

City of Cambridge

The Committee on Health and Hospitals conducted a public hearing beginning at 8:00 a.m. on Thursday, February 15, 1990 in the James F. Mahan Trustee room at the Cambridge Hospital. Those present at the meeting were Councillor Francis Duehay, Mayor Alice Wolf, Councillor Ed Cyr, Councillor Jonathan Myers, Councillor Timothy Toomey, Jr., Commissioner Melvin H. Chalfen, M.D., Mr. John O'Brien, Mr. Robert Cooper, Ms. Lori Berry, Dr. Myron Belfer, Dr. Ira Mintzer, Dr. Paul Epstein, Dr. David Bor, and Detective Frank Pasquarello.

Councillor Francis H. Duehay, Chairman of the Committee, opened the meeting by stating that among his agenda items for the current council term is to develop a comprehensive substance abuse policy, giving special attention to the problems of youth. Furthermore he informed the committee he has arranged for a second year graduate student from the Kennedy School of Government who will be working with the committee and administration of the hospital on this issue for several months. He further stated he had requested this particular meeting in order to learn more about the substance abuse issue from the point of view of the local health care community; and at this time he recognized Dr. Melvin Chalfen, Commissioner of Health and Hospitals.

Commissioner Chalfen stated he believed one of the most difficult problems facing the community is that of substance abuse because it relates

to so many other health problems, particularly those associated with drugs, aids, etc. Furthermore he stated he had asked a group of physicians from the hospital who have first hand knowledge of the myriad of problems facing the hospital to speak on this issue today.

At this time Mr. John O'Brien, Hospital Administrator, echoed Dr. Chalfen's comment relating to drug abuse and stated that because of the wide range of medical resources required to address this problem it permeates the entire hospital.

Mayor Alize Wolf questioned whether this was unique to just Cambridge or was it also being experienced at other hospitals within the greater Boston area. Mr. O'Brien responded by stating it was in fact happening not only in the Boston region, but throughout the nation. The Mayor further asked to what extent the city health services were reaching our youth.

Dr. Myron Belfer, Director of the Department of Psychiatry, stated that generally speaking from his point of view, they only see an adolescent if he or she is admitted with a drug overdose and obviously the individual already had some history of drug use.

Pursuing this line of questioning, Dr. Ira Mintzer, Medical Director for the Alcohol Program, stated that it is very important to preserve early intervention for drug and alcohol abuse with young people, but often times they are not seen at the hospital. Furthermore, he stated that the need is great, but financial and personnel resources are down.

At this time the Committee heard from Ms. Lori Berry, Associate Administrator for Ambulatory Care, stated that it has been her experience that many children who have drug abuse problems do not enter existing programs and therefore that kind of "threshold" opportunity for intervention is lost.

Dr. Belfer stated that speaking about the problems of adults seeking help at the Cambridge Hospital, he believes additional security and a different kind of facility for treatment of patients seeking methodone and psychiatric counseling would address the immediate neighborhood concern about the "acting out" behavior of patients coming and going from the Macht building. Furthermore, he stated the work being done through CASPAR (Cambridge and Somerville Program for Alcoholic Rehabilitation) is extremely important; as is the "Relapse Prevention" program which allows a model to be set-up to assist people to remain drug free. Much of this work he stated, is going on through the North Charles Interdiction program.

Responding to questions from Councillor Duehay, Mr. O'Brien stated that three security guards are on duty within the hospital on a 24 hour basis and they are under the direction of a Cambridge Police Sergeant who also is on the premises.

At this time Councillor Jonathan Myers, questioned whether the hospital was in fact seeing a fair representation of youth affected by drug and/or alcohol abuse so that we have some sense of the overall population. Dr. Belfer responded in the negative. Councillor Myers further questioned what was the primary focal point for access. Dr. Belfer responded by stating it was either CASPAR or the Community Health Center.

Councillor Ed Cyr stated that although he believes the city and its agencies provide many fine services, there is a gap in both housing services and day programs for people who have drug or alcohol problems.

At this time, Dr. Mintzer stated that any further cutbacks from the state will just about eliminate many of the service programs currently in existence; unfortunately he stated the Department of Public Health just does not want to fund alcohol rehabilitation programs. Furthermore he stated there is a growing problem with the permanency of the shelter located at 240 Albany Street in terms of M.I.T.'s intent.

Dr. Belfer responded by stating he believed the solution would be some form of subsidized housing, a comprehensive rehabilitation service and counseling.

At this time, the Committee heard from Dr. Paul Epstein, chair of the AIDS Task Force, who stated that New York has dealt with this type of problem by utilizing single room occupancy (SRO's) dwellings and by

establishing programs for personal rehabilitation. Dr. Epstein further stated that IV drug users need early intervention and education. A recent national study completed by the Institute for Social Research indicated that across the country, drug abuse is down from 56% to 50%, and that 27% of the users are individuals who have dropped out of school.

Dr. Epstein further stated that although the program in which he serves as Medical Director, S.P.A.L. (Somerville Portuguese American League), does a good job, more drop in centers are needed.

Mayor Wolf asked how many people these programs may reach. Dr. Epstein responded by stating that the number of Cambridge people probably reaches about 200.

At this time Detective Frank Pasquarello of the Cambridge Police stated that the police intelligence sources indicates an increase in heroin use and cocaine injection. He also stated they were uncertain of the reason but it was clear through the recent increase in arrests for possession that heroin use permeates the community.

At this time the Committee heard from Dr. David Bor of the Department of Medicine who stated that the only time people in the hospital see a young IV drug user is during acute care. Otherwise, he stated, these cases get by the hospital because often times the users are not in school and therefore not seen by the school nurses. Furthermore, he stated, that there is a

strong need to focus on the social aspect of life to prevent IV drug abuse and AIDS. Dr. Bor raised the issue of IV drug patients acting out within the hospital thereby upsetting other patients as well as presenting an overall security problems to staff as well.

Councillor Timothy Toomey questioned whether or not the staff feels safe during these kinds of disturbances, and what affect does it have on the hospital. Dr. Bor responded by stating that the security people and the staff need training to respond to these situations. Some patients who cannot be restrained have to be discharged.

Mr. O'Brien responded that although these disturbances do happen from time to time and they are taken very seriously by the medical and professional staff, there is no simple solution.

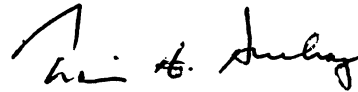
Councillor Duehay questioned whether or not there was some way to document the number of youth who need help. Ms. Berry responded by stating the resources needed to do this just are not available and that the mental health system in Massachusetts has begin to collapse. She further stated that she believed the best way to begin to document the problem is to work at the elementary school level.

Councillor Cyr suggested that the Committee use some 10 drug counselors and outreach workers.

Councillor Duehay responded by asking Mr. O'Brien to arrange for the Council Committee to meet with these workers at the next meeting.

The hearing was adjourned at 10:06 a.m.

For the Committee



Councillor Francis H. Duehay
Chairman

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COMMITTEE REPORTS

S-189

Comm. from Joseph E. Connarton, City Clerk,
transmitting a report from Councillor
Francis H. Duehay, Chairman of the Committee
on Health and Hospitals, for a hearing held
on Thursday, February 15, 1990 relative to
developing a comprehensive substance abuse
policy and giving special attention to the
problems of the youth in the city.

In City Council,

February 26, 1990

Report accepted