March 11, 2021 Continuum of Care meeting minutes

The March 2021 meeting, which took place virtually (due to the ongoing pandemic), via a Zoom conference call, was called to order and began at 11:03 am. The minutes from the January meeting were reviewed and unanimously approved.

The guest speaker was Rebecca Rhodes from the NJ Office of Homeless Prevention (OHP). Rebecca has spent over 20 years working in the field, including as Director of Housing for Catholic Charities in Metuchen. The Office of Homeless Prevention will coordinate a statewide strategy for homeless prevention measures, and was allocated $3 million for this work. The Office plans to stay connected with what is going on locally and recognizes that Continuum of Care Committee members are the “eyes and ears” of what is going on in a community. The Office also plans to bring State departments together to provide services to vulnerable populations. Unfortunately, there is often not a housing component to go along with the services.

The OHP is expanding their Housing First initiative, which gives people the resources to do planning in communities. This was prompted by an increase in unsheltered homeless in NJ, including those with disabilities and the chronically homeless. One of the key components of this is “diversion” – keeping people from becoming homeless in the first place. Approximately $1.25 million has been allocated to communities to address the needs of people who are requesting shelter.

Michelle Blanchfield from Zufall Health provided an update on their COVID vaccine supply and distribution plan. They have (and will have) an unknown number of vaccines. Their plan is to distribute them to those who are homeless, but would prefer to have a stationary location rather than go from one place to another. They are hoping to vaccinate residents at Agape House as soon as possible and are looking at possible locations for the future.

Reflections on Racism: The Racial Diversity Subcommittee screened the documentary “13th” again in January and held a Circles Workshop on February 25th, both of which were well-attended. They are looking for other documentaries to screen, as well as planning another Circles Workshop, which will likely take place in April.

Announcements:

* Legal Services of Northwest Jersey (LSNJ) has expanded its eligibility standards to make their services available to more residents of the State of NJ. Note that there are no income restrictions for people over the age of 60 and that Legal Services does not provide assistance for matters usually dominated by private counsel, like estate planning for a large estate. If you are not sure of someone’s eligibility, please direct them to call 908-231-0840 or to email lsnwj-somerset@lsnj.org so they can be screened.
* The Central Jersey Housing Resource Center will offer a two-session virtual Homebuyer Webinar on April 5 and 7 from 5:30-8:00 pm and a Post Purchase webinar on May 11 from 6-8 pm. Both of these are free. Details and registration info are available on their website (www.cjhrc.org).
* United Way of Northern New Jersey continues to offer free tax preparation services. Bilingual services are available.
* NJ Transit has launched a mobile app for AccessLink. There is a webinar – “Ask the Bicycle Expert” – scheduled for March 16th. It will be geared toward families and children.
* Alternatives has a vacancy at one of its permanent supportive housing locations. If you have contact with a single adult in emergency shelter, a single adult that is living in a hotel that is being paid for by a social service agency or an unsheltered homeless single adult that has a mental health diagnosis and is chronically homeless, please contact Kim Cowart via email at cowart@co.somerset.nj.us so that you can submit them for consideration before the Monday, March 22 deadline.
* Somerset County continues to offer rental assistance through the CDBG –CV ERR Program. Information and application materials are available on the website.

The meeting adjourned at 12:11pm.