

01-06-2021 Town Council Meeting

Responses to Council Questions

ITEM #1: Update on Criminal Justice Debt Program Advisory Committee

Council Question:

Please describe how this program is being publicized to prospective applicants and what channels are being used to do so.

Staff Response:

Materials about the Debt Relief Program and how to apply have been distributed to local community stakeholders, such as Community Empowerment Fund, El Centro Hispano, PORCH, and DSS. The Clerk of Court has also added information about the Debt Relief Program to documents provided to defendants in court, providing information on how to pay court debt. Referrals are also made by Restoration Legal Counsel, Reentry Counsel, & the Street Outreach, Harm Reduction, and Deflection Program. Most recently, an extern in the CJRD compiled a list of Reentry Council clients with unpaid court debt and efforts are underway by Restoration Legal Counsel to contact these individuals to encourage an application for assistance from the Debt Relief Fund.

Council Question:

How does the committee feel about the number of applications it has received thus far?

Staff Response:

Based on recent meetings, the Board agrees that the numbers are lower than we'd like them to be. Each Board Member is aware that there is a large need for this type of relief and so the issue seems to be raising awareness about the Program and enhancing access to the application.

Council Question:

In reference to the Blanchard Community Law Clinic mentioned on p. 17 of the packet, is it known how many Wake County residents that the clinic assists and the amount of debt it has helped residents pay in a given year?

Staff Response:

We do not know the number of Raleigh residents assisted by the fund but we do know that the Blanchard Clinic began distributing money to applicants in January 2020 with an initial grant of \$10,000 from the City of Raleigh. This full grant had been allocated by the end of November 2020. The Blanchard Clinic now has a new, privately-funded grant of \$25,000 to distribute to Raleigh residents. Our Chair, Emma Ferriola-Bruckenstein, reached out to the Clinic on January 4 to see if they are able to share their numbers.

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Council Question:

Does the committee feel like it has an appropriately sized group with appropriate representation to make determinations on applications?

Staff Response:

Yes, there is strong representation on the Board and all have worked together well. The Board has discussed the need for ensuring that a victim-oriented organization is represented in its membership and have agreed that a victim's liaison either from the Orange County Sherriff's Department or District Attorney's Office would serve this need well.

Council Question:

Does the committee feel it has been adequately supported in its work? If not, how else might it need support?

Staff Response:

The committee has not raised any issues of support and has seemed able to perform its duties effectively. The biggest barrier at this point has been the impact that COVID has had on the ability to reach potential applicants.

Council Question:

Can you please have presenters address the impact of COVID on the program uptake. For example, do they think it has impacted their ability to inform potential applicants of this new program? Has the lack of trials being held impacted the number of likely applicants?

Staff Response:

*The committee has discussed this at length, and consensus is that the pandemic has likely played a significant role in the lower applicant numbers. District Court was closed from Mid-March to June 1st, resulting in a significant decrease in the number of people coming into contact with information through the court/clerk's office, as well as through Restoration Legal Counsel. Additionally, many local organizations had reduced operations or in-office resources, resulting in less dissemination of new information. Even since court reopened on June 1st, the District Attorney's office has done several mass dismissals of lower level cases due to COVID-19, resulting in fewer people coming through the courts. The additional fact that the fund did not begin to operate until **after** COVID-19 began impacting the county further added to this difficulty.*

Council Question:

The description of actions and time commitment does not include efforts to publicize the

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program. Can you ask the presenters to share what has been done to date and if there are other ways to increase publicity of the program, especially given the current limitations due to COVID?

Staff Response:

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