



## CAN Community Council Meeting Minutes, 2/9/2015

**Community Council Members in Attendance:** Christopher Auruajo, Cathy Brandewie, Michelle Casanova, Crystal Crawford, Rolando Delgado, Nancy Gilliam, Monica Guzman, Anne H. Harutunian, Kirsha Haverlah, Knox Kimberly, Molly Latham, Carmen Luevanos, Stacey Mather, Ara Merjanian, Melissa Orren, Blythe Plunkett, Ruthie Redmond, Ken Ripperger-Suhler, Clint Smith, Terry Wilt, Michelle Zadrozny

**Community Council Members unable to attend:** Sylvia Blanco, Rhonda Douglas, Vincent Harding, Stephan Molina, Laura Poskochil, Eileen Schrandt, Gloria Souhami

Roman Venegas (resigned 1/26/15 – moving to San Antonio for new position)

**Staff in Attendance:** Hannah Brown, Mary Dodd, and Kevin Paris

**Others in Attendance:** None.

**Call to Order and Introductions:** Anne H. Harutunian called the meeting to order at 5.32 p.m. Terry Wilt announced that the Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition will meet next week at Lifeworks. Kirsha Haverlah announced that February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month. There will be an event tonight at the Carver Museum related to teen dating violence. A proclamation will also be made by the Austin City Council at their February 12<sup>th</sup> meeting.

**Citizens Communication:** None.

**Approval of Minutes from January 12, 2015:** Ara Merjanian made a motion to approve the minutes. Nancy Gilliam seconded the motion. The minutes were approved unanimously.

**Updates from Community Council Chair:** Anne Harutunian provided several announcements and updates.

- *CAN Executive Director Transition:* Harutunian announced that Executive Director Vanessa Sarria left CAN to take a position with the Austin Mayor's office. At last month's Executive Committee meeting, Mary Dodd was named Interim Executive Director. The CAN Executive Committee will conduct a search to identify a new Executive Director by the fall. Anne Harutunian, Kirsha Haverlah and Eileen Schrandt represent the Community Council on the Executive Committee.
- *Community Council Member Statement of Understanding:* Mary Dodd sent a copy of the Community Council member statement of understanding via email. Members were asked to return the statements as soon as possible. Both new and returning members are asked to sign the Statement of Understanding.
- *Community Council Subcommittee Report:* The Forum Planning Sub-committee has not yet met. As discussed at last month's meeting, Ara Merjanian and Nancy Gilliam will lead the sub-committee. Cathy Brandewie, Christopher Auruajo, Ken Ripperger-Suhler, and Kirsha Haverlah will all serve on the Committee. The current, past, and vice Community Council chairs will meet this week to check-in on the progress of the committees. The three chairs and committee leaders will meet on a monthly basis. Michelle Casanova will lead the committee working to develop questions for panelists at Community Council meetings. Ruthie Redmond, Knox Kimberly, and Laura Poskochil will serve on the Committee. Since last month's meeting, the group identified questions to ask the participants at the meetings for the year.

**CAN Dashboard Steering Committee Report:** Michelle Casanova reported that the Dashboard Steering Committee (DSC) met this past Thursday. They selected a new target for the housing cost-burdened indicator- 33% of Travis County households cost-burdened by 2017. Travis County is currently at 36%. The new target of 33% is also the national rate and the pooled average rate for Texas' major urban counties. The CAN Board will vote on this target at an upcoming meeting. The DSC identified criteria for including local efforts on the CAN Community Dashboard. These will guide selections, but remain flexible enough to include promising practices. A Dashboard user survey will be released following the release of the 2015 Dashboard report. The 2015 Community Dashboard Report

will be released in early May. Members were encouraged to utilize the Dashboard ([cancommunitydashboard.org](http://cancommunitydashboard.org)) if they haven't already.

