

REPORT
ST. LOUIS COUNTY COUNCIL
JUSTICE, HEALTH AND WELFARE COMMITTEE
10:00 A.M., THURSDAY, MAY 14, 2020
Approved 5/26/2020

The St. Louis County Council’s Justice, Health and Welfare Committee met on Thursday, May 14, 2020 at 10:00 a.m. by videoconference to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and the African American community in North County.

ATTENDANCE AT THE MEETING

Committee Members present were Chairwoman Rochelle Walton Gray, Rita Heard Days, and Tim Fitch.

Councilwoman Lisa Clancy was absent.

Councilwoman Kelli Dunaway and Councilman Ernie Trakas were in attendance.

Representatives of St. Louis County Departments present were:

Ken Griffin	Department of Public Health (DPH)
Theda Person	Office of the County Executive – Community Engagement
Kevin McKenna	Office of the County Executive

Diann L. Valenti, Acting Administrative Director for the Council, Gen Frank, Associate County Counselor, and Chris Howard, Budget Policy Coordinator for the Council, were present as well.

Dr. Jason Purnell, Associate Professor, Washington University Pandemic Task Force, and Mr. Rick Stevens, President of Christian Hospital, were also present.

Cindy Brinkley, lead advisor for the St. Louis County CARES Initiative program, was also in attendance.

MEETING CONVENED

The Chair called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m. and stated the purpose of the meeting. Chairwoman Gray stated, “The Committee takes official notice of and admits into evidence all St. Louis County Ordinances and Resolutions.”

REMARKS BY DR. JASON PURNELL, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY PANDEMIC TASK FORCE

Chairwoman Gray recognized Dr. Jason Purnell and thanked him for taking the time to speak during this meeting.

Dr. Purnell greeted the Committee and those in attendance. He explained his remarks for today's meeting focus on the disproportionate burden of COVID-19 on the African American community and stated given that it impacts parts of St. Louis County, it is a real concern.

Dr. Purnell made the following statements: "What I've said before and will say again, disproportionate burden requires an asymmetrical response, which means that resources for not just testing, but treatment and the kinds of support that people need to quarantine and isolate themselves need to be deployed in the hardest hit areas of St. Louis County. But I think over and above that, I've become convinced that we have recover from this pandemic in a different way than we have recovered from other crises. And that, in my mind, requires a real focus on equity. And the way I've been trying to define and describe equity for folks is that if there are two houses on the block that are on fire, you don't knock on everybody's door in the neighborhood and ask them how much water they need. You train all the water that you have on the two houses that are on fire. All the maps of cases and deaths from COVID-19 in the St. Louis region tell us where they fire is, and that's going to require us to invest real resources, not just healthcare resources, but also jobs and other financial and economic stimulus in the areas that are hardest hit by this disease. I think the way we have to think about that is not just to recover and go back to the status quo but to recover and become stronger as a region as a result of that."

Dr. Purnell welcomed any questions at this time.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS – COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Councilwoman Days prefaced her question, stating she feels that those, as well as others, representing the impacted area are aware of the disparity, especially as it relates to the pandemic. She then asked Dr. Purnell what it will take to get past the point of acknowledgement and address or eliminate said disparity.

Dr. Purnell reiterated that there has to be an asymmetrical response which includes targeting the areas most impacted with whatever funding dedicated to response and recovery. Additional resources also need to be invested in the hardest hit areas. The additional resources include, but are not limited to, access to jobs, rental and utility assistance, or other resources or support to allow them to stay in their homes. He explained that in reference to larger scale structural responses to inequities that existed prior to the pandemic, and that are deepened by the pandemic, there's a whole host of factors related to wealth creation, quality of education, job preparation, etc. He stated that we have to do a better job as a region to dedicate resources to the parts of the region that have been hardest hit. Dr. Purnell agrees that the awareness part is done and it's now time for the investment part.

Questions and Comments – Committee Members – Continued

Councilwoman Days concurred with Dr. Purnell's response. She stated that they, and the administration, get chastised for trying to direct resources to the most impacted areas. She explained many people will say the resources are equally distributed but equal distribution is not a reasonable response when certain areas have a greater need, and oftentimes those areas consist of African American communities. Councilwoman Days stated it has been a challenge to get folks to understand that an equitable response, as described by Dr. Purnell, is the necessary route and approach.

REMARKS BY MR. RICK STEVENS, PRESIDENT, CHRISTIAN HOSPITAL

Chairwoman Gray welcomed Mr. Rick Stevens and thanked him for taking the time to speak during this meeting.

Mr. Stevens greeted the Committee. He pointed out that Christian Hospital sits in the 63136 zip code, which is adjacent to the 63033 and 63031 zip codes, all three of which are hot zones for COVID-19 cases. He stated that there have been times in which Christian Hospital had more COVID-19 patients than Barnes. He further stated that at least 92% of the 600(+) patients who have been inpatients, as well as outpatients, have been African American.

