

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 4, 2005

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: RECEIPT OF THE FY 2004 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION

ISSUE: City Council receipt of the Fiscal Year 2004 Annual Report of the Economic Opportunities Commission (EOC).

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council receive the report, which covers the activities of the Economic Opportunities Commission from July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2004 (FY 2004).

DISCUSSION: The Economic Opportunities Commission was established in 1966 to advise the Council on issues affecting low-income residents of the City. The 18-member body provides oversight for those programs and services of the Office of Community Services in the Department of Human Services that provide emergency services, promote self-sufficiency and improve conditions of poverty. The attached report summarizes the work of the Commission during fiscal year 2004. These activities included:

- a November retreat to develop the Commission's work plan and priorities;
- researching and drafting a report on access to health care for the poor and uninsured in Alexandria;
- continued support of the Earned Income Tax Credit campaign and tax assistance program with the Social Services Advisory Board;
- regular program briefings;
- collaboration with community groups and other boards and commissions;
- advocacy for low-income and target populations; and
- support for state legislative and budget initiatives that promote the interests of low-income people.

Appendix I to the report is a summary of the service activity of the Office of Community Services during FY 2004.

ATTACHMENT: FY 2004 EOC Annual Report

STAFF:

Debra Collins, Director, Department of Human Services

Jack Powers, Director, Division of Community Programs

Nelson Smith, Director, OCS, Department of Human Services

ATTACHMENT

FY 2004 ANNUAL REPORT OF

THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION

PRESENTED TO THE ALEXANDRIA CITY COUNCIL

APRIL 12, 2005



**MAYOR WILLIAM D. EUILLE
VICE MAYOR REDELLA S. PEPPER
COUNCILMAN LUDWIG P. GAINES
COUNCILMAN ROB KRUPICKA
COUNCILMAN ANDREW H. MACDONALD
COUNCILMAN PAUL C. SMEDBERG
COUNCILWOMAN JOYCE WOODSON

JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER**

BACKGROUND

The Economic Opportunities Commission (EOC) was created by City Council in 1966. In general, EOC's mission is to; serve as an advocate for Alexandria's low-income residents, advise the City Council on programs for these residents, and provide guidance and oversight of the Office of Community Services (OCS) in the conduct of the programs designed to serve low-income and other special populations. The EOC is comprised of 18 members with one-third of its members consisting of elected officials or their representatives appointed by the City Council, one-third of its members consisting of representatives of the poor, and one-third of its members representing business, religious, welfare or other private sector groups and organizations.

EOC and OCS comprise the Community Action Agency for Alexandria. Community Action goals are to promote self-sufficiency for low-income persons, alleviate conditions of poverty, improve the conditions under which low-income persons work and live, and ensure that low-income individuals have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential.

To help achieve these goals, OCS offers a variety of programs and services involving crisis intervention through the Community Services Block Grant, comprehensive services for the homeless and prevention for the near homeless, seasonal energy assistance through the Virginia Energy Assistance Program, bi-lingual and bi-cultural services for recent immigrants and newcomers, and services for ex-offenders through the Virginia Community Action Re-entry System (VA CARES). A profile of each program area appears as an appendix to this report.

HIGHLIGHTS AND ACTIVITIES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2004

To fulfill its mission, the EOC undertook a variety of activities during fiscal year 2004 including: providing program oversight, holding a planning retreat, monitoring legislative and budget issues, advocacy for target populations, and coordination with other community groups and organizations. A major highlight during the fiscal year was the drafting of a white paper that focused on health care access for low-income Alexandrians. During fiscal year 2005, the EOC plans to share a draft of this white paper with various boards, commissions, and community groups to seek their comments on the draft as well their support to work with us on addressing the issues raised in the document. The EOC also plans to submit the white paper to the City Council in the spring of 2005.

Program Oversight

The EOC continued its initiative, started in fiscal year 1997, to receive monthly briefings on OCS initiatives and programs' progress. As result of this initiative, the Commission receives extensive background and outcome information on services to low-income residents. This initiative improves the Commission's program knowledge and oversight, allowing the EOC to better assess if the needs of low-income residents are being met by OCS programs and services and if any unmet needs exist. For example, as result of the briefings the EOC discussed the impacts of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development's efforts to end chronic homelessness within 10 years on the City's homeless programs.

To supplement its program oversight responsibilities, during fiscal year 2004, the EOC invited the co-chair of Alexandria's Housing Action Committee and the Executive Director of Carpenter's Shelter to discuss affordable housing and transitional housing issues. The EOC also invited the new Director of Alexandria's Department of Human Services to discuss her goals and priorities for the Department.