### ***A Person-Centered Approach to Serving the Reentry Population:***

**2015: Building on the Work of 2014:** Mary Dodd gave an overview of the connection between the Community Council's 2015 meetings and their tie to their work in 2014. The full presentation is available at: [At last year's meetings](#), panelists were asked to identify barriers, challenges, and local efforts to improve the well-being of vulnerable populations. The information was collected in a set of web pages located on CAN's website. CAN also held a series of Safety Net Forums to identify needs in our Community, which resulted in the development of seven person-centered themes that were discussed at CAN's 2014 Retreat. In 2015, both the Board of Directors and Community Council will meet with partners and collaborations to learn how to better fulfill these principles. These meetings will culminate in a Summit held in October to highlight what was learned and discuss what systemic or bureaucratic barriers may inhibit service providers' ability to provide services in a more person-centered approach. The Community Council will focus their meetings on the following themes:

- Consider my whole family.
- Develop services where I am.
- Develop a system that works for me.

Organizations identified by Community Council members will be invited to present at regular meetings of the Community Council. Community Council members were given copies of the questions that will be asked of speakers at the evening's meeting and biographies of the speakers.

**Seedling Foundation:** Shira Ledman, Executive Director, said Seedling was created in 1998 by John Blazier because in his conversations with school principals, he often heard of a growing need for services for children whose parents were incarcerated. This is a hidden population- at the intersection of poverty and grief. If children were not living in poverty before their parent was incarcerated, they often now are after the loss of a wage earner. Incarceration is the loss of a parent. However, unlike the death of a parent, there is little rallying around the child to support them due to shame or stigma. Incarceration of a parent is also an Adverse Childhood Experience that affects a child's development.

Seedlings Promise is a K-8<sup>th</sup> grade program involving school-based mentoring. All children served are economically disadvantaged and most are African-American and Hispanic. Services are centered around school because of the belief that education is a way out of poverty. The program serves students in AISD, Del Valle, Manor, and Hays ISDs, and involves relationship-based mentoring during children's lunchtime. The adult mentor becomes a consistent, supporting aid for the child. The length of a relationship with a mentor influences outcomes strongly. Therefore, they encourage mentors to volunteer for multiple years- mentors serve the same child regardless of a child's transfer between schools, and the organization can serve children outside of the core schools served. They expect to serve about 575 children. Their focus is on the child, rather than the family as a whole. They serve children with a parent's permission. Part of this is acknowledging that children know why they are in the program, i.e. they are aware that their parent is incarcerated. Seedling's approach to mentoring is a strengths-based approach, which views the children through their gifts and talents. The content of each session centers around what the child wants to do. The conversation also follows the child's lead- it is up to the child what they want to disclose and discuss. Mentors are taught to be non-judgmental.

The program conducts an annual external evaluation. The evaluation is based on variables that research shows are influential in positive outcomes. These include: participant satisfaction, attendance, school discipline, test scores, and length of mentor relationship. Seedling has relationships with the districts to track this data, and is currently looking for data related to mental health needs. Referrals are typically back to school counselors, as well as Communities in Schools. Sources of funding are AISD (about 45% of funding), a grant from Travis County to support their work in Del Valle, and individual donors.

"Wish list" items include: Reducing the stigma around having a parent who is incarcerated is critical. Schools really have to find students for the program. Right now, families must reach out for services. Seedling would like to

increase the geographic availability of mentors. Programs occur during the school day, so they must rely on mentors whose employer gives them time off. This becomes an issue for schools that are farther outside of the City core. Seedling is also working to recruit more mentors who are men and people of color. They would like to raise community awareness and acceptance of this issue, ensuring that children are not seen in a negative light due to a parent's choices. They have a consistent waiting list of about 100 kids, despite organizing about 500 volunteer mentors. They have particular challenges finding mentors in East Austin, Del Valle, and Manor.

Referrals typically come through the school. They would like to receive referrals from sources outside of the schools, because school personnel are not always aware of the need. Seedling would like to connect with the Department of Family and Protective Services because a significant percentage of kids in foster care have an incarcerated parent, but Seedling currently does not have a large number of these kids in the program.

They would like mentors to be aware of the challenges parents face as they return from prison in order to make them more aware of the impact on children. Seedling recently conducted a training with mentors on these issues.

**Military Veteran Peer Network:** Lee Cavendar was unable to join the meeting due to illness. Christopher Auruaajo spoke about the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) on his behalf. MVPN began about 5 years ago after the Fort Hood shootings. The Texas Legislature realized that the state was not doing enough to support veteran mental health. Today, there are 36 coordinators across Texas that are housed at local mental health authorities. The primary role of the organization is to find veterans who are not currently accessing mental health services. They receive referrals from a variety of places, including the Austin Police Department's Mobile Crisis Outreach Team.

