

Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria
Mental Health / Substance Abuse Work Group
Meeting Minutes
September 13, 2006

Work Group Members Present:

- Mary Riley, Community Services Board; Public Health Advisory Commission
- William Chesley, Alexandria Parks and Recreation Department
- Cathy Thompson, ALIVE!
- Claire Eberwein, Alexandria School Board
- Asta Lynch, Alexandria Community Services Board
- Nora Partlow, St. Elmo's Coffee Pub (Business Representative)
- John Porter, Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS)
- Carol Freeman, Northern VA Family Services – Healthy Families
- Patricia Matthews, Northern Virginia Health Foundation
- Charles Konigsberg, Alexandria Health Department
- JoAnn Pearson Knox, Campbell Hoffman Foundation
- Veronica Aberle, Nurse Manager, Alexandria Health Department
- Nelson Smith, DHS, Office of Community Services
- Christina Theokas, ACPS
- Mike Mackey, Coordinator, Alexandria Gang Prevention & Intervention, Court Services
- Bill Cleveland, Private Citizen
- Mary Flynt, ACPS
- Robin Wallin, ACPS
- Rose Berler, Chair, ACPS Health Advisory Board
- Deborah Warren, Alexandria Community Services Board
- Cara Pennel, Health Planner, Alexandria Health Department

I. Introductions

II. Overview of Current Programs

School, City and non-profit representatives provided an overview of their programs and services and some of the MH/SA issues they see in the populations they serve.

John Porter, ACPS – ACPS administration and staff are seeing an increase in mental health issues in youth (seeing more kids with more issues). Has the “pay me now or pay me later” philosophy – we need to be doing more up front to eliminate or reduce the issues for both youth and families. It is better to reach these kids at a younger age to better deal with these issues in the long-and short-term.

William Chesley, Parks and Recreation – Alexandria has seven full-time rec centers, an arts focused center, and a center (Chinquapin) that serves city employees. The rec centers serve youth out of school through after-school and summer programs. Focus on education enhancement, sports/fitness, and arts. Collaborate with other city agencies such as Mental Health, Mental Retardation, & Substance Abuse and Health Department on many programs, utilize and count on

their expertise for substance abuse prevention, ACAP (adolescent pregnancy prevention), gang initiative, and others. Provide opportunities for youth to practice and participate in sports, particularly trying to get girls more involved (e.g., provide opportunity for cheerleading). Partner with 4H at Cooperative Extension for nutritional programs and youth leadership. Have had more success in engaging middle school students than high school students. Have expanded hours on Friday evenings and Saturdays to reach more kids at the times they are available (have 30-40 kids now and expect more in the winter months). Working on a violence prevention program, SORE (Set Objectives and Achieve Results). When disciplinary problems occur, they try to work with families because they want kids to stay in their programs and keep coming to the rec centers. Try to get problems corrected. Parents are working to keep kids engaged because they don't want them to get in trouble. Parks and Rec is also trying to obtain funds to get youth involved in the design and implementation of projects and activities – to get youth on staff in paid positions to take ownership of programs and spur other kids to get involved.

Deborah Warren, CSB, also mentioned that multiple city agencies are collaborating to promote parent involvement through National Family Day on September 25 and a Family Fun Night (Alcohol & Drug Addiction Recovery Month cookout) taking place at Charles Houston Rec Center. It's an opportunity to engage families, provide an opportunity for families to spend quality time together, and educate parents about the importance of spending time with kids, importance of supervision, etc. Deborah provided a handout for this event but indicated information is on the city website for Family Day at http://www.alexandriava.gov/mhmrsa/family_day.pdf and for Family Fun Night at http://www.alexandriava.gov/mhmrsa/recovery_month_06.pdf.

Mike Mackey spoke for Ron Lemley, Court Services Unit – Alexandria Court Services Unit has 30 staff with different departments. Intake is available 24/7 and is connected with the police; act as magistrate to determine whether to hold youth offenders or release to parents. Have programs for anger management, community service, shoplifting, wilderness program, alternative program (give another chance to stay out of trouble). Probation Services is involved once youth are found guilty, provide case management to youth offenders. Probation Services has 9 staff with 30-35 youth cases per staff member. Have a mentorship program for girls called “Space of Her Own” to improve bedroom, work on art projects and opportunity to learn life skills. The Day Reporting Program is a proactive, after-school program that provides life skills training. There is a community-based probation officer. Have 2 family therapists in-house; other times refer out to Family Assessment and Planning Team (FAPT). City-wide Gang Initiative – using Public Service Announcements to get people involved, gang prevention curriculum, street outreach workers, which are similar to the Roving Leaders Program.

A question was asked whether family therapists speak other languages. Three probation officers speak Spanish but family therapists do not. They use the language line, which is coordinated with JoAnn Maldonado with Multicultural Services. JoAnn has agreed to provide an overview of the City's language assistance program at the next meeting.

