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Asking for more gets less

Homeless programs lose federal funding after request for new program denied

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When the Columbus-Russell County network supporting homeless programs asked the federal government for almost half a million dollars for a new program, the program was rejected.

But the local Continuum of Care network not only lost the \$456,262 that program would have cost, the federal agency's rules also required its funding level to be slashed by that amount.

The result: Because the continuum sought to launch a new program, it faces a net loss of \$353,840 for existing programs.

It's all due to a rule within U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development regulations which local network directors did not understand would require rejected new programs to count against existing homeless services' funding.

In addition to the money needed to run existing programs in Columbus, the local network asked HUD for money to kick-start the House of Restoration, a program in Phenix City to provide semi-permanenthousing to homeless people with disabilities.

But HUD rules dictate a ceiling for these types of programs -- in Muscogee and Russell Counties it's slightly more than \$1 million -- based on a community's population, poverty data, housing overcrowding and other considerations. Continuums submit comprehensive requests to officials in Washington, who assign each a grade.

A HUD spokesman in Atlanta said an applicant's request must surpass a certain score to be eligible for new projects. If its score comes up short, the extra money it requested is deducted from what it would have otherwise received.

How it happened

The spokesman, who said rules in Washington would not allow his name to be used, said the Columbus continuum didn't score high enough. Although the House of Restoration project was not funded, HUD rules required the \$456,262 for that rejected project be counted among the funds that were approved.

The impact: The continuum funding was actually reduced by the \$456,262 it sought for the Phenix City project.

Elizabeth Dillard Alcantara, director of the Homeless Resource Network, which organizes and submits the continuum's grants to HUD officials in Washington, didn't know why the cuts were made until contacted by the Ledger-Enquirer on Friday afternoon. "Wow, my mouth is hanging open with that," Alcantara said.

The HUD spokesman said the directors of programs in Georgia convened at the Westin Hotel in Atlanta last year, where they were allowed to ask questions about HUD funding, and that this issue was covered in the presentation.

Alcantara said she attended, but she didn't understand the process would be applied that way.

"That doesn't make any sense. It prevents you from adding anything new," she said.

A different HUD spokesman in Washington, Brian Sullivan, said a technical debriefing can be arranged to explain to the Columbus group exactly what has happened.

"To the extent that we are able, we will correct this," Sullivan said. He said he didn't know how often this misunderstanding happens.

Cuts hit home

Hit the hardest by the cuts was the Stewart Community Home on 15th Street in Columbus, which houses 55-60 people with mental and physical disabilities who otherwise wouldn't have a place to live. Executive Director Jeff Koehler requested \$285,620. On Monday, he got a phone call telling him he got \$66,123.

"You're kind of flabbergasted," Koehler said in an interview in his office Thursday.

At the Stewart Home, residents live two to three in a room, and have at their disposal staff who make sure they get medication and make physician's appointments. Many also get free training in life skills, such as how to prepare for an interview and how to fill out an application, to help them regain their independence.

Koehler isn't talking about shutting doors yet, but unless he's able to make up for the shortfall in the next few months through United Way or private donations, he may reduce or cut these types of social services.

"We're going to have to completely rethink what we do and how we fund it," Koehler said.

House of T.I.M.E., another program in the continuum, offers homeless women who abuse drugs and alcohol a temporary home and treatment for their addictions.

Executive Director Sandy Watson said her organization lost the entire \$134,343 grant used to pay the lease of the six houses where the women live. She said she spent this week writing letters asking for private donations to help make up that money. If she can't, she said, she'll have to choose between reducing the services in the homes or the number of women who enter the program.

"There's going to be more homeless people on the streets, that's the bottom line," Watson said of cuts with which House of T.I.M.E. and the Stewart Home must cope.

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