal to experience communication challenges in the beginning, as Board Committees are formed, staff are assigned to these committees and appropriate lines of communication develop. As a Councilmember, I am very sensitive to the need for early and often communication. When many changes are taking place, communication is the key to alleviating concerns of community members, developing trust between Board members and creating the glue that holds organizations together. However, after two years, CHHS Board and staff communication challenges continue. Committee meetings are irregular and meeting agendas and documents are not always available in advance. This month, a public hearing that was scheduled was rescheduled with very late notice to the Board and no notice to the community. Council recently received a letter from an affordable housing grantee of the city who had received no communication for months related to funding that had been awarded and had not been received. I am concerned it is difficult for anyone to be productive and engaged under these circumstances, especially community volunteers and service partners.

I also disagree with a recent decision to exclude Board members from attending Executive Committee meetings. If there are quorum issues, a public meeting notice can be arranged. There is no good reason why a Board member should be barred from attending this committee or any Board committee meeting. Transparency is key to ensuring a beneficial relationship with our citizens and community partners.

CDBG and Neighborhoods

The interaction between neighborhoods, the new CHHS Department and the CHHS Board is not working. Last year, the employee who provided the line of communication with neighborhoods regarding CDBG funding was let go and the position eliminated. I and other Council members sounded the alarm about removing this position. Who would answer the technical questions of the neighborhoods...especially now that ALL 27 neighborhoods are receiving CDBG Funds?

The Office of Neighborhood Services personnel are doing yeoman's work acting as the "middlemen" between the neighborhoods and the CHHS department, but in my opinion (and in the opinion of many neighborhood representatives who are coming to me with questions and concerns), it isn't efficient or effective.

I am also concerned that some CHHS Board members seem disinterested in allocating CDBG dollars to neighborhoods. One of the commitments made to the community when the three boards were combined was to continue to allocate funds directly to neighborhoods for capital improvements. The Council and Mayor have been on record supporting this and the CHHS Board needs to honor this commitment.

Alignment with City Priorities

The CHHS Board serves the Council and Mayor, providing guidance on policy and allocation of funds. The Council is looking for recommendations from the CHHS Board that provide expertise, but that also align with greater goals and strategies of the City. There has been some tension around priorities and who sets priorities and how these priorities get implemented. Council did provide some advice around the Targeted Investment Pilot. It took many months and several grant cycles to figure out a way to incentivize funds to the TIP area through various RFP processes.

I am grateful to the Board for doing this, but we have to find a better way of aligning City goals and CHHS priorities. I am reminded of a time when the Board Executive Committee brought forth a recommendation to cut the allocation of CDBG funding to the Community Centers. I spoke out against this recommendation, as it was out of synch with the goals of the Mayor and Council and it was ultimately not supported by the Board. There may be ways that the Council and Mayor can better communicate goals and priorities to the Board. Executive-level staff must also play a stronger role in coordinating this effort so Board members are clear on their role and how their recommendations should be consistent with the greater goals of the City.

Leadership

During a time of change, leadership and vision is vital to success. Merging two departments is a challenging task and there are audit findings to deal with, new HUD regulations, and a very busy CHHS Board. The time and effort to meet the array of challenges falls on the director and her work is to be commended. However, as mentioned above, I think it would be very valuable to the Board and the Council for the executive leadership of CHHS to play a stronger role in focusing the efforts of the Board and helping shape and communicate the City's (Mayor and Council's) priorities, plans and strategies.

Communication about priorities between the Mayor, City Council, CHHS staff and CHHS Board is critical. Recently, Catholic Charities and the Spokane Low Income Housing Coalition sent letters to the CHHS Board, concerned that the Board had given bonus points to projects in the East Sprague Targeted Investment Pilot (TIP) area for HOME and CDBG funding. In his letter, Rob McCann states that providing bonus points to the TIP area "...seems to contradict a great deal of ground work done by a great many in leadership positions at the City in the past 18 months." As a Councilmember and CHHS Board member, I have been part of general discussions about investing in low-barrier housing for high-risk homeless individuals. However, the Council has never been asked to make it the highest funding priority. There is a disconnect here that needs further conversation between Mayor, staff, Council and Board.

I want to continue this conversation and find ways to address some of the concerns I've outlined in this letter, but I am finding difficulty accomplishing this as a Board member. I have asked Council President Stuckart to fill my Council appointment on the CHHS Board with another Councilmember as soon as possible.

I will be happy to help orient the Councilmember and provide him/her with my files. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to serve and I look forward to working with you to increase communication between the Mayor, Council, Staff, Board, neighborhoods and grant partners to ensure funding priorities are clear and that our mission to improve the lives of low to moderate income people in Spokane is achieved.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Amber Waldref".

Amber Waldref
Spokane City Council
District 1, Pos. 2