Additionally the EOC invited the Wider Opportunities for Women's (WOW) Director of Local Programs and Policy to discuss WOW's self-sufficiency standard for Alexandria and potential issues surrounding possible official implementation of the standard in the City. This issue is of significant importance since many organizations have programs to move people to self-sufficiency without defining the term self-sufficiency. For example, one of the EOC's goals is to promote self-sufficiency for low-income persons but it has not yet defined the term. Also, the City's Community Partnership Fund has a goal of funding programs to move people to self-sufficiency. Absent such a definition it is difficult to assess the progress made by these organizations.

In February 2004, staff from the Virginia Department of Social Services' (VDSS) Community Services office conducted a bi-annual site visit with OCS. The results of the VDSS monitoring report were positive and a good reflection of the work of EOC and OCS.

Planning Retreat

On November 8, 2003 the EOC held a planning retreat to discuss the issues raised during its prior oversight discussions and to frame a list of major areas to assist low-income residents that required the EOC's attention over the next few years. As a result of this discussion, the EOC identified four major areas:

- (1) affordable housing,
- (2) access to health care;
- (3) increased community awareness and use of the self-sufficiency standard; and
- (4) public education of, and information on, programs that provide greater opportunities for Alexandria's low-income residents.

As a result of this retreat, the EOC formed a working subcommittee to study the issue of access to health care for low-income residents. By the end of fiscal year 2004, the subcommittee completed its study and drafted a white paper on the issue. The EOC approved the initial draft and developed a list of board, commission, and community organizations to share the draft to seek their comments on the document as well their support to work with us on addressing the issues raised in the document. The EOC plans to complete this process in fiscal year 2005 and to share the results of the study with the City Council.

Monitoring of Legislative and Budgetary Issues

During fiscal year 2004, the EOC monitored federal and state legislative initiatives and budget amendments with potential impact on the Community Services Block Grant and other Community Action programs. The EOC also played an active role in the City's budget process through testimony at City Council public hearings. In November 2003, the EOC testified at the City Council's public hearing on the fiscal year 2005 budget process.

Advocacy

An important role of the Commission is to take supportive positions on major issues affecting the low-income community. In support of this role the EOC has designated seats EOC members hold on the Human Rights Commission, the Early Childhood Commission, and the Fair Housing Testing Advisory Committee.

Additionally, 2004 marks the 40th anniversary of the nation's War on Poverty efforts. To highlight the progress made to date and the much needed work that lies ahead to provide opportunities for the poor in Alexandria, as well as the nation, the EOC began planning an event in conjunction with the Mayor for early in FY 2005 to recognize the 40th anniversary of the War on Poverty.

Coordination

EOC members followed the work of Alexandria's Youth Policy Commission, the Alexandria Community Health Assessment initiative, the Alexandria Commission on Aging's 2003 Needs Assessment, and the Alexandria United Way's Human Services Committee.

FUTURE WORK OF THE EOC

During fiscal year 2005, the EOC expects to continue with many of the activities from fiscal year 2004: program oversight primarily through monthly program briefings, monitoring legislative and budget issues, advocacy, and coordination with other community groups. EOC will also review board and commission comments and complete work on the white paper on access to health care for low-income Alexandrians. Further, the EOC plans to discuss the need for community indicators to assess progress toward improving the lives of Alexandria's low-income residents.

PROFILE OF PROGRAMS IN THE OFFICE OF COMMUNITY SERVICES

The Office of Community Services (OCS) provides a variety of programs, services and activities to promote self-sufficiency and improve the lives of Alexandria's low-income residents. For purposes of this discussion, these programs, services, and activities are grouped into three areas: crisis intervention, homeless services, and ex-offender services.

CRISIS INTERVENTION

The federal and State Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), supplemented by local general funds, supports intake services, crisis intervention, emergency assistance and community outreach efforts. Housing, shelter, food, fuel, utility, medical, transportation and other emergency assistance is provided to eligible low-income residents of the City through referrals and fund-raising by Community Services staff. State and local general funds are used in conjunction with financial assistance from local churches and charities to preserve existing housing for eligible families facing short-term financial crises.

Emergency services and crisis intervention changed dramatically in the months following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Spurred in part by the terrorist attacks, the regional economy slowed and thousands of workers lost their jobs or faced reduced hours. Requests for emergency assistance reflected this fact as the caseload increased by 25% in FY 2002. This trend continued into FY 2003 in response to a slowly recovering economy. In FY 2003 the number of unduplicated low-income households requesting emergency assistance grew by another 7% over FY 2002.

