

Recommendation Regarding Funding Process for the Legal Aid Justice Center

During the FY17 budget process for the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle County, the Legal Aid Justice Center asked the City and County to exclude them from the Agency Budget Review Team (ABRT) evaluation process for their future applications for funding and have their request reviewed outside that process. City and County staff has been asked to make recommendations to the City Council and Board of Supervisors regarding this request.

Background

Albemarle County had put its first Agency Review Team in place in 1983. The first team was comprised of County staff members (Budget Office, Social Services, Planning, and Finance). The County invited City staff to be part of the process in 1991 and citizen members were added to the team in 1993. The budget review team was developed to help the Councilors and Supervisors by reviewing agency requests and making recommendations for funding. At this time, the City provides coordination of the ABRT process on behalf of the City and the County, and County staff members serve as team members on the ABRT. Due to its focus on human service-oriented programs and services, funding requests to Albemarle County for cultural programs and festivals are no longer reviewed by the ABRT. These requests are reviewed by an internal County team.

By including citizens in the review process, utilizing a detailed scoring matrix, and providing site visits to agencies requesting funding from the City and the County, the ABRT process is intended to provide a comprehensive and fair process to provide recommendations as to which nonprofit programs and services the localities should support based on alignment with community and strategic priorities. By identifying desired outcomes and measuring success in achieving those outcomes, non-profit agencies can revise their programming as required to meet commonly agreed upon goals as well as to support the strategic plans and priorities of the City and County. The process also serves as a means to assist in ongoing quality improvement and collaboration for the City and County's nonprofit partners. The process also encourages maximum efficiency and decreases potential duplication of services. Applicants are offered workshops and one-on-one assistance for their applications, particularly if they are new to the process or have not scored well the year before.

Recommendation

Staff recognizes that the Legal Aid Justice Center provides a unique and important service to members of the community and that the ABRT community-based funding process may be more rigorous than the agency funding processes of other Virginia jurisdictions. The application process is about to begin for the FY 18 funding cycle and the new application matrix will incorporate the Board's most recent strategic plan priority setting efforts.

After careful consideration and meetings with staff from the Legal Aid Justice Center on August 24, 2016, City and County staff recommend that, as a non-profit, the Legal Aid Justice Center's requests for funding remain within the Agency Budget Review Team process. This recommendation is based on the following considerations:

1. The Legal Aid Justice Center's requests for funding have been included in the ABRT process for 27 years.
2. The ABRT is composed of knowledgeable staff and community member who are familiar with the community, work diligently to understand how agencies work together to solve community issues, and to discern the effectiveness of programs to meet community goals in a systematic way.
3. The Legal Aid Justice Center is not a government agency like Region Ten or the Health Department or an agency that provides a mandated service, such as the SPCA, that do not request their annual funding requests through the ABRT process.

4. Confidentiality should not be a concern for the Legal Aid Justice Center's clients. Agency applicants in ABRT are never asked to provide personal client information. They are only asked to provide numbers of cases, types of cases, and aggregate outcomes.

5. All agencies are offered the opportunity to work with staff to improve their funding applications, particularly if they had a low score the prior year.

6. Separating out the Legal Aid Justice Center's annual funding requests from the ABRT process could encourage other agencies to request the same and the ABRT system's credibility could be diminished.

7. The City has reviewed how other localities approach funding legal aid services and found that other localities in the state also review legal services organization's request in the same manner than they review their other nonprofit funding requests. These localities include:

Roanoke City and County, Lynchburg, Harrisonburg, Henrico, Chesterfield, Fairfax City and County, Newport News, Richmond, Fauquier, Fluvanna, Arlington, Surry Petersburg and Spotsylvania. Roanoke City, Harrisonburg, Fairfax County, Petersburg, and Lynchburg.

ABRT Process Moving Forward:

The application process is about to begin for the FY 18 funding cycle and the new application matrix will incorporate the Board's most recent strategic plan priority setting efforts.

To help to ensure consistency of application review by the various ABRT teams, Mr. Mike Murphy, City of Charlottesville's Assistant City Manager who has been a senior member of the ABRT for over ten years, will serve as an ABRT reviewer for all program applications beginning in FY 18.

Additionally, if the Legal Aid Justice Center's ABRT FY 18 application review scores are rated as solid or exemplary, their FY 18 funding position will essentially be re-set at that level and the agency will not be negatively impacted by the 2 year ABRT de-funding policy.