



BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS WORK SESSION MINUTES

Monday, March 1, 2021, 2:00 P.M.

Virtual

To join the meeting please visit: www.centrecountypa.gov/virtual.

I. CALL TO ORDER

The public work session of the Centre County Board of Commissioners was convened at 2:03 PM by Chair of the Board Michael Pipe.

In attendance were Commissioner Michael Pipe, Commissioner Mark Higgins, Administrator Margaret Gray, Executive Office Supervisor Natalie Smith and Staff Assistant Jillian Savage.

County personnel present included Chad Joyce, Faith Ryan, Natalie Corman and Travis Walker.

Guests present included Corey Troutman.

Representatives from the news media included Marley Parish.

II. PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no comments received from the public.

III. COVID-19 PLANNING AND RESPONSE

U.S. Department of Human Services – Emergency Rental Assistance Program

Director of Human Services Natalie Corman introduced the Emergency Rental Assistance Program to the Board. The Governor's Office has distributed the funding to counties throughout Pennsylvania that have a threshold of below 200,000 residents. Centre County's funding is being allocated by the PA Department of Human Services. Funding for counties with higher populations is being provided by the US Treasury. Director of Adult Services Faith Ryan will discuss development of the plan concerning the roll out of the Rental Assistance Program. This program is different from the program that was released last fall utilizing CARES funding. Applications will be processed through the Statewide Benefits System, COMPASS. The funding will be coming directly to the Office of Adult Services through the County's Homeless Assistance Program (HAP).

Faith has been working on a plan to determine how Centre County residents will access the rental and utility assistance funding as it has been laid out by the State. The plan must be submitted to the State by Friday.

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The County has contracted with Service Access Management (SAM) to assist in the processing of applications. SAM was able to identify four housing agencies who are able to get a COMPASS ID and can assist with the processing. At tomorrow's Board of Commissioners meeting, Faith will present a contract with the identified agencies to provide housing stability services, which refers to the individuals that are processing the applications. The County has also requested administrative assistance from SAM, similar to how SAM partnered with the County for the CARES Rent Relief Program or the County's fair housing assistance programs. SAM has the capacity and desire to process checks and direct deposit. The use of direct deposit means funding can be sent to the landlords much quicker. Commissioner Higgins asked for clarification on the use of direct deposit for landlords. Faith stated that landlords or property management groups are allowed to choose whether or not they want to receive direct deposit.

Faith reported that there have been discussions on how to staff the program to avoid becoming overwhelmed when it is unknown what the exact level of community need will be. In addition to the Caseworker 2 position, opening two Caseworker 1 positions was discussed, this is pending approval at the March 11th Salary Board meeting. The two Caseworker 1 positions would be temporary through December 31 with a possible extension if assistance is needed to close out the program. Their first set of duties would be to provide the office with the internal logistics and support needed to manage the expected incredibly high call volume and receiving paper applications. If the application submissions are so fast and in such high volume that additional assistance is needed, the Caseworker 1's would be moved into a position to process applications. While SAM staff process applications, approving and denying depending on eligibility, a Caseworker 2 can provide case management services to families or individuals who are expressing greater need, or if their needs are identified as very complex. One other community agency in Centre County reached out with interest in helping with the program. The other challenge is asking residents to complete applications on their own as that can be very difficult for some and having another provider that can provide that service would be beneficial.

Commissioner Pipe asked if there will be a tutorial for residents on how to use COMPASS to fill out an application. Faith reported the department is getting their tutorial on Thursday regarding receiving applications. She has not been made aware of what the user interface on COMPASS will look like since it varies by program. There have been discussions on whether or not people will be able to upload documents and if their income will be automatically processed or calculated. Since the State is moving so quickly the application might be more skeletal than originally planned. It is also likely that the State will make upgrades and updates as the program progresses.

Natalie stated that COMPASS does have a mobile feature, meaning it is accessible to people via computer as well as phone. It is not known if the State will have a separate application button specific to this program. The Human Services Offices already guide individuals through the COMPASS application process for Medicaid. She expects the opportunity to ensure that multiple caseworkers and agencies know what the user interface looks like for this particular program.

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Commissioner Pipe inquired if the State is producing a standard application for all counties and if all counties have decided to process their applications through COMPASS. Faith confirmed that the State has provided a standard application prepared in English and Spanish. Natalie stated they have not been made aware of how many counties opted to use COMPASS for application processing. The County has requested their CCAP affiliate, PASHA, keep track of information to determine which counties are using COMPASS. She does not have the updated listing, however, she believes most counties who received their allocation through the Department of Human Services planned on opting into COMPASS. Those who received their allocation through the US Treasury may have had a different opportunity for their application system.

Commissioner Pipe is in support of hiring additional individuals or working with multiple stakeholders to get as many applications through the system as possible. He mentioned that funding from the American Recovery Plan through the Federal Government, similar to the CARES Act, will be able to be invested in some of these costs when it comes to getting individuals ready to process the applications. Faith announced that the Rent Relief website has been revitalized for the use of this program.

Commissioner Higgins asked if the restriction was still in place that stated if 65% of the funding is not allocated by a certain date in September, no more funding would be given. Faith stated that the State has to spend 65% of the total or the remaining funding must be returned to the Federal government. In August or September, the County must report how much funding has been allocated. She expects the County to receive funding soon. The funding will be in increments, but she is unaware of what the increments will be. If the County surpasses the allocation, there is the opportunity to reach back out as the State has fluidity in deciding how the money is moved around as needed. Commissioner Higgins stated it is great that two additional people are being hired to work on this program. If additional funds are needed to be expended, there is a 5% override, over a half million dollars.

