

Barrier Busters Network Action Group

April 23, 2008, LLRC

1:30pm—3:00pm

BBN Attendees: Mary Beth Lampe, CSTS; Co-Chair (recorder)
Andrea Plevak, MSU Extension; Co-Chair
Alex Bailey, Michigan Ability Partners- MAP
Harriet Bakalar & Amanda Chingman, Housing Bureau for Seniors
Karyn Boyce, Ozone House
Jennifer Brown, Salvation Army
Vicki Frederick-Toure, SafeHouse Center
Bonnie Guest, ETCS
Anne Harrell, ACCESS/WCHO
Measie James, Washtenaw Health Plan
Edwina Jarrett, WCC
Marcie Kerr – Child Care Network
Patrice LaGrand, Neighborhood Senior Services
Heather Mooney, Washtenaw County Treasurer's Office
Angela Moore, Women's Center
Helena Prince, Friends in Deed
George Ridenour, Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living
Katie Seidl and youth action representatives, Red Cross
Mira Sussman, Jewish Family Services
Shirley Tarvis, CSTS
Therese Taylor, MI Works!
Naomi Williams, Hope Clinic

Staff Present: Candace Cadena, Office of Community Development

I. Welcome/Introductions

Meeting began at 1:35. Members and guests introduced themselves.

II. Announcements and Public Comment

Angela Moore from The Women's Center announced that they will be moving about a ½ block across the street (on Stadium in Ann Arbor) effective mid-August into a new building. There is a realtor sign at current building but the Center is still open as usual.

Karyn Boyce announced that there is a new housing subsidy program targeted for 5 youth households, age 18-24, (single or with dependents). Assistance for up to 2 years. Goal of program is engagement in education and job training. Note: Households with disabilities are not prioritized.

Housing Awareness Week: May 9th thru 18th with a fair on the 9th with 75 vendors. All events free. Registration is encouraged but not required. See H. Bakalar or call or see HBS website for schedule. Also a good opportunity to visit/tour/ask questions of local assisted living, subsidized housing sites.

Heather Mooney distributed flyers for Money Smart events and Area Revival, which focuses on foreclosure prevention. Info also available at <http://www.ewashtenaw.org/government/treasurer/>.

Mira of Jewish Family Services reported youth and family events, including 6/8/08 ages and stages of adoption session.

Youth Community Action Team of Red Cross presented about Bike Restoration Project. Restoration/repair of donated bikes, then bikes are donated to children or adults who have needs

Barrier Busters Network Action Group

(preference given to children since this is a youth led effort) A referral form was passed out. Additional copies can be obtained from jared.meldrum@wc-redcross.org 971-5300. Bikes available!

Alex Bailey- MAP- is asking for referral for housing in MAP's transitional housing with supports, for up to 2 years. 975-6880 (or see your Barrier Buster list!) 4 duplexes, 3 bedrooms in each. Veterans with history of homelessness, history of incarceration, disability (does include substance abuse or mental health). Contacts are trying to be made with VA Outreach Joe DuVoe (sp?) about this too.

Center for Independent Living (CIL) reports they also complete assessments for veterans.

Salvation Army, Jennifer Brown, reports summer day camp for ages 6-12. \$20/week or reduced rates especially if more than one eligible child in program. Covers most of summer. Parents likely have to provide own transportation. Program uses a van for field trips.

Andrea Plevak noted that Emily Arents assistance as intern has ended as Emily will not be able to continue thru the summer as previously hoped. The group expressed appreciation for Emily's dedication, particularly with the recent request reviews.

III. Approval of Agenda and Minutes

Agenda was approved by consent. Minutes from the March meeting were approved as motioned by A. Moore and seconded by H. Bakalar.

IV. New Business

- a. Ann Arbor Water Utilities: Candace Cadena reported and lead discussion about information received from Ann Arbor Water Utility department. She distributed a chart showing the typical timeline for bills. If clients call customer service any time before their property gets "tagged" they can get an extension up to 10 days before the next bill is issued. This can be as much as 3 months. Will work if clients if clients contact before tagged, if only behind on one bill, if client is in compliance with a payment plan already set up.

Clients are sent bill, 2 reminders, then are tagged. Please encourage clients to call earlier than the "tagging" point. Tags happen on Thursdays for shutoffs occurring on Tuesdays. Workers doing shutoffs would like to avoid confrontations. Those workers can't collect payments. Some water meters are inside the house, some are outside.

Discussion of whether Barrier Busters has a policy of when to request water utility funds. It was noted that documentation of amount owed, sustainability, and how the arrearage occurred is more important than whether the person has been tagged already (since starting an intervention at the tagging point reduces the chances that a shut-off can be averted, and then increased cost occurs for "reconnect" fees)

YCUA- Ypsilanti Area Utilities has a \$75 reconnect fee. It is not known exactly what YCUA's timeline for water shut-off is but their billing is every other month thru our experience — we have invited a YCUA representative to present at future meeting in 2008.

- b. ETCS (Employment, Training and Community Services- Community Action Agency) and other utility resources: Bonnie Guest shared postcards indicating new location at 336 Harriet Street, Ypsilanti (MI Works building) and services generally provided. Emergency Services (such as utility shutoffs) require an appointment between 8:30 – 4 PM. 200 % of Poverty Level is upper maximum income. Postcard distributed of required documents applicants must bring. Must be in shut-off or already shut-off. Includes request for propane or natural gas. Clients must contact DHS first if they need more than \$600 of assistance. ETCS also asit in linking people to Home Heating Credit (this is the time to apply – the September cut-off will come quickly!)