Mary Flynt, Prevention Education, ACPS – (Provided handouts: “Overview of Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention Education Programs in the Alexandria City Public Schools, 2006-2007” and “A Parent’s Guide For the Prevention of Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Use).” ACPS’s Prevention Education Programs include the following:

- Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies Curriculum (PATHS) is provided to teach children in grades K-5 about expressing emotions in positive ways, self-control and self-monitoring, and how feelings affect behavior. Classroom teachers are trained to provide this curriculum in the classroom.
- Peer Mediation and Conflict Resolution programs are peer-led and provided for grades K-12 through guidance and counseling departments.
- Life Skills Training is provided to middle school students (grades 6-8) by Health and Physical Education teachers. This curriculum (with 15 lessons in 6th grade, 10 lessons in 7th grade and 5 lessons in 8th grade) is designed to address a wide range of risk and protective factors by teaching general personal and social skills in combination with drug resistance skills.
- *Get Real About Violence* is taught to 9th graders about controlling anger to reduce violence and addresses issues like bullying and Internet harassment.
- *Peer Mediation and Conflict Resolution* program is continued in grades 10-12 both in classroom and in after-school program.
- The *Strengthening Families Program* is a parent education program for elementary and middle school students and their families. Two teams of School Guidance Counselors co-teach, meeting with parents and students separately and then together to improve family relationships, improve parenting skills and increase youth’s social and life skills.

Nelson Smith, DHS Office of Community Services – Office of Community Services (OCS) works with the low-income population in Alexandria, which includes such populations as homeless and ex-offenders. Alexandria has a high poverty rate at approximately 8-8½%. The child poverty rate is probably two times the adult rate. OCS provides a wide range of programs and services. OCS has an Emergency Service Unit that works with low-income residents (only adult population) and serves approximately 5,000 per year. They provide assistance for food, rent, utility bills, health insurance (children tend to have better health coverage than adults). Short-term financial rental assistance keeps people out of shelters and off the streets (average cost of apartment housing in Alexandria is \$1100 per month for a one-bedroom unit). For those who are going through a tough time temporarily, OCS is able to provide mortgage/rental assistance for 6 months, so residents don’t lose their housing. OCS provides heating and cooling programs in the winter and summer months. There is a multi-agency Alexandria Homeless Services Coordinating Committee that shares best practices and has recently focused on issues with chronic homelessness. They are concerned with the continuum of care, emergency services, case management, discharge, etc. They have been working closely with the CSB, which is developing a Safe Haven on Patrick Street to provide permanent supportive housing for homeless men and women. A multi-agency point-in-time survey conducted in January indicated that there are approximately 390-400 homeless in Alexandria, with 95-100 fitting the profile of chronic homelessness. (HUD defines chronic homelessness as “an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been homeless for a year or more or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.”). This group is very difficult to serve. Special services are provided for children in shelters to help identify the needs. Nelson distributed a handout, the Executive Summary to the City’s “Ten Year Plan to End Chronic

Homelessness.” Mary noted that the full plan can be found on the CSB’s website at: http://www.alexandriava.gov/mhmrsa/safe_haven.html

According to **Robin Wallin, ACPS**, a new lead psychologist has been hired with ACPS and is housed in Student Services. She would like to attend future meetings, but was not able to attend today.

Carol Freeman, Northern Virginia Family Service-Healthy Families Alexandria Program, indicated that their program serves approximately 250 families annually and that 70% of the mothers score with depressive symptoms. They are able to provide 6 counseling sessions to a select number of the highest-risk families, but there are many families they are not able to serve.

III. Possible Areas of Focus for the MH/SA Work Group

Comments about the direction of the work group and possible areas of focus:

- It will be important to look at evidence-based programs and resources and select and implement strategies that have demonstrated effectiveness in other communities.
- The purpose of this work group is to identify and implement prevention strategies rather than to provide staffing for direct mental health and substance abuse services. However, if certain strategies are selected, it would be imperative to ensure treatment resources are available (e.g., individual screening strategies such as TeenScreen).
- The work group might consider targeting children ages ~0-5 (from birth until they enter school). By the time they enter school, it’s difficult to get a handle on their problems. The earlier you can get to families/kids, the less likely that they will become involved in risky behaviors.
- There is concern that existing programs and services are missing young children who are not at greatest risk.
- The group needs to look at where services are being duplicated. Several other groups have developed or might develop resource documents (DHS has already compiled a resource directory for children and families; Human Services Council wants to pull together city and non-profits to develop a human services resource directory; HCAP Service Integration Team is pulling together a directory for health care resources, to include mental health services)
- Need to focus on intervention as well as prevention, because there are existing needs in the community that need to be addressed.

The work group discussed the handout: *Possible Action Steps and Strategies: Short, Medium and Long-Range*, criteria for selecting strategies, and potential strategies. Comments about the strategies include:

- Need to ensure substance abuse strategies are broad-based than just alcohol.
- Strategy #12 – Need to *expand* mentoring programs as well as strengthen them. Mike Mackey provided a brief overview of efforts to expand the number of volunteer mentors in the City, mentioning a Fairfax County mentoring website that could be used as a model. (This website provides a resource for potential volunteers, with web links to all of the mentoring programs in Fairfax. See: www.mentorfairfax.org.) Some members expressed

concern that parents are not going to use a web-based program to find mentoring resources for their children and the need to have a strong presence at schools and rec centers.

- It was suggested, as a possibility, that the work group focus on mental health issues for now and wait until after YRBSS has been administered to address youth substance abuse issues.

Mary invited the members to provide comments on the potential strategies, action steps, and criteria via e-mail to Cara. Before the next meeting, an attempt will be made to fill in some of the blanks in the far right-hand “Criteria” column, as well as to possibly consolidate some of the action steps.

VII. Date for Next Meeting

Cara will e-mail possible dates and times for the next work group meeting. The meeting date will be determined by the date/time that works for the majority of the work group.