

Mayor's Commission on Reentry Minutes
November 15, 2021 at 1:00pm

In attendance: Kristin Barker, Pat Frey, Stacy Rivera, Monica Spencer, John House, John Wade, Sabrina Leonard, Waleisah Wilson, Carla Godwin, Davida Hatton, and Bridget Downs

The minutes from the October Commission meeting were reviewed and approved.

Pat Frey updated the group on housing progress. Home for Good is establishing new with Goodwill, BETTER WORK Columbus, and Ashley Becker to help clients find employment. The goal is to address the issues that cause homelessness and create sustainability. Data tracking will be critical to allow these connections to be made prior to release from incarceration. John Wade is playing an integral role by working to make this happen from our local jail. The Columbus Housing Authority continues to work toward providing housing vouchers for returning citizens.

It was also noted that the Sheriff's Department is very supportive of resource organizations in Columbus. Thanks was given to John Wade for this support and a quick response to the needs that present themselves. It is this support and connection in our community that will allow us all to move toward stated goals.

Officer Baker with DCS is working with Home for Good to alleviate parking issues at the homeless encampment. Residents were asked by The Bridge church not to park in the abandoned lot that backs up to their parking lot. Now cars are being parked in an area where they are being ticketed which could lead to a probation violation for some. Pat is working to find out who owns the abandoned lot and to education the church on this issue. Davida expressed that DCS will not revoke for a parking ticket.

Monica Spencer has now been hired by VoteRiders to work in Columbus. This nonpartisan, national organization works to help people get IDs needed for voting. They can also help with transportation to the DDS for a license as well as help obtaining other needed documentation like getting birth certificates and social security cards. This is huge for the homeless and for returning citizens. A voter ID clinic can be held onsite when needed. Contact Monica about this opportunity.

Carla Godwin shared additional information about the proposed voucher program mentioned above. The Housing Authority has received board support and will submit in this year's 2023 annual plan to HUD. If approved through HUD, 10 vouchers would have a flat rate of up to \$724 per month for a one bedroom. Any limits are based on the income. This program would go into effect July 1 and can be resubmitted annually.

These are vouchers designated for individuals returning from incarceration. There are proximity restrictions that are the same as the Moving to Work program. Registered sex offenders will not qualify for these vouchers but would qualify for rapid rehousing and other projects that Home for Good is working on. Manufacturers of meth will also not qualify. It would be helpful to target this voucher program or give preference to those who designate Muscogee as their county of residence. Home for Good can take this into consideration as well.

The employment subcommittee has been unable to make movement on our ban the box initiative due to delays in receipt of the funding to the Urban League. As a reminder, the Urban League is partnering with the Commission and will take the lead on this effort. Tracey Mosely has also been receiving some push back because we received Crime Prevention Grant funding to support this effort. We want to use these funds to find out about objections employers have to hiring those who are justice involved, craft a plan for addressing these objections, and deliver this to employers in a way they can relate and respond.

Our goal is to get private employers to change their perspective on hiring and recognize the value that can come from hiring returning citizens. Commission members can help by explaining this to anyone in the community who does not understand the purpose for this funding and how important this is.

Waleisah expressed concerns that there are people who do not have a personal agenda and want to provide housing for individuals who have been incarcerated. These people are unable to get the funding and are facing new local regulations that prohibit them from using properties for the purpose of opening group homes for the people who need them.

John House explained that the City Council recently updated our local ordinances to align with the way that state codes define a transitional home and a personal care home. This was not done to keep people out of Columbus. It was done to follow the state code. The bigger issue is that it is difficult to find a parcel of land in the city that meets all of the regulations for sex offenders. Constructive recommendations on how to fix the problem should be shared with Will Johnson. Will handles zoning and this is typically where the problem starts. Kristin asked Commission members to think about solutions and bring them up for discussion.

Kristin met with Jennifer Dunlap and was informed that errors on background reports in Muscogee are extremely high. She recommended that educating employers and arming them with information will help. If we can influence employers to refer candidates to her non-profit when a background does not meet the company's qualifications with the specific reason, she may be able to quickly get the errors corrected and they will be able to hire.

Michael Forte has communicated that he must take a step back from the Commission because of his duties with the school system. This means we need someone to take a leadership role in the Faith Based Subcommittee. Monica Spencer volunteered to take on this lead role.

Commission progress was shared for the City Manager's annual report. Kristin asked if we can share that update on the Commission page on the Mayor's website. John will check to see how we can share that information with the community. Two members of the Commission have stepped up to manage our communication and make sure that we are communicating regularly and effectively maintain an online presence and in other formats as needed. Under this new structure, student interns will report to Gamaliel Torres who will focus on online communication. Baki Muhammad will help with needed reports to the city and managing other activities that require convening partner organizations.

John also shared that anything we need to sign should be reviewed by the city attorney's office. We should not need to ask about sharing anything that shows up in the website or in our minutes. If we

are talking about ordinances or take a position on an issue, we should ask for permission. Otherwise, we should be ok.

Bridget shared the job description for student interns. There is one student from the Communication Department who is interested. Kristin and Gamaliel will be interviewing a student who has already applied on the Thursday following this meeting.

We need someone to take the lead on coordinating with 211 to make sure the Commission is referring individuals with needs to 211 and making those connections as seamlessly as possible. Pat will speak with Cathy at Home for Good who is already handling this housing.

Keith Mitchell has officially stepped down as chair but will continue to serve as a member of the Commission in 2022. Kristin volunteered to serve as Chair for 2022-23. Pat motioned to approve the nomination. Stacy seconded and the motion was approved.

The following new members of the Commission were also voted in: John Wade, Davida Hatton, Stacy Rivera, and Sabrina Leonard. Existing members include: Kristin Barker, Pat Frey, Rev. Monica Spencer, Keith W. Mitchell, Baki Muhammad, Cathy Robinson, Waleisah Wilson, and Gamaliel Torres.

John Wade will serve as an advisor to the communications team.

We need someone to step up and serve as the Vice Chair and Secretary for the Commission. Rebecca Covington was nominated to serve as Secretary. She was not present to accept that nomination. Kristin asked each member of the group to consider serving in the Vice Chair role and expect to discuss this at the next meeting.

The meeting was dismissed at 1:58pm.

Our next meeting will be on January 24, 2021. We will meet virtually on zoom.