Barrier Busters Network Action Group

Bonnie also distributed a flyer about employment for those who have been incarcerated or have other criminal histories. Concern was expressed by multiple agencies about difficulty of individuals obtaining employment who are in this situation. It was suggested that Clay Bell @ MI WORKS 481-2517 (who is possibly replacing Ruby Smith) may have offer specific assistance. Jewish Family Services also has a small program. Further capacity needed.

Discussion occurred about how to review utility requests per two case examples Mary Beth Lampe presented. The group reviewed the sample bills and discussed. It was determined that in this situation the consumer was on an unaffordable payment plan of \$350 a month. However, she had not been making any payments at all during several months so this compounded the problem to a balance of \$1900. The client did have a recent medical problem but the arrearage and the need for the payment plan had occurred due to low-income (below poverty level) over many years. Also, the payment plan of \$350 was actually less than the most recent month's usage of \$460.

It was recommended to remember in our interventions that larger bills indicate a problem of managing finances (and/or lack of income) over time, and often ways to increase income and decrease expenses need to be resolved before assistance can be determined. Also, this consumer had Universal as energy supplier, which appeared to be charging higher prices than typically seen, over \$300 a month plus Michcon Delivery & Electric charges.

The group requested more information about legality and consumer rights in "other energy supplier" situations. Some workers reported that until the balance is paid of a person can't switch providers but to get caught up is impossible since the cost is higher than what DTE or MichCon (regulated services) would charge. It was also stated that some energy suppliers go door to door to try to sign people up for these contracts. We will ask Paul Sher/Legal Services if any additional info is available. Also noted that Michigan Public Service Commission can assist, but we are unsure if that is only when DTE is the supplier.

The second sample bill indicated the client had a usage spike (compared to last time this year -- an increase of 600%) Mary Beth determined that this individual had been heating unit with stove due to landlord not providing enough heat which actually was the landlord's responsibility per the lease. The client will be able to afford bill again, and thus this person would be eligible for Barrier Buster assistance.

DTE Case Management **1-800-545-8046** can be helpful in reviewing utility usage and past payment history, but agencies are encouraged to sign up for DTE Online Resources for Agencies (ORA) as soon as possible since this has been helpful to many case workers processing current requests. Also a good communication tool since DHS enters their commitments on it too. Mary Beth Lampe will invite DTE to a future meeting, and also attempt to schedule a computer training with the goal of multiple agencies obtaining access at once.

V. Old Business

[Agency agreements are due – please submit if yours are outstanding.]

VI. Case Consultation

Suggestions were requested on behalf of a working mother. H Price, FID, and J Brown, Salvation Army will partner on this situation.

VII. BB Emergency Unmet Needs Fund Update

Implementation of audit and evaluation suggestions are ongoing. Research is also occurring regarding a timeline for changes to Encompas, for the request form we use.

Barrier Busters Network Action Group

Per Candace, please continue to submit appropriate requests for funding. Funds are currently low for general use but funds are sufficient for seniors 60+ and City of Ann Arbor utilities. Candace will continue to approve requests which are absolute emergencies but asks the group to remember to use the "Network" of Barrier Buster contacts to access resources (and services) from other agencies whenever possible so that the general funds are available for those who don't meet other agency requirements. Please make sure to note which other sources were tried (or why not) in request submitted.

Also, Candace announced that the Land Lakes Homeowner's Association has made a contribution to the Barrier Buster Fund.

Some discussion ensued about "when" to make a financial request from the fund (or from other agencies) on behalf of an individual. Helena Price remarked that as a small funder, FID can usually only cover the last part of a bill due to lack of funding, and that many other agencies are in the same situation. Salvation Army reported they do not always require a shut-off notice, for utilities. Heather Mooney explained that in cases of foreclosure there is a huge benefit to preventing foreclosure early, due to late fees and interest compounding. Some counties have worked with DHS specifically to have DHS consider an SER at an earlier point. Interest was expressed to consider this strategy in eviction prevention efforts as a community – if the eviction can be prevented then it does not make sense for court fees to be paid and the amount needed increases. Andrea Plevak noted the more funds we release now, the less we will have to help other people down the road... so it is important to be mindful of when we can prevent unnecessary fee increases by providing a prompt intervention (which may or may not result in requesting funds from the community). Harriet Bakalar noted that if we believe (as she does) that public funds should be spent first, then we should consider that we have a responsibility to bring public fund standards in line with private fund standards.

Participant asked about a fund thru 211 or South Eastern Michigan that might be able to offer up to \$500 for non Washtenaw County residents. We will ask 211 representatives at a future meeting to see whether such a fund exists.

A participant asked about car gas resources. Salvation Army reported that they can sometimes help, assuming person has valid driver's license, verified work or ongoing medical appointments (usually more than once a week). Only given out via vouchers, not cash.

VIII. Adjournment: The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:00 pm.

***The Next Meeting is scheduled for
May 28, 2008 –
1:30 pm – 3:00 pm***