

New community group will address needs of low-income residents who face urgent issues

BY ELIZABETH SAENGER

A coalition of social service agencies, citizens and parents has been formed to address the needs of lower income residents in the community, but the urgent needs in housing and the achievement gap require special attention. These were the topics addressed by the speakers at The Larchmont-Mamaroneck Local Summit Breakfast on Tuesday, February 11th at the Nautilus Diner.

NEW GROUP FORMED

Zoe Colon, Executive Director of the Hispanic Resource Center, announced the recent formation of the Mamaroneck Cares Coalition—a group of local social service providers, agencies, municipal employees, elected officials, and volunteers. The purpose of the group is to address local areas of need as well as to better coordinate services to the whole low income community. She stressed, “This coalition is just beginning and is open to everyone.”

Within the Coalition there are five working committees: Health and Wellness plans to run a health fair and looks to find access to low cost care for undocumented residents who aren't eligible for the federal and state health care programs. Children and Youth strives to close the achievement gap between different groups in the community and recently presented a program to the whole faculty of Mamaroneck Schools about the immigrant experience. Adult and Family Services seeks new ways to involve needy community members in available services. Education and Workforce Development works with the schools and others to help with employment. Community Safety addresses such urgent

issues as flooding in Mamaroneck and improving police-community relations.

In response to a question about youth services, Colon said they are exploring new and different ways to provide these. For example, in Port Chester, the community school model has worked well, involving the whole family and including mental health services. Here, Guidance Center staff members are already located at the Hornmocks Middle School and two community health workers are now in the Mamaroneck Ave. School.

HOUSING NEEDS

Angela Torero, Case Manager and Program Associate at Washingtonville Housing Alliance, emphasized the great need for affordable housing. “With basic studio apartments in the area currently requiring a minimum of \$1400 monthly, and most clients saying the most they can possibly afford is \$600 monthly, we have a crisis,” she said. The waiting list for the WHA senior housing center is several years long. “Many seniors would like to sell their homes which are now a financial burden to them,



Panelists, left to right: Dr. Robert Shaps, Superintendent, Mamaroneck Union Free School District; Zoe Colon, Executive Director, Hispanic Resource Center; Angela Torero, Program Associate, Washingtonville Housing Alliance and Richard Nightingale, President of Westhab and Chair of Washingtonville Housing Alliance. Photo courtesy of: Linnet Tse.

but they are unable to find rentals they can afford to move into.” Over-crowding and severe family stress are obvious consequences. A formal needs assessment would help.

Richard Nightingale, Executive Director/CEO of Westhab Inc., described the Westhab-Washingtonville Housing Alliance partnership, saying that while Westhab will have overall responsibility, WHA will continue to remain a local agency. Headquartered in Yonkers, Westhab is the leading not-for-profit provider of housing and social services for homeless and low income families in Westchester. “We can bring economies of scale to Washingtonville that will benefit the community,” said Nightingale. Westhab has built 2500 housing units in Westchester, but many more are needed. It also provides, crucially, strong employment services for walk-in clients, including job-training. Their annual average of 500 job placements is particularly notable since many of their clients are often hard-to-place individuals. Westhab also provides youth services, especially after-school programs. And Westhab can provide the tools to ensure that WHA can help with advancing affordable housing placements. However, though they consider their housing retention services vital, Nightingale said, “We are constantly faced with budget cuts when trying to deal with the current home eviction crisis.”

When asked to define “affordable housing,” the answer: Officially in Westchester those eligible must earn 80% of the Area Median Family Income. This is hardly realistic here in Larchmont/Mamaroneck where the AMFI is about \$100,000. The point is that there is a range of affordable housing numbers throughout the county, but it is certainly not broad enough here to provide subsidies to the families who need them most.

According to HUD, families who pay more than 30% of their income on housing are considered cost burdened and may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation and medical care. “But the reality here is that more than 50% of people are paying 40, 50, and 60% for a roof over their heads,” observed audience member Jeremy Ingpen, former Director of WHA.

Ingpen then asked, “How many here in this room receive government assistance with their housing?” After observing a few raised hands, he pointed out that the middle class has enjoyed generous federal government subsidies through the home mortgage deduction allowance and other measures, while lower income people are caught in a poverty trap. “Afford-

able housing is a political issue,” he added.

ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Dr. Robert Shaps, Superintendent of Mamaroneck Union Free School District, put the discussion in context providing local demographic data. He said: “with 5228 students, Mamaroneck is the largest non-city district in the county. Students are 49% female, 51 % male; 19 % Hispanic, 72 % White, 2% Black, 5% Asian, and 2% multi-racial. 12% are officially “economically disadvantaged,” of whom 80% are Hispanic. Of the 70 Hispanic students who graduated in 2012, 53 went on to college, of whom 33 went to four-year colleges.”

The challenges are many. Dr. Shaps continued, “Emphasis at the Pre-K and Kindergarten levels needs to be placed on children from homes with limited language-rich and experience-rich homes.” For 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students, Mamaroneck has innovated a dual language program this year, with 24 English-dominant and 24 Spanish-dominant enrollees. The goal is to have a full K-5 dual language program. In addition, Mamaroneck is finding new paths for more parental involvement in the schools. There have been evening meetings helping parents experience the new methods of teaching math, and for dealing with Common Core issues. College preparation is stressed early in the education process. Padres Unidos (Parents United) helps Spanish speaking families feel included. Non-college careers such as culinary, carpentry, building trades, and information technology skills are also provided and stressed. Dr. Shaps emphasized, “The goal is to foster life-long learning.”

He acknowledged that with the NYS tax cap, the schools are in very difficult straits in trying to meet its many needs. Mamaroneck schools are 28% over budget and face painful cuts. The fiscal challenge of the last five has been daunting. “We have an out-dated industrial model for our schools and need a new one badly. Categories are archaic. How can we find a way to re-frame the needs and the facilities to address those needs?”

From the audience, Michael Rosenbaum urged, “Political awareness is vital. We must stop the shift from state to local responsibility for public functions such as education.”

This forum was hosted by The Larchmont/Mamaroneck Local Summit, an informal community council that seeks to make life better for all in the community. Monthly public meetings are usually held at 7:45am on the third Tuesday of the month at the Nautilus Diner.

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