

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: FEBRUARY 13, 2006

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: RECEIPT OF THE FY 2005 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION

ISSUE: City Council receipt of the Fiscal Year 2005 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, 2004 through June 30, 2005 (FY 2005).

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 2005. These activities included holding a planning retreat to develop the Commission's work plan. The Commission identified the following priority issues that affect the quality of life of low-income Alexandrians:

- affordable housing;
- access to health care and affordable prescription medications;
- affordable home energy;
- access to dental care; and
- access to jobs that pay a livable wage.

Appendix I to the report is a summary of the service activity of the Office of Community Services during FY 2005.

ATTACHMENT: FY 2005 EOC Annual Report

STAFF:

Debra R. Collins, Director, Department of Human Services
Jack Powers, Director, Division of Community Programs
Nelson Smith, Director, OCS, Department of Human Services

ATTACHMENT

FY 2005 ANNUAL REPORT OF

THE ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION

PRESENTED TO THE ALEXANDRIA CITY COUNCIL

FEBRUARY 28, 2006



**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 on March 22, 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. EOC and OCS comprise the Community Action Agency for Alexandria. Over the almost 40 years of work the EOC has focused on the goals of promoting self-sufficiency for low-income persons, alleviating conditions of poverty, improving the conditions under which low-income persons work and live, and ensuring 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 the programs appears as an appendix to this report.

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.

HIGHLIGHTS AND ACTIVITIES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2005

To fulfill its mission, the EOC undertook a variety of activities during fiscal year 2005 including: providing program oversight, monitoring legislative and budget issues, advocating for target populations, partnering with other community groups and organizations, and providing outreach with similar programs in the metropolitan Washington DC area. A major highlight of the fiscal year was the event we cosponsored with Mayor Euille to recognize the 40th Anniversary of the War on Poverty. During fiscal year 2006, the EOC plans to focus on (1) increasing awareness of the self-sufficiency standard for Alexandria; and (2) the need for community indicators to assess progress toward improving the lives of Alexandria's low-income residents.

Program Oversight

The EOC continued to receive monthly briefings on OCS initiatives and programs' progress. As a result, 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. In addition to the program briefings we received a briefing on the City's 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness within our City.

The EOC also held a planning retreat on October 16, 2004 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 these briefings and the planning retreat, the EOC has identified the following five significant issues that affect the quality of life of our most vulnerable community members:

- Affordable housing
- Access to health care and affordable prescription medicines
- Affordable home energy for heating and cooling
- Access to dental care
- Access to jobs that pay a livable wage.

Monitoring of Legislative and Budgetary Issues

During fiscal year 2005, 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. An EOC member also attended the City Council's November 2004 budget retreat and briefed its members on the highlights of the retreat.

Advocacy

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

The EOC also fulfills this role through such efforts as events that increase the community's awareness of the problems facing those in need in our city as well as providing comments to the City Council on their behalf. For example, on October 26, 2004, the EOC co-sponsored with Mayor Euille an event to recognize the 40th Anniversary of the War on Poverty. The purpose of this event was 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 was honored to have Mr. Clarence Carter, former Director of the Office of Community Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human services speak at the event. Additionally, the EOC paid tribute to the many wonderful community-based organizations that provide vital services to our fellow Alexandrians in need and provide them the opportunities to move toward self-sufficiency. As part of that tribute, the work of one such organization—ALIVE!—was highlighted. The EOC owes a special thanks to Washington Mutual Bank, which provided a cash donation to ALIVE! to help them continue their work in our City.

The EOC continues to be committed to working with partner organizations and the City to address the need for more affordable housing and for funding to support it. This year, the EOC

worked in support of Housing Action to encourage the City Council to set aside a portion of the real property tax recordation fee and dedicate a portion of the real property tax revenue for affordable housing. The EOC salutes the Council for taking the important step of supporting these funding proposals.

At the urging of Housing Action and other advocates, including the EOC, City Council provided funding support for the development of a comprehensive affordable housing plan for the City. However, the EOC is concerned that the process of developing this plan has not fully begun. The EOC is committed to and will continue to work with staff, advocates and housing providers to advance the development of a comprehensive plan for affordable housing.

Partnership

The EOC holds designated seats on the Human Rights Commission, the Early Childhood Commission and the Fair Housing Testing Committee. EOC is also actively involved in the work of the Alexandria United Way's Human Services Committee.

We also served as a member of the Wider Opportunities for Women's (WOW) Metropolitan Washington DC Self-Sufficiency Standard Advisory Committee. In 1999, WOW and the Center for Women's Welfare developed the first Self-Sufficiency Standard for individuals and families for the various jurisdictions in the Metropolitan Washington DC area, including the City of Alexandria. The purpose of the Advisory Committee was to oversee the update of the Self-Sufficiency Standard, the compilation of the report on the Standard, and develop implementation strategies for the Standard. The report, *The Self-Sufficiency Standard for the Washington DC Metropolitan Area 2005*, was released in September 2005. It is important to note that the 2005 Self-Sufficiency Standard for Alexandria ranges from an annual income of \$27, 086.12 for an individual to \$93,310.67 for a family of five comprised of two adults and three children (three pre-schoolers).

