



**BUSINESS OF THE CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF MERCER ISLAND**

**AB 6509
July 2, 2024
Regular Business**

AGENDA BILL INFORMATION

TITLE:	AB 6509: Emergency Assistance Program 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:	Ali Spietz, Chief of Administration Derek Franklin, YFS Administrator
COUNCIL LIAISON:	n/a
EXHIBITS:	1. Emergency Assistance Program Update Presentation
CITY COUNCIL PRIORITY:	4. Focus efforts and actions to be an environmentally and fiscally sustainable, connected, and diverse community.

AMOUNT OF EXPENDITURE	\$ n/a
AMOUNT BUDGETED	\$ n/a
APPROPRIATION REQUIRED	\$ n/a

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this agenda bill is to inform the City Council of the modifications to the Department of Youth and Family Services’ (YFS) Emergency Assistance (EA) Program in the first of 2024.

- The YFS EA Program is staffed by a 1.0 FTE Emergency Assistance Coordinator and supports stable housing, food security, and basic needs for income-qualified Mercer Island residents.
- The unprecedented demands of the COVID-19 pandemic required YFS to make rapid adjustments to EA service delivery protocols in 2020 including the closing of the (in person) YFS Food Pantry, implementation of a food card program, and adjusting program eligibility and support options to align with need.
- Expanded pandemic EA program expenditures were largely supported by additional contributions from the MIYFS Foundation as well as ARPA and pandemic-related short term funding options that are no longer available or sustainable.
- YFS retooled and scaled back components of EA programming and expenditures in the first 6 months of 2024 to align with demand in the current recovery phase of the pandemic by ending the food card program and returning to supplying real and shelf stable food items for food insecure residents while maintaining a lowered bar for eligibility and enhancing rent and other assistance options to adapt to the housing/rental market and inflation.

BACKGROUND

Established in 1973, YFS is a comprehensive support services organization and department of the City of Mercer Island providing behavioral health and human services assistance to the Mercer Island community. It is uniquely funded through public and private sources: City of Mercer Island, Mercer Island Thrift Shop, MIYFS Foundation, a contribution from MISD for school counselors, direct community donations, grants, and fees from select outpatient mental health services. The MIYFS service portfolio spans the continuum of care from health promotion, to risk prevention, and to intervention programs and services, including:

- Mental Health Counselors in each of the six Mercer Island public schools
- Mental Health Outpatient Counseling Services
- Emergency Assistance, including Food and Housing Security
- Senior Services, including case management and supports
- Substance Abuse Prevention and Mental Health Promotion (Healthy Youth Initiative)

Emergency Assistance Program

Staffed by one full-time Emergency Assistance Coordinator, the Emergency Assistance (EA) Program exists to reduce the risk factors, and enhance the protective factors, related to meeting basic needs of Mercer Island residents, including shelter (housing), nutrition (food), and employment. EA services were uniquely stressed during the pandemic and YFS has been assessing post pandemic needs and adapting.

The key function of the EA program, meeting the most basic needs, is instrumental to individual and family well-being and supports a level of baseline, functional stability that allows residents to avoid catastrophic financial or health crises while leveraging other YFS programs, including mental health and case management services to achieve self-sufficiency. The EA Family Assistance Coordinator, a professional social worker, works closely with other YFS programs and community organizations to coordinate a collaborative service model towards achieving individualized goals: residential/food security, financial autonomy, and linkages to formal services such as for aging, disability, or legal supports.

Community Need

The COVID-19 pandemic created a dramatic and sudden challenge to maintaining basic needs, especially for residents experiencing low income, disability, immigration challenge, unexpected medical crises, and employment insecurity. Local and federal pandemic support programs were leveraged when possible, to help individuals and families avert crisis and stabilize. Regional financial support and targeted government relief funds were coordinated to bolster EA financial support capacity. Many of those programs are ending at the same time rents are increasing and inflation is disproportionately impacting the community's most vulnerable members.

During the pandemic, the MIYFS Foundation, the non-profit fundraising (non-governance) board which exclusively raises funds to support YFS, significantly increased its financial support to meet pandemic-related need, particularly around food security. In 2024, as the community continues into the recovery phase of the pandemic, programs like YFS' EA that served a crisis response function are now re-aligning budgets and service portfolios to align with current demand. Currently, YFS staff finds basic need stressors for vulnerable Island families are not as extreme as during the pandemic, but greater than the period prior. These pressures are influenced by inflation, increased rental costs, continued (but decreased) demand for food supports, and additional financial uncertainty as government pandemic supports sunset.

YFS has adjusted EA services to account for these changes in the first half of 2024 and are before council to explain the changes and proposed program adjustments.

