


City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: FEBRUARY 17, 2010

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: APPLICATION FOR GRANT FUNDS FROM THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, OFFICE ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN FOR A SUPERVISED VISITATION AND SAFE CHILD EXCHANGE PROGRAM OPERATED BY THE ALEXANDRIA COURT SERVICE UNIT.

ISSUE: Council authorization to apply for \$400,000 grant funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women (DOJ/OVW) for a supervised visitation and safe child exchange program for families and household members where there has been domestic violence.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council authorize staff to:

- (1) Submit a grant application to the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women (DOJ/OVW) amount of \$400,000 to fund: (1) Phase I Planning-funding for a planning phase of a cooperative agreement among community stakeholders who are participants of the Juvenile Court Model Court program to develop a supervised visitation program in two locations in the City; (2) Phase II Implementation - contracting with a private non-profit agency with experience working with domestic violence victims and children of domestic violence to provide a supervised visitation and exchange program. The grant period extends over a 36-month period after receipt. No local match is required for these funds; and
- (2) Execute all necessary documents that may be required.

BACKGROUND: The Department of Justice, Office of Violence Against Women is offering a 36-month grant for new supervised visitation and child exchange programs. These programs are designed for parents who may present a risk to their children or to another parent. It provides an opportunity to have parent-child contact monitored by an appropriate third party in a safe environment. In FY 2008, the Court Service Unit received 923 custody cases and 164 cases needing adult protective orders. It is estimated that at least 30% of these cases could use this service to continue parental visitation of family members with their children. In addition, during that same year, the Court Service Unit filed 174 petitions for child protective orders and emergency removals. This program would be available, to enhance services already provided, to social services workers in efforts to reunite families where there has been abuse and neglect.

DISCUSSION: Experts in the field of child abuse and neglect have recognized supervised visitation and child exchange programs as a service crucial for families whose children have been removed from the home because of child abuse or neglect allegations. From this knowledge, visitation centers have begun to emerge as a service for some families engaged in child custody disputes and for families with histories of domestic violence and other allegations of parental misconduct. Supervised visitation and child exchanges reduce the risks to children and adult victims and often mitigate the effects of such violence on all members of the family.

This program would increase supervised visitation and exchange services for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking, dating violence and child abuse. The supervised visitation program seeks to provide supervised visitation and exchange with safety of not only the children, but the adult victim. Currently this program does not exist in the City of Alexandria.

For some time, the Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court Judges have been concerned that unsupervised visitations were occurring in highly volatile familial situations in many of the custody cases that they hear in court. The Judges have also expressed concern that in many other cases, parent visitations do not occur at all or for long periods because of safety issues. As a result, serious issues develop in the healthy growth and bonding of the child-parent relationship. After viewing a visitation/exchange program operated by the Fairfax County Court Service Unit, both Juvenile Court Judges felt the need for a similar service in the City of Alexandria.

The grant requires that a stakeholder committee assist in planning and developing the program. This function would be done by the already existing Model Court program which is an inter-agency group headed by Chief Judge Frogale in partnership with the City's Division of Social Services in the Human Services Department. The Model Court consists of all the stakeholders required by the grant including staff representation from the following programs or offices: family services, court service, guardians ad litem, domestic violence, mental health, police, schools and city attorney.

It is anticipated that the service would be delivered by a private non-profit agency experienced in providing a visitation/child exchange program. The Court Service Unit would provide a staff person through the grant to act as a liaison between the program delivery agency and the court system to ensure a smooth referral system and follow-up by the participants. The grant provides funding for security and rental costs for the visitation centers.

FISCAL IMPACT: The grant award would be \$400,000 to be expended over a 36-month period. The grant application is due March 10, 2010 and there is no local match requirement. The DOJ/DVW offers \$300,000 continual funding after the first 36 month period but should the Court Service Unit not receive continued funding, the program would terminate.

The grant is administered by the Court Service Unit and will require one new full-time non-benefitted staff position. Minimal staff time from the Finance Department and Office of Management and Budget would also be needed.

STAFF:

Lillian Brooks, Director, Court Service Unit
Paul Doku, Budget Analyst