



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

November 17, 2023

Meronne Teklu, Board Chair
Alexandria Office of Community Services

Dear Ms. Teklu:

On November 1, 2023, the Virginia Department of Social Services' Office of Economic Opportunity conducted a hybrid monitoring review of Alexandria's Office of Community Services.

Our office did send a follow up email with the information contained in this letter. This report is to formally document the monitoring results.

OEO has responsibility for administering the federal Community Services Block Grant (CSBG), state general or TANF funds appropriated to accomplish the purposes of the Virginia Community Action Act, and for overseeing the operations of Virginia's community action network.

Monitoring reviews provide OEO a way of ensuring local compliance with federal and state law, regulations, and guidelines and an opportunity to make recommendations designed to improve the governance and administration of local community action agencies and programs.

The attached "CSBG Review Report" contains no findings, no concerns, and no recommendations identified during our on-site visit.

OEO defines *findings* as "instances of non-compliance with statutes, regulations, policies, or procedures established by the agency itself, the Commonwealth of Virginia, or federal agencies."

Similarly, OEO defines *concerns* as "conditions that have the potential to lead to findings or problems for the agency including deficiencies in agency management and governance

systems.” Though less critical than *findings*, identified *concerns* are nevertheless considered to be serious.

OEO defines *recommendations* as “best practices” that can contribute to increased agency effectiveness. Based on our knowledge and experience in working with non-profit organizations and community action agencies in particular, these recommendations encompass ways your management and governance systems might be improved and program services be made more effective.

I want to thank the staff for both their hospitality and cooperation during the virtual visit. We commend your agency for the important work you do and for the difference you are making in the lives of the low-income families you serve.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at (804) 726-7939 or by email at abigail.hanks@dss.virginia.gov.

Sincerely,

Abigail Hanks

Abigail Hanks
Community Services Block Grant Program Manager

cc. Alison Coleman
file

CSBG Review Report

Agency: Alexandria Office of Community Services (Alexandria)

Date: November 1, 2023

Reviewer(s): Abby Hanks, Violet Peyton, Sheila Lemon

Agency Staff: Alison Coleman, Director, Office of Community Services
Mesha Hall, Community Services Coordinator
Sharon Somers Veeny, Fiscal Officer

Board Members: Aminata Ly, Vice Chair
Conrad Sylvanus, Board Member

Agency Overview

The Alexandria Office of Community Services operates the Alexandria Community Action Program (Alexandria) as a public Community Action Agency. This agency serves the City of Alexandria. Alexandria uses its allocation of Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) funds primarily to provide emergency aid to address area needs. All of the CSGB funds are used to provide direct services. The emergency services covered under the program primarily include utility assistance and housing assistance. The agency strives to prioritize the needs indicated in the area Needs Assessment. Affordable housing has been the number one need in this area for the past several years. The areas of homelessness prevention, eviction prevention, childcare and workforce are also considered a priority.

Advisory Board

Alexandria Office of Community Services is governed by a fifteen (15) member Advisory Board. At the time of this monitoring there was one vacancy, in the elected official sector. OEO attended a Board meeting on October 18, 2023, during that meeting the members were active in asking questions and all committees provided reports to the full board. The board reviews programmatic reports and understands the services the agency provides. The board also welcomes discussion and questions on services the agency operates. The board is very involved in the advocacy work of the organization. Board members meet with board of supervisors members and city leadership as needed. The board is very engaged in the Community Needs Assessment process and utilizes information gained from other commissions to inform the Needs Assessment.

Needs Assessment

Alexandria Office of Community Service reports that it is in the final stages of completing its 2023 Community Needs Assessment. The assessment has been reviewed by the board and is currently in review by the Communications department. Once the communications department finalizes the document the board will approval the final version. Data utilized in the report is gathered by the Office

of Community Services and advisory board members. Data used include unemployment statistics, census data, information from collaborating community organizations, and client surveys are all used to create the Needs Assessment. Members of the advisory board were instrumental in gathering information for the assessment. Documents and conversations with partner organizations in the community are also used for the Needs Assessment. The completed Needs Assessment is used to prioritize funding decisions.

Agency Administration and General Operations

Staff indicated that Alexandria follows the Virginia Department of Social Services guidelines for safeguarding the confidentiality of client records. All records are maintained in locked cabinets within locked rooms. There is limited access to the records. Client information is entered into a system [REDACTED] that is only accessible on City servers and by individuals with approved access. Alexandria demonstrates its commitment to Equal Employment Opportunity by posting the information throughout the office as well as by educating employees through Human Resources. The City policy dictates the policy on performance evaluations. Reminders are sent by the Human Resources department to managers when performance evaluations are due.

Program Administration

Alexandria Office of Community Services has navigators who can provide more one-on-one assistance for clients with higher needs. Case management services are used for a clearer up-front assessment and more wraparound services (stability plans, childcare access, and affordable housing assistance). Alexandria uses its CSBG allocation for emergency direct services. Staff determines which emergencies they will help with based on the needs. The Board is aware of the programmatic goals and receives updates through reports. Intake is standardized and appears concise and complete. Prospective clients must verify their income. Income verification documentation includes, but is not limited to; pay stubs, SSI statements, Social Security statements, food stamp documentation, and child support verification. OEO staff analyzed ten (10) client files. The files contained all pertinent client data and were well organized. Alexandria Office of Community Services does an outstanding job of coordinating services with many community partners. Some of these include; area faith-based organizations, child protection services, and the Department of Social Services. The intake form used by Alexandria includes information regarding other service providers. Alexandria is exceptionally good at providing training opportunities and staff development. Most training is required, and staff is supplied with a training calendar. Staff, with the help of their supervisor(s), develops goals and objectives for each year.

Financial Management

During Fiscal Year 2022-2023, Alexandria Office of Community Service managed total CSBG and TANF resources of \$396,529. This includes \$160,430 in a Federal Community Services Block Grant and an additional \$138,750 in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grant. Alexandria also received an additional CSBG CARES allocation of \$241,110 plus TANF CARES of \$60,000.

The financial system, as part of the city system, is well designed and managed. All payments are well documented. Documentation is well organized and easily accessible. There are two systems used in the financial tracking/disbursement process. [REDACTED] is used for entering all information, and sign-offs by staff, manager, and finance also occur in that system. [REDACTED] is used to match up the program and fiscal

information. The Board receives a report every six months on revenues, expenditures, and balance of grant funds remaining. These reports are pulled from [REDACTED] and [REDACTED].

Adequate checks and balances are in place with review and approval in [REDACTED] by staff and managers. A review and approval is then performed by the Fiscal Officer at which point the information is forwarded to the city finance office for review, approval, and funds to be disbursed.

CONCLUSION

Alexandria Office of Community Service appears to be well managed and in compliance with CSBG requirements. Agency staff is well qualified and professional. The staff are highly engaged in the community and are involved with several community organizations. These connections have led to the start of the eviction prevention taskforce which has been highlighted across the state.

FINDINGS: OEO defines "Findings" as instances of non-compliance with statutes, regulations, policies, or procedures established by the agency itself, the Commonwealth of Virginia, or federal agencies.

None

CONCERNS: OEO defines "Concerns" as conditions that have the potential to lead to findings or problems for the agency including deficiencies in agency management and governance systems.

None

RECOMMENDATIONS: OEO defines "Recommendations" as "best practices" that can contribute to increased agency effectiveness.

None