MVPN considered how best to serve vets who are incarcerated. They began to focus on state jail offenders who, once released from state jail, have no supervision, follow-up care, or parole. Upon release, ex-offenders are dropped off at a homeless shelter or given a bus pass. MVPN decided to create a special Veterans Reentry Dorm the first program of its type for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. They received a list of veterans with less than 10 to 12 months left in their sentence, interviewed 350 of them and selected 24 individuals who appropriate for the program and who were interested in moving from other prisons in Texas to the dorm, located at the Travis State Jail. Vets must request entry into the program; some decline the opportunity because they wish to stay closer to family members.

MVPN wanted to create a 'squad mentality' within the dorm, similar to what veterans experienced in the military. They began the pilot program with eight male veterans. First, they received a flag and flag pole donated by Home Depot, and hold flag ceremonies each morning and evening. Many veterans have substance abuse issues, so they bring in veterans who are substance abuse counselors and conduct peer support groups through Via Hope. MVPN also used alternative types of medicine, like Tai Chi, and created a garden to aid in therapy. The organization brought in speakers on a variety of issues, including representatives from the Texas Attorney General, to discuss child support payments, and the Texas Veterans Commission, to discuss entrepreneurship. MVPN also helped TDCJ counselors receive training on veterans benefits. Veterans disability benefits are dropped down to 10% during incarceration (about \$100/month)- many veterans do not realize that they must file paperwork to reduce benefits, and end up owing the VA money upon release. Many are also unaware that their dependents may be entitled to receive a portion of their benefits while the vet is incarcerated.

MVPN helps arrange needed paperwork prior to release from jail, e.g. ID cards, etc. Upon studying similar programs in other states, they noticed that many similar programs do not have continuity care, so MVPN helps arrange continuity care upon release. Recently, prisoners included in the first class were released. Many of the veterans wanted to stay in Austin where they had access to resources available to veterans. Vets leaving the area are connected with the MVPN coordinator in their home area.

As best they can, MVPN will track 1-, 3-, and 5-year re-arrest rates. MVPN has partnerships with nearly all veteran service providers in the community. The program is currently all-volunteer and recruits volunteers for peer support. They need additional volunteers, but want to keep it veteran-specific because of the ease of relating with clients.

TDCJ must wait for re-arrest data before they can go to the Legislature to request more permanent funding or an expansion of the program. MVPN has estimated that it would take about \$70,000 to run the program.

**Texas Reach Out:** David Pena said he and his wife bought the first home for the organization in 2000. Pena left prison 28 years ago and never looked back, crediting his faith for his recovery. David is also a licensed chemical dependency counselor. People with substance abuse issues have many issues, including spiritual needs. Texas Reach Out has eight homes, and recently moved their office to the For the City Center in North Austin where they share space with 12 other non-profits. They assess everyone with an application and screening and do not accept everyone. The organization is not equipped currently to meet all needs, for example, they are not able to treat people with serious mental illness and refer these individuals other organizations. The homes are unable to house people with a sex offense because they are located in residential areas. They also conduct drug and alcohol screenings and refer clients to treatment if they are using drugs. They currently do not offer drug and alcohol counseling services, as they are not licensed. House leaders ensure that houses are kept orderly. There is structure and guidelines in the houses, including mandatory evening meetings twice a week and church services on Sundays. Mentors meet with clients for one to three hours each week. Many people do not realize the importance of structure, but it is critical for people who have been incarcerated for many years. The organization conducts life skills and employment training classes with professionals in the community. The organization has contacts with over 90 employers that have hired Texas Reach Out Clients. Often, employers give clients an opportunity because they are in a structured program that conducts drug testing. They partner with Goodwill for educational training. Goodwill hires many ex-offenders and helps clients obtain occupational licenses like commercial driver licenses. Texas Reach Out also works to reunite clients with their children.

