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HIV Community Holds Rally at City Hall City Council General Welfare Committee Holds Budget Hearing Concerns over Cuts to HIV services



On the steps of City Hall, the HIV advocacy community held a rally in coordination with City Council General Welfare Chair Annabel Palma opposing the Mayor's plans to cut funding for many HIV services. Speakers especially expressed concern over proposed cuts to HIV/AIDS Services Administration (HASA) case worker staff and to the only NYC-funded HIV nutrition program.

The Mayor's January Financial Plan calls for elimination of 248 HASA case workers, saving the City nearly \$4.2 million. This represents a 29 percent case worker staff reduction. HIV advocates contend this move would be in violation of Local Law 49 and a federal court order in *Henrietta D. vs. Giuliani.*, claiming it would seriously restrict the ability of HASA to function and provide the basic services that persons living with HIV/AIDS rely on. HASA serves more than 45,000 individuals.

Beyond the substantial cut to HASA staff, the Mayor's January Financial Plan also fails to include funding for two important areas where City Council made restorations a year ago to preserve functions and services the Mayor had sought to cut. These are:

- HASA-contracted supportive housing programs (\$1.876 million reduction)
- The Human Resources Administration (HRA) HIV food and nutrition program (\$491,000 reduction), which helps support The Momentum Project, the only NYC-financed food and nutrition program specifically for poor and homeless persons living with HIV/AIDS.

The Mayor's January Financial Plan seemingly chooses to ignore the fact that City Council restored identical cuts to those programs in 2009. This means that once again legislative action would be required to forestall these cuts.

Matthew Lesieur, director of public policy at VillageCare, spoke at the rally about how important it is that City Council continue to provide the \$491,000 in nutrition funding in order to sustain food and nutrition services at The Momentum Project.

The Momentum Project serves about 1,000 individuals with congregate hot meals six days a week, and pantry bags that provide an additional 24 meals. Momentum also provides crisis counseling, social services, advocacy, nutrition counseling and coordination, and to a community health clinic for those who are in failing health. Without City Council restoration of the \$491,000 cut by the Mayor, Momentum will most likely be forced to layoff as many as six staff members, and close at least one, and more likely two, of its nine sites. Momentum, alternatively, could significantly curtail or eliminate its pantry bag program, which would leave vulnerable individuals without food during the week between Momentum meals in their community.

Without the funds, whatever course of action that Momentum chooses, the result would be a loss of vital food and nutrition services for needy persons living with HIV/AIDS.

City Council's General Welfare Committee also held a hearing on the Mayor's January Financial Plan. At this hearing, HRA Commissioner Doar highlighted the City's plan to eliminate the 248 HASA case workers. Many City Council members pushed back strongly against this proposal. Committee Chair Palma questioned the legality of this action. Many other Council members raised objections to cutting HASA staff so significantly.

Newly elected City Council Member James Van Bramer challenged the Administration's plan to cut the HIV nutrition program by 50 percent, reminding HRA Commissioner Robert Doar that the Council chose to restore funding last year. In response, Commissioner Doar recycled the same argument for cutting this program from a year ago - that there are other funding sources available in the community, that Momentum has other funding it can rely on, and that this money is for "administration" and not food.

The Council did not accept this dubious explanation last year.

Despite the Administration's claim that there are other funding sources available, Momentum actually saw the loss of \$480,000 in funding over the past year. This forced the organization to lay off staff and reduce the number of pantry bags it could distribute. The claim that the HRA grant is only for "administrative" activities fails to recognize what is needed to run a congregate meal program, including staff to prepare the meals, to distribute the meals and to clean up the facility at the end of the day. Also, pantry bags must be filled, facilities where the food is distributed must be rented and a nutritionist familiar with the unique needs persons living with HIV/AIDS must be available. Matthew Lesieur also testified at this budget hearing to refute the rationale HRA gave for cutting this program.

This budget hearing is only the first step in a multi-month process. Between now and June 30, the Council and the Mayor must negotiate a budget before the beginning of the next fiscal year. There are many more steps to go

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