Commissioner Higgins asked if there have been clarifications on income limits. Faith stated it is 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI), which is similar to HUD programs, the State did provide a threshold based on household size for each county.

Commissioner Higgins reported the AMI for a family of four in Centre County is \$71,000. Faith states this will be based on what an individual's current or 2020 income is. Many benefits are not allowed to be counted towards income, such as the pandemic unemployment, however, this could be beneficial in some instances.

Commissioner Higgins remarked that even if 80% AMI for a single person in Centre County is \$49,700, these are relatively high limits and most people would be eligible for the program. Faith responded that there will be a sliver of people that would exceed the threshold and have experienced a significant financial loss. If someone was found in that rare instance, they would be diverted to the private services.

Commissioner Higgins asked if the AMI income is based on 2019 income or current income. Faith stated it should be 2020 income, HUD usually releases their update information in April.

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Commissioner Higgins asked if the income for a family of four had been \$100,000, but went down to \$60,000, which income the 80% of AMI would be based on. Faith stated that it would likely be the reduced income. There are different options to determine an income for this program, an individual's full twelve-month income for calendar year 2020, a three-month period, depending on the type of job, or the current months income. There is much flexibility in this program when compared to the CARES Rent Relief. Commissioner Higgins expressed that the flexibility is good but might slow down the application processing. Natalie stated the application process is very fine tuned by the State, hence why it is in the COMPASS system. Since it's an electronic application process there will be a learning curve on just how those calculations and what information might be needed as applications are submitted.

Commissioner Higgins asked if there is an upper limit on the rent figure. Faith stated while there is no cap, an applicant must show they are income eligible, and have some type of impact by COVID. Natalie added that property managers and landlords will also have to be part of this process and approval will depend on if those vendors will accept the payments. Commissioner Higgins stated applicants can be eligible for up to a total of twelve-months of rent and utilities. If someone is in arrears in upwards of a year, that could be paid that off immediately. If they were in arrears six months, that could be paid, as well as the upcoming three months. Then if three months in the future they are still impacted another three months could be paid. Faith and Natalie both confirmed this was correct.

Commissioner Higgins stated this program will be easier to work with than the CARES Act, but there is more pressure on the County. Once there is a level of comfortability with the COMPASS system, and the State rules and guidelines for the program, things must move quickly. He asked what the marketing plan is to get this to the community, the social service agencies, hotels, larger restaurants, etc. Faith reported that following tomorrow's Board of Commissioners meeting, they will be reaching out to all the landlords, for whom an email is on file, that participated in the CARES Rent Relief Program, and properties who chose not to participate in the CARES Program because of all the red tape. It will be explained to them that this similar to the rental assistance program that they already worked with. There's lot more availability of funding and also some different criteria and guidelines. A press release was done for the CARES program which was picked up by the media and was really helpful. Several of the providers also put information out on their Facebook pages. All the different entities that are typically reached out to from the point-in-time count, which includes all municipalities and school districts, will be contacted.

Commissioner Higgins suggested that an active outreach be made to the Happy Valley Adventure Bureau as their members include several hotels and restaurants in the County. Natalie suggested a press release providing a brief summary, the website for COMPASS, the link for the County website, and the phone number for the office. She emphasized the need to publicize the website as that's where a majority of people will go. This can be shared in multiple ways.

Commissioner Higgins asked about pre-booking a virtual presentation to the Centre County Council for Human Services whenever comfortable. Faith confirmed this was

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a possibility. She also mentioned placing an article about the program in the Centre Daily Times in April or early May. Natalie suggested sharing this with HOPE who has connections to faith-based organizations, the local libraries, YMCA's and County assistance office.

Commissioner Higgins stated that this program has the potential to significantly repair family balance sheets in Centre County. The average grant to a family could be over \$12,000 between six months' rent and utilities. As soon as the guidelines are in and the application process is tested, this should be one of the highest priorities of human services available to our county and affiliates. He asked is there has been anything more on mortgages. Natalie responded they are not sure that's getting done through the Treasury. Faith added the program is broken up into three main categories: rent arrears, future rent and utilities. Natalie stated updates will be provided to Margaret, and then to the Board, in terms of how the program is progressing. Commissioner Pipe reported on the American Rescue Plan that's working past the House this weekend. The Plan includes another \$30 billion in rental assistance, and \$10 million more for mortgage assistance. He stated the County will be working on rental assistance programs for quite some time if the county would receive an estimated \$30 million. Going forward, he agrees that having 30 to 45-minute check-in calls would be beneficial.

Corey Troutman of Susquehanna Accounting and Consulting Solutions asked if any general fund dollars will be used. Faith stated there is no anticipation that general fund dollars will be needed as 9.09% of the funding received is allotted for administrative use. The current allocations are as follows: 2% Adult Services, 3% SAM for the administrative assistance and check processing, and 4.09% housing stability services, in the same contract. Reallocation is possible if needed.

IV. PUBLIC MEETING SCHEDULE

Tuesday, March 2, 2021

Board of Commissioners – 10:00 AM – Virtual

Board of Elections – 11:00 AM – Virtual

Tuesday, March 9, 2021

Board of Commissioners – 10:00 AM – Virtual

V. ADJOURNMENT

On a motion by Commissioner Higgins, seconded by Commissioner Pipe, the Board voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting at 2:46 PM.

ATTEST:

Margaret N. Gray
Administrator