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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: JANUARY 2, 2024

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

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

FROM: JAMES SPENGLER, DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION,
PARKS & CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

DOCKET TITLE:
Consideration of the Release of \$75,000 from FY 2024 Contingent Reserves to Pilot Mental Health Services at Recreation Centers.

ISSUE: Consideration of the release of \$75,000 from FY 2024 Contingent Reserves to provide mental health resources at recreation centers through the Department of Recreation, Parks, & Cultural Activities.

RECOMMENDATION: That City Council allocate \$75,000 held in FY 2024 General Fund contingent reserves to enable the distribution of funding to the Department of Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities (RPCA) budget to pilot varied mental health supports for youth and their families at City recreation centers.

BACKGROUND: During the FY 2024 Budget Development Q&A, City Council requested information regarding the necessary resources to provide mental health services at City recreation facilities. Specifically, the request stated, “In an effort to respond to young people’s requests in recent focus groups to “meet them where they are” and “create more safe spaces,” what would it look like and cost to pilot an approach and/or position at City park and recreation facilities that is designed to better connect residents to mental health services and if needed provide onsite mental health services? What level of qualifications would be needed for this type of position?” Budget memorandum #012 responded to this question with a budget estimate for a part time Senior Therapist, additional Community Outreach support, and improvements to physical space.

During the FY 2024 Budget’s final Add/Delete session, City Council included \$75,000 in the non-departmental contingency budget to be used to develop a pilot program at two RPCA facilities to provide mental health services at community spaces. Council agreed to allow staff flexibility in determining the type of position most appropriate for this program.

DISCUSSION: RPCA staff worked with the Department of Community & Human Services (DCHS) Center for Children and Families to develop a proposed pilot program. Based on the guidance provided by City Council, an important criterion during this process was to ensure that youth voice informed the proposed pilot. Staff sought feedback directly from community youth through various interactions, including from focus groups and from the Youth and Caring Adult Forum. The forum was developed and conducted by DCHS Youth Ambassadors with a focus on teen mental health and scheduled for October. The forum was rescheduled and held on November 9.

Staff also sought coordination with the Alexandria City Public Schools’ (ACPS) Student Support Services team. Early in the school year, ACPS announced expanded mental health services for all students through virtually accessed therapy through a partnership with Hazel Health. This service provides scheduled therapy appointments for students with licensed therapists who are bilingual, diverse, and experts in the needs of children and teens. With this new program in place, the ACPS Executive Director of Student Support Teams provided feedback from his team based on where they identified unmet needs for youth mental health. ACPS suggested that RPCA conduct focus groups with students and use the pilot to tie in supports to substance use education, suicide prevention, and community building activities at City recreation centers.

Based on the information above, staff met with four groups of teens including the Spanish-speaking class from Liberty’s Promise, the English-speaking class from Liberty’s Promise (primarily comprised of high school students from Afghanistan), teens at the Charles Houston Recreation Center, and teens at the Patrick Henry Recreation Center (50 youth total). Youth provided very helpful feedback regarding stressors and anxiety that they are experiencing, mental health concerns, and what helps them most to feel better. Each group was unique and shared different needs and interests that helped to inform the proposed pilot. After these preliminary discussions, and at the conclusion of the Youth & Caring Adult Forum, RPCA and DCHS agreed that a focus on prevention and developmental assets support for youth would likely have a greater impact than focusing on hiring a therapist to host “office hours” at our centers.

Below are the essential components of the proposed, evidence-based pilot starting initially at Charles Houston, William Ramsay, and Patrick Henry Recreation Centers:

