

City of Cambridge

The Public Safety Committee held a public hearing on December 22, 1997, beginning at 9:15 a.m. in the Sullivan Chamber for the purpose of discussing issues pertaining to youth violence.

Present at the hearing were Councillor Michael A. Sullivan, Chair of the Committee, Councillor Henrietta Davis and City Clerk D. Margaret Drury. Also present were Jeffrey Beard, Men of Color Task Force; Harold Cox, Chief Public Health Officer for the City of Cambridge; Robert Goodwin, Youth Program Manager, Department of Human Services; Ed Harris, Executive Director, Positive Edge; Robert W. Healy, City Manager; Jill Herold, Assistant City Manager for Human Services; Karen Kasameyer, Cambridge Youth Guidance Center; Eileen Keegan, Community and Youth Division Head, Department of Human Services; Police Superintendent Harold Murphy; Deputy School Superintendent Patrick Murphy; John O'Brien, CEO, Cambridge Public Health Commission; Paul Ryder, Recreation Division Head, Department of Human Services; Lynn Schoeff, Public Health Department; Ellen Semonoff, Deputy Director, Human Services Department; John Silva, Chief of Security, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School; Dr. Ron Steingard, Cambridge Public Health Commission; Jack Vondras, Director, Cambridge Prevention Coalition; Police Commissioner Ronnie Watson and Richard Wright, Violence Prevention Coordinator, Public Health Department.

Councillor Sullivan convened the hearing and explained the purpose. He stated that this is the second meeting of the full committee. There was a small meeting to talk about the agenda on December 3, 1997. Councillor Sullivan described the motivation and history for meeting on the topic. He then described the Attorney General's new report "No Time to Lose, A Comprehensive Action Plan to Prevent Youth Violence," produced in collaboration with Jay A. Winsten, Ph.D., Assistant Dean, Harvard School of Public Health. Councillor Sullivan then reviewed the discussion and noted the issues raised at the December 3, 1997 agenda discussion. They included a hot line, involving parents, expanding the community-based justice concept to include older kids who may no longer be in school, looking at grant funding available to police and looking at the city's crisis response in recent incidents - what worked and what needs improvement.

Councillor Davis assumed the Chair and requested comments from those present.

Harold Cox, Chief Public Health Officer, described the steps that the City has taken to look at the crisis response in the Jeffrey Curley tragedy. One step was to evaluate the performance; the other was to think about additional training. He said that there was a recognition that the City was able to mobilize and put together resources, but there is a concern about systematizing the response. They are continuing to look at both pieces.

Councillor Davis asked if there would be a budget request to reflect new proposals. Mr. Cox stated that the evaluation is not at that stage at this time.

Councillor Davis asked if the Victims of Violence project was involved.

Dr. Steingard said that the first part was more involved with evaluation of the crisis intervention. The second part will involve the Victims of Violence Project more.

Commissioner Watson asked what would happen if there were an incident today.

John O'Brien stated that in the Jeff Curley incident, the City worked well. Now the next step is to capture what was done in policy and procedure, because the question is not whether another incident will occur, it is when.

Councillor Sullivan resumed the chair and stated that there are outstanding questions about how to pull the community in and how to coordinate the resources of the community that want to "pitch-in."

Mr. O'Brien stated that there is also the question of the response of the system over time. How do we use the new learning about the needs of the community to make adjustments to the delivery of services?

Commissioner Watson stated that this is his concern with regard to the meeting Hoyt Field after the shooting incident there. A lot of anger was expressed, but it is not clear to him that anything else has happened.

Councillor Davis asked what the Committee can do in the crisis response issue to help ensure that it happens.

Dr. Patrick Murphy stated that the work of evaluating the crisis and recommending training is going on now.

Assistant City Manager Jill Herold stated that the Committee can ask for the report that they are working on and then bring it before the full City Council.

Councillor Davis asked whether the report will address the issues that arose from Hoyt Field. Jill Herold stated that she believes that it will.

Councillor Sullivan pointed out some differences between the incidents at Hoyt Field and the Curley incident. The Hoyt Field shooting happened in the summer, not during the school year, the press responses and the ages of the kids involved were very different.

Mr. Harold Cox agreed that no two incidents will be the same, but the evaluation will help them look at what pieces of the system work most effectively.

Councillor Davis stated that the kids at Hoyt Field were not given a phone number to call; they really had to mobilize themselves.

Councillor Sullivan stated that this leads into the issues of parent involvement and getting information out as to what resources are in place, because this is a system with good resources.

Ed Harris, Director of Positive Edge, noted the importance of the agencies and institutions getting their act together.

Ellen Semonoff, Deputy Director of Human Services, stated that one of the difficulties that surfaced was the difficulty of engaging parents. More work needs to take place on figuring out what strategies for involving parents are most effective.

Mr. O'Brien stated that they have found out with regard to information and referral, that over time the City has not communicated effectively about what resources are available. There was good feedback from the public on the two page letter listing resources available for families.

Councillor Davis said that it is important to ask the parents how to help them. That is the best place to get the information. She heard mixed comments about the effectiveness of the letter.

Councillor Davis stated that at the Harrington School meeting, parents made very concrete statements about specific issues, like pit bulls in the park. To build trust, you need to start by asking and then responding to fix the problems identified. It is important to build a sense of confidence that people will be listened to.

Mr. Cox stated that during that time the city staff worked with the Community Policing Program to have staff there to listen to parents.

Dr. Steingard stated that at the first follow-up meeting with the community after the large meeting at the Harrington School, there were more professionals than parents there.