Texas Reach Out considers successful outcomes for clients to include: full-time employment, abstinence from drugs, avoidance of re-offending, and entry into stable housing. Employment, transportation to jobs and social skills are important for successful reentry. Many of their clients have served over 20 years in prison and need social skills development, as are social ties. Anger management is also critical. The organization is funded through churches, Christian foundations, family members, and client income once they begin working. They operate on limited finances- a \$280,000 budget for 48 beds. The community can help by volunteering to be a mentor, or providing skills classes or jobs. There is apprehension among many people to volunteering with ex-offenders, due to stigma.

**Discussion:** Discussion included:

- There have been a few offers to give CAN Community Council members a tour of correctional facilities. Members were asked to contact Anne Harutunian or Mary Dodd if they are interested in exploring this option.
- It is easier than ever to stay isolated. How do programs get clients re-connected to the community and sharing their experiences?
  - Texas Reach Out encourages clients to volunteer in prison and other places and connect with faith community.
  - MVPN: Veterans in the program receive intense counseling for about 6 months, but it is not really enough to address the trauma. Therefore, they are waiting to encourage clients to speak publicly. They are working to connect clients with mental health providers to continue services. Many veterans who have PTS have isolated themselves. They would eventually like to have successful clients mentor in the veterans dorm at the state jail
  - Seedling: The population they serve has just started to reach college and graduation age. They are beginning to have former clients tell their stories
- Participants in MVPN's program come from state jails across the state.
- Texas Reach Out serves clients for 3 months to 3 years, but have had clients stay longer. These are typically clients who have been institutionalized for many years
- How do you continue services once clients are not living in the facilities? Texas Reach Out holds alumni events to connect former residents to current residents. Many people being released from prison want to put it behind them and disconnect from the experience.
- Do children who have participated in Seedling programs ever come back and mentor? The program has not been in place long enough to see the same clients, but they frequently see mentors who have had a parent incarcerated and want to connect with children going through a similar experience.

- It is very difficult for people being released from prison to find a job, especially a job that sustains you. It is difficult to obtain a job or housing and many ex-offenders can't access emergency foods stamps. There is a big overlap between people experiencing homelessness and people being released from prison.
- MVPN keeps files on every client and hand-delivers them to the coordinator who will handle their case upon release. Unfortunately, there is a lack of services (particularly mental health services) in other regions. The biggest challenge for continuing service is transportation in rural areas
- MVPN has people in their program set 1-, 3-, and 5-year goals while they are in prison
- Community Council members expressed concern for the low level of mental health funding in Texas. These programs really further public safety, but we often don't see these types of services funded at the same level as other public safety initiatives. About 70% of the local budget goes to public safety, but it seems that these programs could further public safety and should be funded as such.
- MVPN has created a position for a justice-involved veteran coordinator. In many cases, veterans are often picked up for a minor charge, but there is no effort to follow up and provide ongoing treatment. Hays and Williamson County are about to start their own veterans courts, following Travis County's example, to address this issue.
- In the absence of intervening with children who have incarcerated parents, other risk factors may manifest that could eventually lead to poor outcomes for children.
- People with mental health issues are often given 10 days of medication upon release from incarceration. When they attempt to schedule follow up appointments upon release, there is often a long delay in scheduling an appointment that would allow them to re-fill their prescription.
- The State tracks 3-year rates for recidivism. Currently, Texas Reach Out doesn't have the capacity to track clients based on their jail identification number that would allow for tracking of outcomes.
- About what proportion of people released from incarceration each year need services? There is no way to track local children with an incarcerated parent. Based on national data, Seedling believes that 4,600 children with incarcerated parents live locally. Veterans must self-identify in prison. Many vets don't believe they are considered a veteran because they haven't served in combat. MVPN believes there are about 3,000 veterans in the TDCJ system.
- Texas Tribune recently produced a story on the veterans reentry dorm, available at <http://www.texastribune.org/2014/09/09/video/>
- The Reentry Roundtable Strategic Plan includes local goals for housing and employment.

**Adjournment:** Anne H. Harutunian, Chair, adjourned the meeting at 7:30 p.m. Next month, the Community Council will be hearing from organizations that serve the aging population. All future meetings will be held in Multipurpose Room B at 700 Lavaca. Future 2015 meeting dates are: March 9, April 20, May 18, June 15, No July meeting, August 17, September 21, October 19, November 16, no December meeting.