

**DISABILITY COMMISSION
ADVISORY BOARD MEETING**

Meeting Link: <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/81008934107>

Wednesday November 10th 2021
5:30-7:00p.m.

Meeting Agenda

- Meeting Called to Order
- Introductions
- Approval of October Minutes
- Presentation – **Community Choice Energy, Theresa Teixeira**
- Presentation – **Recovery Services Engagement Center, Jen Tracey**
- Chair’s Report – **Olivia Richard**
- Member Spotlight
- Commissioner's Report – **Kristen McCosh**
- Architectural Access Report – **Patricia Mendez**
- Announcements
- Old Business
- New Business
- Public Input
- Adjournment

Meeting Minutes

Attending:

Zary Amirhosseini
Jerry Boyd
Paul Caron
Alice Fisher
Wesley Ireland
Dusya Lyubovskaya

Juan Carlos Ramirez-Tapia
Olivia Richard
Carl Richardson

Absent:

Elizabeth Dean-Clower
Kyle Robidoux
Yardley Sanchez

October Meeting Minutes:

Jerry Boyd made a motion and Carl seconded, to approve the October meeting minutes. The motion was unanimously approved without discussion.

Votes Taken

Draft and send a Welcome Letter to Mayor Wu outlining Advisory Board priorities, and including an invitation to address the Advisory Board. Motion was made by Jerry, seconded by Carl. There was unanimous approval.

Other Decisions Made

None.

Issues Discussed

- **Department Presentation One: Kim Thai-Durrigan, Assistant to the Mayor**
- Thai outlined the recent executive order / public health order related to the co-occurring crisis of mental health, addiction, and homelessness. It is a city-wide order, directing activities in multiple neighborhoods, not just in the so-called “Mass & Cass” area, although that area has in many ways been the epicenter of where these crisis have come to a tipping point for other public health issues.
- The order has 5 components, balancing public health and public safety.
 - Creating a central command structure that coordinates both City and State agencies.

- This structure is being used to meet regularly, track and share information regarding shelter/housing availability.
- Implement procedures and interventions to address the public health crises created by people living in tents.
 - This includes an intensive and persistent outreach effort to evaluate people's needs, and provide pathways to housing.
 - Thai emphasized that nothing in this order criminalizes addiction, homelessness, or mental health challenges. No City of Boston employee will force someone to abandon their shelter unless there is a bed available.
- Identify shelter for immediate placement
 - Thai noted that the Department of Neighborhood Development (DND), the Boston Public Health Commission, and other agencies are working to bring more beds online.
- Directing Boston Transportation Department and Public Works Department to clear and maintain clean streets
- Increasing the enforcement of criminal laws
 - This includes directing the Boston Police Department to enforce all existing laws on drug trafficking, human trafficking, disorderly conduct, and trespassing.
 - Thai noted that within this directive, BPD and other actors are instructed to prioritize diversion into treatment.

Questions from the Board

- Question from Board Member Wesley Ireland - what is the role of the recently appointed cabinet member
- Answer - Thai answered that Mayor-Elect Wu's announcement that she intends to appoint Dr. Monica Bharel to her cabinet is outside the Executive

Order, but in her new role in which she'll be leading the health services including many of the departments working at Massachusetts Ave and Melnea Cass Blvd, she will be responsible for moving the EO forward.

- Question from Member Boyd - is there a deadline for removal of the tents or is the City working flexibly? And how successful has the program been so far, are people taking advantage of the housing and treatment opportunities?
- Answer - The EO became effective November 1 so technically all tents are prohibited, but the thoughtful and methodical outreach is engaging with sections of the encampments at a time. Thai mentioned that around 66 people were connected to shelter or treatment last week which is a huge number compared to previous attempts, but the measure isn't in numbers it's about meeting people's needs.
- Question from Member Zary Amirhosseini about the physical accessibility of the shelters where folks are being directed.
- Answer - Thai said that because the shelters are run by BPHC or partners such as the Pine Street Inn that she would assume they are compliant and focused on accessibility, but would defer to them for details.
- Questions from the Public
- Question - If someone refuses to engage with City staff or leave, what will happen?
- Answer - The City is focusing on repeated attempts to engage and working to address people's concerns because the tents are unsafe. If someone continually refuses to engage, they could potentially be arrested for disorderly conduct or trespassing, but it would very much be the last resort after making every attempt to get someone into housing and/or treatment, with a focus on low-threshold housing.
- **Department Presentation 2: Office of Recovery Services, Jen Tracey**