In FY 2004, requests for emergency services declined slightly, but continued to exceed those experienced prior to September 11. Two thousand one hundred and fifty-nine (2,159) unduplicated households comprised of 4,340 persons received one or more service from CSBG funded staff during the year. Despite the decline in the overall number served, 1,732 households requested emergency assistance on 2 or more occasions, 23% higher than the previous year, indicating the severe stress on low-income households' budgets. Driving the increase were requests for energy/utility assistance and medical needs, primarily for prescription medications. Increases in the cost of home energy are extremely damaging for households on fixed incomes or with earnings at or near the poverty level. Even with access to the energy assistance programs described below, benefits do not keep pace with higher costs. In FY 2004, OCS charitable partners provided the highest level of financial assistance since records have been kept, with over \$181,000 going to support emergency services. Over \$100,000 alone went to help households maintain heat and utility service.

The Community Services component also manages the Virginia Energy Assistance (federally funded Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) and the EnergyShare programs. EnergyShare is a fuel fund program sponsored and funded in part by Dominion Virginia Power and is used to preserve heating sources for low-income persons facing emergencies that cannot be met by the state program. EnergyShare is also dependent on donations by corporate and residential customers. During the winter of 2003-2004, the Energy Assistance Program helped 525 low-income households heat their homes.

The Energy Assistance Program includes a cooling assistance component for low-income households at-risk for heat related health complications associated with the region's summer weather. Eligible households receive assistance toward the purchase of air conditioning units and/or electricity costs for cooling the home. During the summer of 2003-2004, the cooling assistance component helped 200 families.

HOMELESS SERVICES

OCS coordinates DHS service delivery to the homeless and shares the leadership responsibility of the Homeless Services Coordinating Committee with non-profit providers. Strategies and programs include homeless prevention, eviction storage, transitional housing, case management, administration of contract operations at the Alexandria Community Shelter (ACS), and supportive services for shelter residents, including emergency child care.

Prevention: The Homeless Intervention Program (HIP) provides up to nine months of financial support in conjunction with housing counseling and case management for households facing eviction or foreclosure as a result of circumstances beyond their control. HIP is funded with a combination of federal (TANF), state and local funds. For several years the escalating costs of housing have depleted available funding as early as one-halfway through the fiscal year. Last year, intake was curtailed in February 2004 as all available funding was encumbered. A budget supplemental approved by City Council in the 2005 budget should help alleviate this problem. In FY 2004, the program helped 147 families maintain their existing housing while working to regain self-support. Six month follow-up contact with HIP families whose assistance ended in FY 2004 found 81% were still in permanent housing.

Emergency Shelter and Support Services: During FY 2004, 257 persons were sheltered at ACS, representing a slight increase over the previous year. The residents included 23 families with 48 children and 202 single individuals. Forty-one percent (41%) of the households that left ACS during FY 2004 moved on to stable housing or continued in substance abuse treatment. Crisis child care assistance is an important service utilized by the case management teams at the shelters. Services were provided for 44 children in City shelter during FY 2004, enabling parents to remain employed, seek employment or conduct a housing search while residing in a shelter.

OCS supports shelter case management and permanent housing placements for the homeless with the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funded Transitional Assistance Program (TAP). The program design provides one half of the security deposit and up to one-half of the first three months rent. Families relocate directly from shelters, but may also be leaving overcrowded situations or facing imminent displacement. One-hundred and nine (109) households used TAP to assist with relocation costs in FY 2004.

OCS continued its long-standing working relationship with Carpenter's Shelter. Staff from several City agencies, in addition to DHS, participate in a comprehensive case management partnership with shelter staff. Carpenter's Shelter receives financial support for operating costs through the City's competitive Community Partnership Fund for Human Services. The City also provides federal and

local financial support through the OCS budget for Carpenter's management of the emergency overnight winter shelter program.

EX-OFFENDER SERVICES

The Virginia Community Action Re-Entry System (Virginia CARES) provides transitional services and counseling to ex-offender's returning to Alexandria from the state correctional system, and to their families. In FY 2004, 80 new participants were enrolled in the program and a total of 178 new and ongoing clients and family members received services. Basic needs such as shelter, food, clothing and transportation are addressed immediately. Long range goals concentrate on employment, self-sufficiency and non-recidivism. Follow-up contacts made one year after enrollment with FY 2003 participants found just 10% re-incarcerated on new felony charges in FY 2004.

Primary funding for the program was provided through a state grant administered by the Department of Criminal Justice Services until December 2002. At that point, all state general funds supporting the program were recalled in response to the state budget crisis and replaced by federal grant funding passed through the state. The federal grant is a maximum of 4 years and required a 25% cash match. Virginia CARES board members and staff from across the state network are continuing to work with the Virginia CARES central administrative staff to get state funding restored and diversify funding sources. The Governor's budget proposal for FY 2006 calls for restoration of \$400,000 of state general funds which represents less than one-quarter of the funds necessary to support the network. A request for full restoration of funding is included in the City's legislative package and has the backing of Alexandria's General Assembly delegation.