EA Program Overview (prior to 2024)

Main components of the EA Program:

- Financial security assistance (including rent, utility, and emergency financial support)
- Food security assistance (MIYFS Food Pantry; cash cards since 2020)
- Employment assistance
- Referral and linkage to local and regional resources
- Eviction prevention and linking the unhoused to short- and long-term shelter options
- Case management, resource coordination, and systems navigation
- Targeted support programs including back-to-school supplies, holiday gifts/food, childcare, “camperships,” and pre-school scholarships

EA eligibility requirements:

1. Proof of current or temporary Mercer Island residency (residency requirements for individuals and families experiencing homelessness are determined by the EA Coordinator’s ability to establish residential equivalency).
2. Income below 70% King County area median income (AMI) established via review of the past 6 months of financial statements.

Qualified EA clients receive a maximum of \$2,000 in financial support annually for rent, utility payments, or enhanced food support. There was no limit to the number of food cards clients could receive ongoing and typical weekly food card distributions went to approximately 100 households (\$25 for single households; \$50 for two or more).

Before the COVID pandemic, Food Pantry eligibility was determined by residency and expressed food insecurity only. The Food Pantry collected and distributed food items out of MIYFS administrative offices with significant volunteer support from the community. Because most food was donated, the cost of the program (\$40,000 annually) was largely for enhancing supplies with items to meet unique dietary and cultural needs and augmenting stock over the summer months when donations slowed.

During the pandemic, there was no change to eligibility, but there was a shift to providing food cards instead of food items. In 2022, the annual cost of the Food Pantry was \$200,000. By 2023, the approximate cost of the food card program had increased to \$250,000 annually with 125 households receiving food cards weekly.

The **key outputs** for the EA Program in 2023 are as follows:

1. 235 unduplicated households served by some aspect of EA Program
2. 6% decrease in rent assistance requests from 2022; 48% of all requests are new clients
3. Seniors represent 18% of rent assistance and 25% of utility assistance
4. 173 households accessed the Food Pantry: 40% increase from 2022
5. Cost: Shifted from food items to food cards in 2020; cost was approximately \$200,000 in 2022 and \$250,000 in 2023

EA Program Updates and Modifications (January 2024)

In response to changes in environmental and financial factors during and after the pandemic, YFS administration enacted temporary adjustments to EA Program operations to align with changing demand.

These changes recognize that the additional resources expended during the pandemic were no longer fully necessary or financially sustainable. While less than during the pandemic, the demand for EA services post-pandemic is above pre-pandemic levels. Compared to 2019, 2023 typical rent prices on Mercer Island have increased by 25% to \$2,521 (Zillow Observed Rent Index) and are higher than typical comparison Cities except for Sammamish. The overall cost of living continues to outpace salaries, especially for the underemployed and working-class residents.

The following modifications were made to EA programming in January 2024:

1. **Program Eligibility:** Maintained the small pandemic-era decrease in eligibility requirements for EA services by keeping income eligibility threshold at 80% of King County AMI (previously 70%). The current increased cost of housing, food, and other basic needs continues to add risk to the community’s most vulnerable. As of June 20, 2024, two EA clients are within the 70%-80% threshold and both had received EA services in years past.

Benefit	Cost
<i>Aligns eligibility with post-pandemic needs; additional families between 70-80% of KCAMI eligible for support services.</i>	<i>Additional cost of 4-5 new families eligible per year (~\$10,000).</i>

2. **Food Security:**

- a. Diversified food security sources to re-establish distribution of fresh and shelf-stable food items while limiting food card distribution only to those enrolled in, or during transition into, formal EA Program services (requiring income verification).
- b. Contracted with HopeLink Mobile Market to bring their mobile feeding program to Mercer Island twice per month, providing approximately 75% of the food needs of participants for a two-week period. Hopelink contract ensures adequate food supplies on hand to meet local demand—up to 120 visits. The Hopelink food bank in Bellevue can be accessed by Mercer Island residents in need of additional food between Mobile Market visits and home deliveries can be arranged for those with mobility impairments.
- c. Included exceptions to approve food card access for those experiencing a qualifying emergent event (EA Coordinator to determine impairment in function or risk to basic needs attainment/ short term only) or having an established cultural or dietary need which is not able to be met by the mobile market. Food cards availability in this category is for one time or infrequent/crisis use only. Food cards can be distributed by YFS case managers in emergencies upon their determination of a qualifying event (up to \$100 in cards per event).
- d. Collaborated with the Mercer Island Farmers Market (MIFM) to purchase “Market Bucks” to distribute to food insecure clients to enhance options for obtaining additional fresh foods during weeks of market operations. Market Bucks qualify for SNAP eligible purchases only per MIFM policy.

