



BUSINESS OF THE CITY COUNCIL CITY OF MERCER ISLAND

AB 5957
October 19, 2021
Study Session

AGENDA BILL INFORMATION

TITLE:	AB 5957: Youth & Family Services Emergency Assistance Update	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion Only <input type="checkbox"/> Action Needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Motion <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinance <input type="checkbox"/> Resolution
RECOMMENDED ACTION:	Receive report. No action necessary.	

DEPARTMENT:	Youth and Family Services
STAFF:	Tambi Cork, YFS Administrator
COUNCIL LIAISON:	n/a
EXHIBITS:	1. Emergency Assistance Slides
CITY COUNCIL PRIORITY:	n/a

SUMMARY

The purpose of this agenda bill is to update the City Council on the Youth and Family Services Emergency Assistance Program.

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM HISTORY, FUNDING & OPERATIONS

Employment development (JobLine) was one of the first programs created by Youth and Family Services (YFS) in 1974 and YFS employment and emergency assistance program services were stabilized in 1992 when the Emergency Assistance fund was created to support residents experiencing financial challenges meeting basic household needs – housing, utilities, and food.

The funding for direct support assistance (rent, utilities and food) has historically been sourced entirely from individual donations, local business donations, and grants from local organizations and family foundations (including Rotary, Lions, Mercer Island Community Fund, Mercer Island Preschool Association, VWF, Masons and the Auerbach Foundation).

In 2020, the City Council allocated HB 1406 funds to the rental assistance program, providing approximately \$35,000 annually in funds. In July 2021, the MIYFS Foundation donated \$80,000 to fully fund the 2021 Back-to-School Program and fill a gap in the 2021 Food Pantry funding. Staff time for these programs is funded from the YFS fund. A grant from the Washington Department of Commerce Coronavirus Emergency Supplemental Fund allowed for Emergency Assistance staff to be un-furloughed in January 2021 for the 2021-2022 biennium.

Financial assistance from the Emergency Assistance funds is determined through an eligibility process and households must fall below 70% Area Medium Income (AMI). For YFS eligibility purposes, staff utilize the King County HUD Median Income and require financial documentation and proof of Mercer Island residency to be eligible for Emergency Assistance programs.

Current Emergency Assistance programming includes:

- Case management to support long-term plans for financial stability
- Referral to local, regional and national resources
- Application assistance for benefits such as Social Security, Medicaid and Unemployment
- Limited rent and utility assistance
- Low-cost health insurance and medical care referrals
- Holiday Program (for children under 18)
- Back to School Program (assistance for school supplies, backpacks, and shoes)
- Preschool Scholarship Program (funded by Mercer Island Preschool Association)
- Food Pantry, including Holiday Meal Program
- Referrals to other MIYFS services

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM OPERATIONS DURING COVID-19

Similar to all YFS operations, the Emergency Assistance program has adapted to the COVID-19 Pandemic (Pandemic) by pivoting operations to account for a remote workforce and need to prioritize the safety of clients, volunteers, and staff. Emergency Assistance staff have been tracking local, state, and federal executive orders, restrictions and funding that are applicable to Mercer Island residents experiencing financial insecurity related to housing, utilities, and food.

In 2020, 224 unduplicated households were served by Emergency Assistance programs. This does not represent an increase in overall households served from previous years, but instead Emergency Assistance staff have observed an increase in the intensity of financial stress for households that are eligible and in need of case management and other assistance.

In response to this impact unique to Mercer Island, YFS increased the total assistance available to each household to from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per 12 month period for 2020, 2021, and 2022. All Emergency Assistance direct assistance expenditures are reliant on sufficient funds within the restricted Emergency Assistance fund. The generous support of Island residents, businesses, organizations, the MIYFS Foundation, and City Council's allocation of HB 1406 funds to these programs have ensured sufficient funding for this increase through 2022 if the continuation of the increase is indicated by need in the community.

In addition to the increase in assistance available, Emergency Assistance programs including the Food Pantry have pivoted from providing tangible goods to program participants in the Holiday, Back-to-School, and Food Pantry programs, and instead now provides grocery and store gift cards to those program participants. This transition has been beneficial in three key ways: 1) provided additional Pandemic safety for staff, clients and volunteers; 2) increased flexibility in assistance to allow clients to most effectively meet their own needs; and 3) improved staffing efficiency due to reduced people-power needed to run operations.

YFS staff continue to proactively plan for program adaptations to meet the emerging and changing needs in the community during the Pandemic and recovery, including potential responses to households facing eviction when the Washington State moratorium bridge protections end 10/31/2021.

RECOMMENDATION

Receive report. No action necessary.