Outreach

In May 2005, the Chair of the EOC met with members of the City of Rockville, Maryland's Human Services Advisory Commission. This meeting occurred at the request of the Chair of the Human Services Advisory Commission. The purpose of the meeting was to provide the Commission with an overview of the EOC's mission, programs, activities, and accomplishments over the years to help the Commission enhance its program efforts and prepare its work plan for 2005-2006.

FUTURE WORK OF THE EOC

During fiscal year 2006, the EOC expects to continue many of the activities from fiscal year 2005, including: program oversight through monthly staff briefings, monitoring legislative and budget issues, advocacy, and coordination with other community groups. We also plan to focus on two major issues: (1) increasing awareness within the City of the self-sufficiency standard for Alexandria and how it can enhance program efforts and (2) the need for community

indicators to assess progress toward improving the lives of Alexandria's low-income residents. Further, we are in the initial planning stages for an event to recognize the 40th anniversary of the EOC and the creation of Community Action in Alexandria.

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 report, 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 and utility service for eligible families facing short-term financial crises.

In FY 2005, the number of unduplicated households receiving emergency services declined by six percent to 2,034 households, comprised of 3,972 persons. However, the upward trend in repeat requests for assistance continued in FY 2005. Two thousand one hundred and thirty nine (2,139) households required additional emergency assistance during the year, an increase of 23% over the prior year and representing 53% growth since FY 2003. Unmet medical need continued to increase, driven by prescription medication assistance. Sixty percent (60%) of the clients served under the CSBG program lack health insurance. OCS charitable partners continued to support the program, contributing over \$166,000 for emergency assistance. Energy/utility assistance and medical needs represented over 77% of the funding contributed by the partners.

The Community Services component also manages the Virginia Energy Assistance and the EnergyShare programs. Energy Assistance is federally funded through the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). 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 relies on donations by corporate and residential customers of Dominion Power for the majority of its funding. During the winter of 2004-2005, the LIHEAP funded Energy Assistance Program helped 543 low-income households heat their homes. Statewide, the average household received approximately \$220 in assistance for the heating season. Seventy-five (75) families received additional assistance totaling over \$16,000 through EnergyShare to avert an energy crisis. Even with access to the energy assistance programs described above, benefits have failed to keep pace with the higher costs experienced in recent years.

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 FY 2005, the cooling assistance component helped 206 families.

HOMELESS SERVICES

OCS coordinates DHS service delivery to the homeless and shares the leadership responsibility of Alexandria's Homeless Services Coordinating Committee (HSCC) with non-profit providers. The HSCC also serves as the City's Continuum of Care Committee. Strategies and programs include homeless prevention, eviction storage, transitional housing, case management, administration for 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 years the escalating costs of housing have depleted available funding as early as halfway through the fiscal year. In FY 2004, intake was curtailed in February as all available funding was encumbered. A budget supplemental approved by City Council for FY 2005 allowed the program to remain open throughout the entire fiscal year and assist 178 families, 31 more than in FY 2004. Six month follow-up contact with HIP families whose assistance ended during FY 2005 found 72% were still in permanent housing.

Emergency Shelter and Support Services: During FY 2005, 219 households comprised of 292 persons were sheltered at ACS, representing a slight increase over the prior two program years. The residents included 35 families (an increase from 23 in FY 2004) with 75 children and 217 single individuals. Fifty (50%) of the households completing case management exit interviews during FY 2005 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 all three family shelters serving the community. Child care services were provided for 68 children in family shelters serving the City during FY 2005, 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. Eighty two (82) households used TAP to assist with relocation costs in FY 2005. CDBG funding also provides emergency eviction assistance when prevention efforts are not feasible. Sixty-two (62) families accessed up to two months of storage for their possessions while developing alternative housing plans.

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 pre-and post-release services and counseling to ex-offender's returning to Alexandria from the State correctional system, and to their families. Quarterly pre-workshops are provided to prisoners at the Coffeewood Correctional Center. In FY 2005, 97 new participants were enrolled in the program and a total of 270 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. Seventy-seven (77) program participants were able to obtain employment through the coordinated effort of CARES and DHS *Joblink* staff. Follow-up contacts made one year after enrollment with FY 2004 participants found just 8% re-incarcerated on new felony charges in FY 2005. Overall, the statewide recidivism rate approaches 30%.

Four years ago State general funds supporting the Virginia CARES program were recalled in response to the State budget crisis and replaced by federal grant funding passed through the State. The federal grant requires a 25% cash match which presented a major problem to the statewide Community Action Program. In FY 2006, Virginia CARES board members and staff were successful in regaining a foothold in the State budget. Matching funds for the federal grant were included in the State budget and work continues to fully restore the State funding lost over the years. The City's 2006 legislative package includes support for the network budget amendment to restore the State funding.