Mr. Stevens referenced Dr. Purnell's statements regarding the necessity of an equitable response and went on to address some necessary factors that need to be in place as part of the response and recovery, especially as it relates to North County and other hot spots.

He stated that we have to have Community Health Workers. He explained Community Health Workers are individuals who have a connection with the community and, as such, they are vital when it comes to educating the public and ensuring people have the information they need, as well as access to necessary resources.

As it relates to public education, Mr. Stevens emphasized the importance of masks and ensuring that people are aware of that importance and have access to masks. He explained that it's been proven that masks provide a barrier. He stated, "It protects me from you and you from me when we're out and about, and that is very much proven." Mr. Stevens further stated the community health worker will also be helpful in teaching the importance of social distancing. Additionally, they will be able to provide information related to testing and testing sites. With that, he mentioned that Christian Hospital does have a testing site and reiterated the importance of testing since that's how people know if they need to quarantine, to go to the hospital, etc.

Mr. Stevens explained that until there is a vaccine and/or total cure, we have to get this under better control to get the numbers down which requires utilizing the resources, as discussed by Dr. Purnell.

Remarks by Mr. Rick Stevens, President, Christian Hospital – Continued

He noted that the alternate care site is critical. He said he saw that the alternate care site in Florissant will stay open for another month. He said that's incredibly important since people still have the disease even when they are released from the hospital, that they are just "not sick enough" to remain in the hospital. The alternative care site provides an option for those patients who still need more time to heal but may be unable to properly social distance in their home.

Mr. Stevens then addressed the importance of nutrition in relation to the pandemic. He stated that before the pandemic, they were "on the bandwidth to work on malnutrition." He noted that malnutrition is an issue throughout North County and one of the contributing factors is the fact that portions of North County are a food desert so individuals do not have access to adequate, nutritious foods. He explained that nutrition plays a significant role in the healing process, stating proteins are a must. Mr. Stevens said the food desert piece needs to be addressed and one possible way to do so would be with the creation nutrition centers. Such centers could provide the necessary nutrition to individuals who may not otherwise have access to the necessary nutrition. He further stated that COVID-19 is very debilitating on the body so nutrition plays an important role in helping the body recover and heal. Furthermore, a nutrition center will help the community come back and thrive.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS – COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Councilwoman Days stated the County is anticipating some businesses reopening and some restrictions being lifted on Monday, May 18, 2020 and asked Mr. Stevens what his thought process is in regards to the reopening. She also asked what information or advice can be provided to businesses in order to ensure safety.

Mr. Stevens reiterated the importance of social distancing and the benefit of wearing masks. Additionally, handwashing, as well as use of hand sanitizer, is absolutely vital to health and safety. Eliminating the need for contact, such as encouraging cash-free methods of payment, and discouraging having too many people inside one place by having people wait outside when possible, will also be beneficial. Mr. Stevens also mentioned performing temperature or health checks prior to employees or individual entering the building(s).

Councilwoman Days then voiced her concern regarding the fact that hospitals are furloughing their employees even as the COVID cases continue coming in. She also asked if Christian Hospital is placing any employees on furlough.

Mr. Stevens stated that BJC, including Christian Hospital, is furloughing individuals. He explained that their hospitals, along with other ones, have not had the business per usual over the last 90 days due to postponing elective surgeries and appointments. He further explained the individuals being furloughed are not in roles that will impact patient care.

Questions and Comments – Committee Members – Continued

Councilwoman Days stated there are so many sources of information all with contradictory information, and asked Mr. Stevens what the source is for getting information related to COVID-19.

Mr. Stevens said the CDC, or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is what they base their information on. He explained, at times the information may seem contradictory from day to day, especially when the virus started spreading in the area, since they are continually learning about the virus. He also explained the information also changes as the virus mutates. Mr. Stevens provided the example that they are now seeing and learning how the virus is affecting pediatric patients while 65 to 90 days ago, that was not an area of concern.

Regarding information discussed by both Dr. Purnell and Mr. Stevens, Chairwoman Gray reiterated the fact that portions in North County, especially in the area surrounding the hospital, are food deserts, especially due to the fact that so many grocery stores closed down in that area in the recent past. In line with that, she addressed the inquiries regarding liquor stores being deemed essential throughout the pandemic, and explained they often have food or groceries and that may be the closest location within walking distance for those who don't have access to transportation and especially so within a food desert. The Chair also brought up the issue of lack of access to quality education in the area, especially since one of the school districts is unaccredited while another is operating on a provisional agreement. The pandemic has only highlighted the lack of quality education systems in the area. She stated wraparound resources, in addition to healthcare resources, are needed in order to build up the community.

