



Legislation Details (With Text)

File #: 24-1711 **Name:**
Type: Other **Status:** Agenda Ready
File created: 12/18/2023 **In control:** City Council Legislative Meeting
On agenda: 1/23/2024 **Final action:**
Title: Consideration of Youth Safety and Resilience Recommendations.
Sponsors:
Indexes:
Code sections:
Attachments: 1. 24-1711_Presentation_Youth Safety and Resilience Recommendation

Date	Ver.	Action By	Action	Result
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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JANUARY 16, 2024

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

THROUGH: JAMES F. PARAJON, CITY MANAGER /s/

FROM: KATE GARVEY, DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY AND HUMAN SERVICES

DOCKET TITLE:

Consideration of Youth Safety and Resilience Recommendations.

ISSUE: Provide City Council with the Youth Safety and Resilience recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS: That City Council accept the Youth Safety and Resilience recommendations.

BACKGROUND: In response to an increase in youth violence that included the loss of a youth in May of 2022, Council drafted a memorandum on June 14, 2022, known as the Youth Safety and Resilience Concept, directing City staff to coordinate across sectors to promote youth safety and resilience. The memo directs staff to engage stakeholders to:

- 1) Listen to the experiences of young people;
- 2) Seek to learn the root-cause of youth trauma and violence and act on recommendations as a result of this engagement with the aim to ultimately develop and improve on the system of care that serves to address youth trauma and mental health;
- 3) Coordinate across sectors to identify challenges, needs, and opportunities;

- 4) Develop sustainable strategies to align services and existing initiatives;
- 5) Identify metrics and transparent processes to hold ourselves accountable;
- 6) Target investments at identified gaps; and
- 7) Prioritize equity and take a whole of community approach to engage the public and private sector's partnership and participation in supporting our city's youth.

In response to the Youth Safety and Resilience Concept memo, City staff took steps to operationalize the directives outlined in the document. To this end, staff worked with internal and external stakeholder organizations to conduct a total of seven focus groups, engaged 125 youth in the process representing racial/ethnic diversity across age and gender. The focus groups contained 19 questions across four domains:

- 1) Knowledge and participation in youth programs;
- 2) Places and elements that make them feel safe or unsafe;
- 3) Youth outreach, engagement, and working with adults; and
- 4) Interest in participating in future youth engagement initiatives.

Based on the feedback collected, the City released the Youth Safety a Resilience Initiative report <https://www.alexandriava.gov/sites/default/files/2023-08/YSRFocusGroupReport.pdf> in October 2023 with recommendations.

In addition to the report, DCHS created an Alexandria Youth Ambassadors Program in an effort to engage youth more fully in the design and implementation of the recommendations. The program is an initiative that aims to empower and engage high school youth in promoting youth safety, resiliency, and mental health. This program brings together a group of passionate and motivated high school students to serve as ambassadors for these critical issues in their schools and communities. The Ambassadors meet 6 to 8 hours a week after school. Through a series of training sessions, workshops and community outreach activities, the program hopes to equip these young leaders with the necessary skills and knowledge to make a positive impact on the lives of their peers. Their first initiative was the Youth and Caring Adult Summit.

The Alexandria Youth Ambassadors hosted the Youth and Caring Adult Summit on November 9, 2023, at First Baptist Church. More than 60 youth and adults attended this inaugural convening, which was planned and facilitated by the Alexandria Youth Ambassadors. During the Youth and Caring Adult Summit, the Ambassadors facilitated interactive break-out sessions focused on youth safety, mental health, and resilience. Each break-out session was thoughtfully designed to encourage open dialogue and creative exploration through intergenerational conversations. In addition to these sessions, the event featured two high school students sharing their own experiences with mental health and school safety to provide participants with authentic and impactful perspectives on some of the challenges that youth face. All attendees completed evaluation forms at the culmination of the event.

Following the summit, the Ambassadors began reviewing youth and adult attendee evaluations and the feedback shared during the breakout sessions. From there, the Ambassadors worked together to summarize a list of key recommendations for addressing youth safety and resiliency.

DISCUSSION: From the feedback provided, the Youth Ambassadors recommended improvements in four main areas:

1. **Communication** - It appears that many youth are unaware of many existing programs available in the community. Youth recommend using a variety of communication methods as a means of reaching fellow peers. These include, but not limited to, communication through school and school-based programs, electronically via text messages or word of mouth.
2. **Space** - Youth shared a desire for dedicated space for high school aged students for year-round programming. They want access to these programs right after school, on evenings and weekends.
3. **Transportation** - Youth expressed a need for access to reliable transportation to reach programming. Youth share that they feel that sometimes the free DASH bus is not a viable option if programs end late.
4. **Variety of Programs** - Youth want programming that is not overly focused on academics. This would include approaches that have real-world applications, fun, hands on activities, and a place where they can safely hang out with their peers.
Examples include:
 - Digital Awareness Campaigns: Create engaging social media content or blog posts focused on promoting youth safety, violence prevention, resilience, or mental health. Share resources, tips, and inspirational stories

to raise awareness.

- **Peer-to-Peer Webinars:** Organize virtual webinars led by high school teens to discuss topics related to mental health, resilience, or violence prevention. Invite guest speakers or professionals for added insights.
- **Artistic Expression Workshops:** Host online or in-person art workshops where participants can express themselves through various artistic mediums. Use art as a tool for healing and self-expression while addressing mental health themes.
- **Storytelling Podcasts:** Develop a podcast series featuring personal stories, interviews, and discussions related to overcoming challenges, building resilience, and promoting mental health awareness among peers.
- **Interactive Workshops for Schools:** Prepare and conduct virtual workshops for local schools on topics such as conflict resolution, stress management, or building a positive school culture to contribute to violence prevention.
- **Digital Mentorship Program:** Establish a digital mentorship initiative where older teens can offer support and guidance to younger students facing challenges related to mental health, resilience, or safety.
- **Community Garden Project:** Create a community garden as a symbol of growth and resilience. Teens can work on planning, planting, and maintaining the garden, fostering a sense of connection and well-being.
- **Fitness Challenges:** Organize online or in-person fitness challenges that promote physical activity as a means of improving mental health. Encourage participants to share their progress and experiences.
- **Positive Affirmation Campaign:** Launch a campaign to spread positivity and encouragement. Design and share digital cards with uplifting messages, promoting mental well-being and resilience.
- **Digital Publication:** Collaborate on a digital magazine that addresses issues related to youth safety, violence prevention, resilience, and mental health. Include articles, artwork, and creative content from program participants.

After sharing these recommendations with the City Council, the Youth Ambassadors will work to develop an action plan to implement strategies to address youth concerns and promote safety and resiliency among Alexandria youth.

FISCAL IMPACT: The fiscal impact is dependent on which recommendations are accepted and how they are implemented. Many of the program and communication recommendations could be implemented at low or no cost.

ATTACHMENT: Presentation

STAFF:

Kendel Taylor, Interim Deputy City Manager
Federico Gutierrez, Assistant Director, DCHS
Barbara Paulson, Director, Center for Children and Families, DCHS
Noraine Buttar, Chief of Youth Development, DCHS
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