Benefit	Cost
<i>The Mobile Market increases availability of whole food, no limit on number amount food items per visit, decrease cost of food card service to better align with available resources, leverage regional food security support to</i>	<i>Decreased frequency of food support (from twice per week food card distribution to twice per month mobile food delivery), modest decreased flexibility of food specific support (food items vs. food cards however retention of</i>

<p><i>enhance overall service. Decrease pandemic level spending on food security by \$175K to better align with current demand (other EA Program efforts simultaneously enhanced to allow greater flexibility in use of support dollars to backstop against post-pandemic resource uncertainty). Maximize expenditures otherwise lost via un-used or partially used food cards (approx. 9% at mid-point in 2023). Enhance healthy food options with MIFM “bucks” when available.</i></p>	<p><i>ability to use food cards for specific needs remains), expense to supplement Hopelink mobile market to meet local need (~\$45K/year). \$1,000 to \$3,000 in market bucks purchases per season.</i></p>
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3. Financial Stability:

- a. Increased EA annual financial stability maximum from \$2,000 to \$3,000 per year per eligible household. Approved utilization of EA funds typically for rent, utilities, unexpected expenses, and food security enhancement (not ongoing food security funding as other options are available in the community and regionally).
- b. Added eligibility criteria requiring any verifiable notice relating to rent or lease being past due for rent assistance and any verifiable notice of utility bill being past due for utility support. Allowed eligibility in this domain for verified financial insecurity directly threatening ability to pay housing or utility bills.
- c. Created a new category for low barrier financial assistance (Flexible Crisis Funding) to allow for the provision of financial support to residents presenting with qualifying crisis events (ex: medical emergency, eviction, utility shut off, domestic violence/safety). The EA Coordinator, under consultation with their supervisor and/or the YFS Administrator, can authorize this support based on specific individual need (transportation, specific resources, medical costs, etc.) The goal is for financial support to be more responsive to the diverse needs of residents experiencing crises by leveraging the relationship established between professional MIYFS case managers and clients. Verification of eligibility will be documented by EA staff in the case file.

Benefit	Cost
<p><i>Increase financial assistance to meet post pandemic need and prevent increased risk of eviction as pandemic safeguards are removed, lower barrier to residents presenting with qualified emergent situations, increase ability to individualize supports, and stabilize financial crises. Focus eligibility criteria for rent and utility financial support on those facing most imminent need.</i></p>	<p><i>Added eligibility criteria for rent and utility support will decrease ongoing support to residents facing chronic need and shift a larger percentage of EA efforts for these clients towards regional support programs. Increase EA budget by \$40K above pre-pandemic levels; create Flexible Crisis Fund of \$20K.</i></p>

- 4. Transportation Support:** To enhance support for mobility impaired EA clients, including seniors, offered “Courtesy Rides” transportation support via the Lyft Concierge program. Transportation support will leverage EA case management services designed to link clients to existing community programs and support stabilization efforts by lowering barriers to accessing medical, dental, and support programs only available via in-person visits (ex: DSHS, social security, etc.)

Benefit	Cost
<i>Increase access to services for EA clients working toward crisis stabilization</i>	<i>\$5,000/year in EA budget to provide targeted transportation for clients in support of EA/Senior Services support objectives</i>

EA Program Cost Projections for January-June 2024

EA Support Category	2019 (pre-pandemic)	2023 (pandemic response)	2024 (1 st Half) (trial re-allocation)
Financial Stability	\$80K	\$120K	\$120K
Holiday/School Programs	\$35K	\$35K	\$35K
Food Security	\$40K (plus food donations)	\$250K (food cards only)	\$45K (Hopelink mobile market)
Farmers Market “bucks”	--	--	\$3K
Flexible Crisis Funding	--	--	\$20K
Courtesy Rides	--	--	\$5K
TOTAL:	\$155K	\$405K	\$228K

ISSUE/DISCUSSION

The YFS EA program modifications for the first half of 2024 have largely aligned with projected demand. Sunsetting of the YFS food card program and transition back to real food support has maintained adequate support for demand and ended possible waste from unused or lost food cards.

Maintaining lower EA eligibility criteria (80% KC AMI) and increasing total annual EA funding support by \$1,000 annually has allowed staff to cover one month’s rent in the current market and not resulted in an influx of newly eligible clients (two to date). Increased eligibility requirements have not restricted staff’s ability to provide support and may be contributing to efficiency in staff time due to a streamlining of the eligibility process.

Two new program elements, Flexible Crisis Funding and Courtesy Rides, have not been utilized to the level predicted. Staff are reviewing needs for these services as pandemic-era federal support programs sunset. Staff are also in discussion with DSHS for a mobile support vehicle to come to the Island resulting in partial reduction of need for ride services.

Staff will continue to monitor and modify EA programming and service delivery models as necessary to meet the demands of the community.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Receive report. No action necessary.