1. Utilize contractor-based mental wellness programming: RPCA identified a contractor, that provides a variety of programs for youth that incorporate several activities that youth spoke about in our focus groups while establishing a platform to discuss challenging issues. All the instructors for the programs are licensed therapists, social workers, and/or counselors. In conjunction with the programs, they will follow up one-on-one with youth as needed and can help identify additional needs to provide specific referrals. RPCA used this contractor this fall to provide a mental health-based art program at Charles Houston and the teens consistently participated and looked forward to the program (and the class instructors) every week. The three contracted programs proposed are:
 - Art Program: The Arts offer an opportunity for teenagers to develop a positive sense of self-esteem and formulate healthy coping skills. Staff has taken note of the powerful impact the Arts can have on the overall well-being of teenagers. The Arts program consists of weekly lesson plans, workshops, and collaborative projects that focus on building self-esteem, coping skills, and goal setting.
 - Wellness Club: The club is dedicated to promoting mental wellness, decompression, and self-care through a variety of activities such as art, music, and wellness practices. The main goal of the club is to support students in developing positive coping mechanisms to reduce stress, while also teaching relaxation techniques through leisure activities and mindfulness. These activities may include arts and crafts, puzzles, music, yoga, breathing techniques, and guest speakers such as therapists, life coaches, and yoga instructors.
 - Scholars Program: The program applies mental health strategies to academics in the classroom. This program aims to teach

students how to develop coping skills to manage anxiety and focus on successfully completing their assignments and exams. Mental health professionals will guide students through an overview of mental health awareness, mindfulness techniques, and provide guidance on when and how to apply coping strategies.

2. Provide Youth Mental Health First Aid and Question Persuade Refer (QPR) suicide prevention training to RPCA recreation center staff working with youth. Youth Mental Health First Aid is designed to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens how to help an adolescent (age 11-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis. Youth mental Health First Aid is primarily designed for adults who regularly interact with young people. The course introduces common mental health challenges for youth, reviews typical adolescent development, and teaches a -step action plan for how to help young people both in crisis and non-crisis situations. Topics covered include anxiety, depression, substance use, disorders in which psychosis may occur, disruptive behavior disorders (including AD/HD), and eating disorders. Like CPR, QPR is an emergency mental health intervention for suicidal persons created in 1995 by Paul Quinnett. An abbreviation for Question, Persuade and Refer, the intent is also to identify and interrupt the crisis and direct that person to the proper care. QPR is a gatekeeper training for anyone who interacts with youth, including recreation staff, coaches, etc.
3. Provide Teen Mental Health First Aid training for teens participating in center activities. The program teaches teens in grades 10-12, or ages 15-18, how to identify, understand and respond to signs of a mental health or substance use challenge in their friends and peers. The training gives teens the skills to have supportive conversations with their friends and teaches them how to get help from a responsible and trusted adult.
4. Identify and utilize contracted therapists for speaking engagements with parents with a goal of reducing the stigma of seeking help for mental health challenges. Based on direct concerns or feedback from parents, contract therapists, CSB referrals and DCHS staff can provide additional resources.
5. Configure existing center spaces to support trauma-informed practices including, privacy, comfort, decompression, and one-on-one discussions with trusted adults, including licensed providers.

RPCA will also continue to connect with and utilize existing DCHS resources, including CSB referrals, Mental Health First Aid, and is considering incorporating parent educational sessions like Parent Cafes in multiple centers. The café offers a parent support circle for parents to learn from each other as they grow in their parenting skills. Parents build their own sense of competence and power by building relationships and connecting with other parents who share common experiences, successes, and challenges. Finally, staff are developing an evaluation tool that is compatible with similar programs to determine the impact of the piloted program on the well-being of participating youth.

FISCAL IMPACT: The \$75,000 is currently held in FY 2024 general fund contingent reserves for this pilot; there is no additional impact to the City's FY 2024 operating budget. Approximately \$65,000 will be allocated to direct services and training, with the remaining \$10,000 used for space improvements and modifications. Authorization by City Council will increase the Department of RPCA General Fund budget by \$75,000 to support the listed components of the pilot program described above. City Council approval of this proposed pilot will provide six months of mental health services at three recreation centers. Additional funding would be required to continue these services into future fiscal years and/or to additional recreation centers.

ATTACHMENTS: None.

STAFF:

Emily A. Baker, Deputy City Manager

Kate Garvey, Director, Department of Community and Human Services

Barbara Paulson, Director, Center for Children & Families, DCHS

Laura Durham, Deputy Director, Department of Recreation, Parks & Cultural Activities