Chairwoman Gray stated she believes there's a misconception regarding furloughs in that people think the COVID-19 cases or concern surrounding COVID-19 are going down since healthcare employees are being furloughed. Mr. Stevens explained that the furloughs are not the same as being laid off and mentioned BJC will continue to cover the employees' health insurance and that the employees will be brought back to work. They are not out of a job. He confirmed that they continue to ensure healthcare professionals will be available to care for patients in need. Mr. Stevens stated he wanted to emphasize that the hospital is still safe to go to for medical needs or concerns. He said there is no need to fear going to the hospital or delay receiving medical attention for medical concerns.

Chairwoman Gray requested some clarification regarding the number of testing sites in North County. Mr. Stevens stated Christian Hospital had its testing site up and running since March 31st. He said there's multiple testing sites established throughout North County. He also shared the phone line for individuals to call if they have any symptoms or signs of COVID-19 so they can complete a screening process. That number is 314-653-5000.

Councilman Fitch referenced Dr. Purnell's discussion about the adverse and disproportionate effect on the African American community. He then explained that in his district, which covers most of West and South County areas which includes African American and Latino communities.

Questions and Comments – Committee Members – Continued

With that in mind, Councilman Fitch asked if there's any discussion about addressing the hot spots outside of North County, such as the Valley Park area.

Mr. Stevens stated he believes all hot spots need to be addressed, especially since one person can infect many people, and resources need to be disbursed as needed to those hot spots.

Councilman Fitch then asked how many nursing homes, assisted living facilities, etc. are responsible for the number of cases within the three zip codes previously mentioned.

Mr. Stevens said they don't have that exact number. He agreed they do have a number of nursing homes in those zip codes but that's something they'd have to do some more digging in order to get that estimate. Mr. Stevens noted that although they have had patients come in from nursing homes, a lot of the patients at Christian are coming directly from the community. Mr. Stevens said that the County may have those statistics.

Councilman Fitch stated he has not been able to get that number from the County and said he is trying to figure out exactly where the numbers and cases are coming from. He further stated he wants to ensure they're focusing their resources where they are needed and not leaving any areas out.

Mr. Stevens agreed nursing homes have to be a part of the equation since they consist of a vulnerable population, in general.

Chairwoman Gray recognized Mr. Ken Griffin (DPH) and asked if he could address any of Councilman Fitch's questions or concerns.

Mr. Griffin stated the County's intention is to address any hot spot in the region. He further stated they've opened more testing sites in the South County area. Mr. Griffin said they are really digging in on addressing the long term care facilities. He acknowledged that the state as well as the County received tests late in the game so that initially slowed some things down. He explained they've acquired and purchased more testing kits and they intend to keep testing sites open. Additionally, individuals are not charged when they receive their test at a County facility.

Councilman Fitch asked if Mr. Griffin can confirm the percentage of confirmed cases out of nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Mr. Griffin said he can only confirm that based on individuals the County has tested. He stated from the 281 tests the County has performed thus far in the last six weeks, 40% have been from long term care facilities.

Questions and Comments – Committee Members - Continued

The Chair recognized Theda Person. Ms. Person greeted the Committee and stated she wanted to ensure everyone knew about, and was informing the public about the *stlcorona.com* website. She explained the website provides information regarding the testing sites, statistics, service changes, and any other COVID-19 related information.

Chairwoman Gray recognized Councilwoman Days. The Councilwoman noted that North County is receiving a significant amount of support and resources from the private healthcare industry. She noted there will be various mobile testing sites, mainly through Affinia, in the coming days and weeks.

Chairwoman Gray recognized Councilman Fitch. Given the importance of personal protective equipment (PPE), he addressed Cindy Brinkley for some clarification regarding the provision of PPE. Councilman Fitch stated he received a phone call from a local fire chief inquiring as to why they (municipality) are being billed by the County for the PPE they ordered from the County when, based on their understanding, the funds from the CARES Act grant covers PPE for first responders. Councilman Fitch asked Ms. Brinkley if the County can spend some of the \$173.5 million in CARES Act funds received by the County in order to provide that for free for the first responders.

Ms. Brinkley explained they have requested more clarification from the Department of Treasury on how the funds can be utilized. She further explained there is an opportunity for reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); however reimbursement can't come from two sources hence the need for clarification.

The Chair recognized Chris Grahn-Howard, Budget Policy Coordinator for the Council. Mr. Grahn-Howard confirmed that as of last Friday, May 8, 2020, there's been approximately \$52,000 of PPE purchased by municipalities from the County.

Chairwoman Gray addressed Councilman Fitch, stating she recognizes the concern for addressing hot spots throughout the region and welcomed inviting others to speak on the specific areas or districts.

PUBLIC COMMENTS – OTHER INTERESTED PERSONS

Ms. Valenti advised there were no public comments submitted for this meeting.

DISCUSSION AND ADJOURNMENT

The Chair called for comments from the Council Members.

Council Member Days moved to adjourn the meeting. Council Member Fitch seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously and the Chair declared the meeting adjourned at 10:50 a.m.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE

Chairwoman Rochelle Walton Gray

Hon. Rita Heard Days

Hon. Tim E. Fitch

Hon. Lisa D. Clancy (absent)