- Tracey opened by describing the ORS overall, which opened in 2015 as the first municipal department focused on recovery. Their work includes prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery support.
- Tracey provided some contextual data on the opioid crisis, including a heat map of the City of Boston showing the places that the post-overdose response team has deployed in the last year.
- The opioid epidemic has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic increased the street population and the number of people facing substance use disorder (SUD). Needs also became more complex including because fentanyl has been found in non-opioid drugs such as cocaine. In addition, many people became disconnected from their providers. Finally, treatment capacity decreased during COVID, as happened in nearly every service, and that many folks were released from prison for COVID-related reasons with fewer reentry supports than ever.
 - Tracey noted that 2020 had the highest number of OD deaths on record in MA, and a noted increase in HIV infections occurred.
 - Those OD deaths were disproportionately Black, non-Hispanic men, among whom deaths increased 70%.
- ORS has 17 outreach workers on the street, operates the Engagement Center located behind the 112 Atkinsons St men's shelter, runs a drop-in service center and associated phone number to help people navigate the system of finding help, and a center in Mattapan that runs various family support programs.
 - The street teams work 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, in 4-person shifts.
- During COVID, ORS enhanced their street team, adding psychiatry and housing experts. The street team interacts with 350 people per day, and saw 4000 individuals in the last 6 months. The team delivers HIV meds and testing, reverses overdoses, and treatment referrals.

- The Engagement Center has been operating in a temporary tent for years, and a permanent building with showers, charging stations, laundry, and a courtyard, is opening in the coming weeks next door to the tent.

Questions from the Board

- Member Ireland - asked about a non-police phone number / contact resource for members of the public to use.
- Tracey answered that 911 is the right number when there is an immediate safety concern, such as an apparent overdose. She noted that police aren't the only responders, and even then they are trained to divert people experiencing SUD. For less immediate concerns, there is always 311. There are 10 departments that get these kinds of 311 updates and they meet daily to triage the messages and assign them to the appropriate team for response. In addition, ORS runs trainings on using Narcan to reverse overdoses for the public, which anyone can take.
- Member Dusya Lyubovskaya - asked whether the Engagement Center welcomes men and women, to which Tracey responded affirmatively, and noted that they collaborate with other day programs, such as the St. Francis House, to ensure people are going to the right place for them.
- Question Member Amirhosseini - asked about work being done outside of Mass & Cass, and whether ORS collaborates with Mass Gen.
- Answer - Tracey responded that ORS works in every corner of the City, and that they are often in touch with Mass Gen, and one of their mobile response vans is often in that area.
- Question Member Boyd - asked about staffing levels, whether ORS feels like they are sufficiently staffed, and whether they will be receiving more funds from recent federal investment and state legislation.
- Answer - Tracey noted that while there is certainly a great need for this kind of work across the City, ORS works in coordination with other service

providers to ensure that needs are being met, and that there is an overall workforce crisis in the health care and substance use disorder sectors and so they are trying to work creatively with partners inside and outside the City.

- Question Member Juan Carlos Ramirez-Tapiz - asked about services for people who don't speak English well.
- Tracey noted that the outreach team and drop in centers are staffed by multilingual employees, primarily Spanish-English bilingual staff. For other needs they work with the Public Health Commission or other City resources.
- **Department Presentation 3 - Environment Department, Theresa Teixeira**
- Teixeira came primarily to present the Community Choice Energy (CCE) program, but started with a brief overview of the Environment Department.
- Then she defined CCE - which is a municipal aggregation program, meaning that the City pools the buying power of electricity clients across the City to negotiate a contract for sources of electricity. People have many options for the source of their electricity, but the delivery all goes through Eversource - meaning they read the meters, bill people, maintain the poles, etc.
 - Clients can use Eversource as their energy source, engage in their own contract with a source provider, or opt into the contract the City negotiated through CCE.
- The City's CCE contract includes three options - a basic option with the lowest cost and the fewest amount of renewable energy used, a middle option, and the most expensive option which is for 100% renewable energy. The contract runs for 25 months, through December 2023. Eversource changes their rates twice per year.
 - The next six months of Eversource rates is likely to be \$0.22 kW/h or higher, while the most expensive CCE option is only \$0.13 kW/h
- Residents of the City can opt into CCE (or out) at any time, because they are not signing a contract.

