



CITY OF NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS

**MEETING: SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AFFORDABLE
HOUSING & HOMELESS AFFAIRS**

DATE: MAY 31, 2023

TIME: 7:03 P.M.

PLACE: CITY COUNCIL CHAMBER, ROOM 214

**PRESENT: COUNCILLORS SHANE BURGO, CHAIRPERSON;
DEREK BAPTISTE; NAOMI CARNEY; MARIA GIESTA;
SCOTT LIMA; WILLIAM BRAD MARKEY; SHAWN
OLIVER; RYAN PEREIRA**

**ABSENT: COUNCILLORS IAN ABREU; BRIAN GOMES; LINDA
MORAD**

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Councillor Burgo called the Affordable Housing & Homeless Affairs Committee meeting to order and took attendance. The Clerk read a Communication from Councillor Morad into the record explaining her absence. The Communication was received and placed on file by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Oliver. This motion passed on a voice vote.

The Clerk also informed the Committee that he received a text Communication from Councillor Abreu stating that he would not be attending the meeting.

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Notice, City Clerk of Reference of a WRITTEN MOTION, Councillor Burgo, requesting that Dr. Erica Barratt and her team from SSTAR come before the Special Committee on Affordable Housing and Homeless Affairs to discuss health-related issues with the City's homeless population (Ref'd 08/18/2022) (12/12/2022 – tabled) was removed from the table by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Baptiste. This motion passed on a voice vote.

The Chair recognized Dr. Erica Barratt of SSTAR. SSTAR is an outreach program located in Fall River and New Bedford that deals with addiction and homelessness. Dr. Barratt gave a PowerPoint presentation of the SSTAR program and what they face on a day-to-day basis.

On motion by Councillor Pereira and seconded by Councilor Giesta, the Committee VOTED: To Receive and Place on File a hard-copy of the PowerPoint presentation submitted by from STARR. This motion passed by voice vote.

Dr. Barratt explained that SSTAR has been based in Fall River since 1977. They offer treatment for substance abuse, both inpatient and outpatient services. They have administrative offices and health care centers and they also provide psychiatric care and medication for opioid use disorder. She provided the Committee with a chart comparing the HIV population between Fall River and New Bedford as well as the figures at which they relate to overdose deaths in both communities.

Dr. Barratt further explained the benefits of a syringe service program (SSP), which Fall River currently has in place but New Bedford does not. She stated that such a program would decrease the transmission of infection, decrease crime, increase engagement and care, prevent overdoses, would result in less needles in the community and decrease Emergency Room visits.

Currently SSTAR is focused on Fall River but has been expanding into New Bedford. They deal primarily with impoverished populations. She stated that there is a direct correlation between addiction, mental health issues and homelessness in both communities.

Councillor Pereira asked why New Bedford does not have an SSP in place. Dr. Barratt answered that she believed it was not allowed by Ordinance, and added that the City is more politically-driven than medically-driven. Councillor Pereira stated that at face value, this was to him a head-scratcher, and that the outreach program appears to be beneficial.

Councillor Lima asked why SSP users appear to use needles three times less than others. Dr. Barratt responded that one of the biggest problems with substance abuse is that people are hard on themselves, suffer from a lack of self-esteem and poor self-image. Organizations such as SSTAR provide an outreach that breaks the barrier with a “you do count” and “someone cares about you” philosophy which in turn, can increase a person’s feelings of self-worth.

Councillor Baptiste opined that this program echoes back to the days of the “Treatment On Demand” program. He asked how many people come from other communities seeking services and if they do visit that community, if they stay. Dr. Barratt replied that most of the people they work with stay within their respective communities. She was asked to explain the program outreach in New Bedford. Dr. Barratt stated that it is currently easier to do outreach in Fall River as opposed to New Bedford. She added that they work with the Sister Rose Shelter on Wednesdays, they do street outreach on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and they regroup on Fridays to discuss what happened during the week.

Dr. Barratt stated that although Sgt. Ortega of the New Bedford Police Department is a great help to their program, they still do not have a lot of interaction with the City. She added that there is also some stigma associated with the police department.

Councillor Oliver asked Dr. Barratt to elaborate on how a needle exchange program contributes to a decrease in needles. He was told that by engaging with people and getting them into treatment, it is an effective way of improving a community while also reducing incidents of crime.

Dr. Barratt went on to say that the City gives the impression that it hates unhoused people. Encampments are approached and torn down and it appears that the City does not want to provide services for its less fortunate individuals. She further stated that the City does not engage people and added that as a medical provider, she is not comfortable with providing outreach in the City.

Dr. Barratt went on to explain that the lack of housing is also a factor because if you don’t have a place to live and you’re trying to recover, you’re faced with many obstacles. More and more people are losing their homes, not just addicts, and that the rail coming has increased the rents in the area dramatically. She added that economics play an important role in their outreach.

Councillor Markey asked if they see the issues leveling off. He was told that this is a tough question to answer because their team is expanding, which indicates there is a real need for such services in both communities.

Councillor Pereira was recognized and was upset to hear that New Bedford does not want services here. He stated that he does not feel this is the opinion of the Council, but more the Administration. Councillor Giesta echoed the same comments as Councillor Pereira and stated that she is disappointed to hear that New Bedford is going backward and not forward.

The Chair recognized Stephanie Sloan, Acting Director of the Health Department. Ms. Sloan stated that she was speaking on behalf of the Health Department and not necessarily the City. Her department has not yet completed its review of the needle exchange program. She said that her predecessor was lead on the task force, but no definitive action had been implemented. She did state that the Health Department offers free sharps disposal containers to those who would like them. It is her goal to move the Health Department forward in working with outreach programs.

Councillor Baptiste stated that sharps boxes are not as effective as a clean needle exchange. Ms. Sloan understood and stated that her department, post-Covid, is looking to expand its ranks. During Covid there was a major staff reduction.

Councillor Oliver asked if there were facilities in the City that accepted dirty needles/sharps. He was told the City did not have drop-offs but that many private organizations and businesses do, similar to a bank deposit drawer. Councillor Carney stated that discarded needles are very much an issue in the City. She explained how she would frequently find needles during events like Operation Clean Sweep.

Councillor Giesta asked if the Health Department does outreach with programs such as SSTAR, PACCA or HighPoint. Ms. Sloan answered that they currently do not, but that it is her long-term plan to expand their relationship with these organizations.

The Chair recognized Cynthia Wallquist, Director of Community Services. Councillor Markey asked if the City saw a lot of repeat people. Ms. Wallquist replied that her department is seeing a lot of the same people as PACCA and SSTAR, and added that they all have the same issues. She stated that mental health issues have grown in the City and that it is a real concern. The level of care that is necessary to address these issues is simply not available, and New Bedford does not have a lot of resources to offer those that require services.

Councillor Carney asked how many calls per week her department gets seeking services and direction. Ms. Wallquist answered at the very least, twelve calls per week. She asked if there were any other buildings like the old Regal House Furniture that could be utilized by the City to offer services. Ms. Wallquist stated that the old nursing home that abuts Common Park would be a perfect place to provide additional services.

On motion by Councillor Giesta and seconded by Councillor Baptiste, the Committee VOTED: To table the matter at this time. This motion passed on a voice vote.

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Councillor Giesta made a motion to adjourn, which was seconded by Councillor Baptiste. This motion passed on a voice vote.

The meeting adjourned @ 8:18 p.m.

ATTEST:

Denis Lawrence Jr.
Clerk of Committees