Councillor Sullivan asked what the attendance was at the first meeting after the large meeting. Mr. Healy stated that there were about twenty citizens.

Commissioner Watson stated that the first response is public hysteria and it is important to deal with that hysteria effectively.

Lynn Schoeff, Public Health Department, stated that some of the things at the first Harrington meeting after Jeffrey Curley were done well, and that in some ways, the City did not meet the needs of the community in attendance at that meeting. There was tremendous hysteria. If she were a Cambridge parent looking for information on how to protect her kids, she is not sure that she would have found that meeting helpful. She stated that she attended two follow-ups, a community policing meeting and a workshop that Karen DeAndre held, which was a wonderful healing experience. She encouraged looking at the City's response a little more critically.

Councillor Sullivan asked when the follow-up meeting was held. He observed that no date was given out at the big meeting. He asked whether there was a follow up meeting that everyone who signed up at the first meeting was notified of. Ms. Schoeff responded in the negative.

John O'Brien stated that the commitment was to continue the dialogue, but not to have another large meeting.

Dr. Steingard noted that, with the benefit of hindsight, the smaller weekend meetings went better. One idea would be to have smaller meetings. That was very close to the trauma to conduct a meeting like that.

Councillor Davis said that there is an enormous need for communication. Some residents use these meetings for that.

Commissioner Watson agreed that you need to have the first meeting to inform the public of what happened, but you can't get any business done at a venting session.

Councillor Davis stated that it is not too late to have the Harrington following. Deputy School Superintendent Murphy said that the weekend meetings afterward were productive, but there came a point where teachers and parents felt that it was necessary to move on, that the incident was becoming all-consuming.

Ms. Semonoff asked how many kids came to the parenting skills workshop. Ms. Schoeff said that two parents came. The challenge is still how to involve parents.

Bob Goodwin stated that of the twenty or thirty who came to the follow up, their issues ran the whole gamut. With regard to the Harrington parents, they come out to support their kids at sporting events, they are the most supportive. He suggested using this parental involvement in sports to reach these kids. He noted the need to make the workshops seem more compelling. These parents have very little free time.

Councillor Sullivan stated that using the parents' involvement in sports is a good idea. He asked what percentage of kids are in sports. Mr. Goodwin stated that he thinks about 60%-70% of kids in the target population are involved in one sport or another. Councillor Sullivan asked what about the other 30%-40%? Mr. Goodwin said that many of them are at the youth centers.

Councillor Sullivan emphasized the variety of activities that are going on at youth centers. They are not just "basketball palaces."

Deputy Superintendent Murphy stated that more must be done to get information out to the public about the services that are available.

Paul Ryder, Recreation Division Head, stated that the problem with the local media is that if you want reporting on the positive issues, you have to write the article and take the photo.

Councillor Davis stated that it is important to get the word out, but we need to be objective. There are not enough facilities for kids. At a meeting of the Healthy Task Force, there was information about the need for more fields and facilities.

Lynn Schoeff stated that we have to be careful when we listen to adolescents - sometimes they are hearing only the negatives. She observed that with regard to the Jeffrey Curley case, the neighborhood will be re-traumatized when the case comes to trial, and that will happen soon.

Dr. Steingard stated that the crisis part is the easiest part to respond to, the harder part is the prevention part. The City really needs to focus on the next part.

Ms. Herold stated that the Attorney General has done a lot of work and has recognized the importance of early prevention. Cambridge has a pilot program in the North Cambridge Family Center. Early home visits to parents of newborns are essential. An early home visit program that served every family would be a tremendous boost to prevention.

Mr. Cox stated that the Public Health Commission has just received a new grant for visits to a segment of the newborn population.

Councillor Davis stated that it is time to expand the services of the North Cambridge Family Center to other parts of the city.

Mr. Goodwin emphasized the need for a blueprint for crisis response, beyond the hospital crisis response team.

Mr. Cox agreed that crisis response has to involve more than just the hospital.

Dr. Steingard stated that from the Harrington meeting came an understanding of who of the City management team will be involved in such crisis.

Councillor Davis said that the team should establish one telephone contact point to the City. She then noted that the agenda for children is in process and will be able to build on these issues.

Councillor Sullivan then moved to the issue of how to try to use the community-based justice model for older kids. He invited comment.

John Silva suggested utilizing the young people themselves. They do a great job with peer mediation. He hopes the blueprint can think about how to create an atmosphere that can help with dispute resolution.

Councillor Sullivan noted the importance of identifying youth who are leaders and bringing them into the solutions. This is something that those who work with youth can help the rest of the crisis team with.

Councillor Sullivan then emphasized the importance of empowering kids as part of the long term prevention strategy.

Mr. Harris stated that Cambridge needs a youth council, young people speaking for young people about young people.

Mr. Goodwin stated that Cambridge has had this in the past. It is difficult to sustain, because the kids graduate.

Eileen Keegan said that these programs work in Florida where they are part of the school day. That helps enormously to sustain them over time. Councillor Sullivan said that it has to go beyond this, to reach the kids who are not in school.

Councillor Davis said that there is a student group at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School and asked if it could build on that. She asked who can look into this.

Mr. Goodwin stated that he will look into this.

Councillor Sullivan thanked all those present for their attendance. The meeting was adjourned at 10:50 a.m.

For the Committee,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Michael", written in a cursive style.

Councillor Michael A. Sullivan
Chair

Committee Report #1

5-124
A report from Councilor Michael Sullivan, Chair of the Public Safety Committee, for a meeting held on December 22, 1997 for the purpose of discussing issues pertaining to youth violence.

In City Council February 23, 1998

Report Accepted

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