- Your energy provider is printed on Eversource bills in the green box.
- To opt in or opt out of CCE you can call the company with whom the City contracts at 833-930-3161, or visit boston.gov/community-choice-energy
- The final option residents have is to sign their own contract with a third-party provider known as “competitive electricity suppliers.” However, Texeira described predatory behaviors by these companies as documented by the MA Attorney General’s office. First, these suppliers offer upfront inducements like gift cards, but often have higher rates than even Eversource. Or, they may have a lower rate for the initial contract term, but at the expiration of the contract residents don’t revert to Eversource. Rather they are often put on a month-to-month contract with the third party supplier, which then jacks up rates. The AG’s office has reported up to \$0.32 kW/h rates, significantly higher than Eversource.
 - Data shows that these companies have a disproportionate presence in low-income communities of color, where they have issued even higher rates than the ones they quote in higher income communities.
- Texeira concluded by describing utility assistance programs. In addition, she noted that Eversource is banned from shutting off the utility for certain groups without explicit approval from the MA Department of Public Utilities to do so. These protected groups include those 65 years and older, those 65 and older with minors in the housing, those with infants in the home, those with serious illnesses, and all residents from November 15 - March 15.

No questions from the Board or the Public

Public Input

-

Member Spotlight:

Skipped

Chair's Report: Olivia Richard

- None

Commissioner's Report: Kristen McCosh

- The Commissioner briefly updated the Board on a variety of projects and initiatives including:
 - Mayor-Elect Wu will be sworn in next week in a small, brief ceremony in City Hall. The full inauguration ceremony will occur in January. The Board has traditionally been invited to that event, and likely will again. The Commissioner will be in touch.
 - The Commission has several open positions. The Outreach and Engagement Specialist posting has recently closed and interviews are in process. The ASL Interpreter and On-Street Accessible Parking (OSAP) Program Manager position will be open for a few more weeks.
 - The Board has previously discussed a welcome letter to Mayor-Elect Wu, action on which remains in the Board's hands.
 - The Captions hearing was held by City Council last week. Several Councilors and City Departments were in attendance, as were members of the public including Board Member Ireland.
 - Next steps include a working group to hash out details of the law such as the complaint form, and to do additional business outreach.
 - During National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October, the Commission hosted a Pathways to Employment webinar with multiple city agencies to discuss the technical aspects of finding

postings and applying. The City has a number of open jobs, and the Commissioner encouraged everyone to apply or spread the word.

- The Commission is also continuing their ongoing program with the MRC to introduce clients to City departments.
- The Commission is preparing for a meeting with the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to advocate for an expansion of Medicaid buy-in programs for people with disabilities without income or asset limits.
- The curb ramp litigation consent decree was finalized in court.
- We continue to work on an outdoor dining permanent program even as the current program winds down, including having already shut down in the North End.
- The Bike Outreach program is on hold until the new year.
- The Commission is looking forward to participating in the Community Access Monitor (CAM) training from the Mass Office of Disability later this month along with members of the Board.

Architectural Access Report – Patricia Mendez

- Informed the Board that she is a member of the MAAB’s subcommittee that is drafting updates to the regulations that cover physical access.
- Let the Board know she would be reaching out to the Board members that are signed up for the CAM training to get their addresses.
- Finally, noted that the City Hall plaza renovation project reached the point of the permanent ramp to the building, and so the full-size temporary Amp Ramp has been installed while that is dealt with.

Announcements

- Member Carl announced that as part of his ongoing advocacy for audio descriptions for movie and TV, the first ever AD Awards Gala will be hosted on Peacock on November 18th. There will be award recipients from studios, remarks from a Hall of Fame NFL Quarterback, and others.
- Member Boyd noted that the R-TAG group has been continually in touch with the RIDE as they have reverted to the old scheduling system. Since the switch, the system has registered some improvements on on-time arrivals and other measures. The R-TAG is hosting a public meeting that the Assistant General Manager for the MBTA will be attending.
 - Member Ireland noted that the DOJ has recently announced a lawsuit against Uber related to increased charges for people with disabilities.

Old Business

None

New Business

- Mayor Wu letter. See votes taken.

Public Input:

- Concetta Paul commented that she agreed with Member Ireland that a dedicated number for SUD emergencies is needed. She also noted that she read an article that some would like to see control of the RIDE removed from the MBTA and turned into a solely state-run service, something she would agree with.

Adjournment

A motion to adjourn was made by Carl, seconded by Jerry, and the motion was carried. The meeting was adjourned.