

Seneca County Housing Coalition

Meeting Minutes

April 26, 2022

2:00 – 3:00 PM

ATTENDEES: Melissa Nesbit (Co-chair), Seneca Housing, Inc.; Joe McGrath (Co-chair), Seneca County Planning Department; Tami Sprague, LAWNY; Osbaldo Arce, LAWNY; Samantha Lotz, Seneca County Temporary Assistance/DHS; Ryan DeVay, Seneca County Workforce Development; Scott Burlison, Seneca County Weatherization; Adam Hampshire, Seneca County Weatherization; Kim Howell, Salvation Army; Ann Vail, Salvation Army; Sarah Anderson, Safe Harbors of the Finger Lakes; Jessica Chase, FLACRA; Roishon Bowman, FLACRA; Donna Stivers, Finger Lakes Landlord Association; Amanda Forney, Seneca County Planning Department; Rhonda Jasper, United Way of Seneca County; Bob Ritter, Seneca County Community Counseling Center; Caroline Fay, Seneca Community Action Programs; Amanda Wadhams, Seneca Housing, Inc.

1. Introductions by Attendees

2. Ossie – LAWNY Fair Housing Presentation

Legal Assistance of Western NY (LAWNY) has received a grant from HUD and a NYS grant to investigate housing discrimination complaints. Complaints are investigated, evaluated, and those with merit are litigated. LAWNY covers 12 counties and has seven offices throughout western NY. There are also five test coordinators who conduct testing to determine if housing providers are violating the Fair Housing Act. The Fair Housing Act protects against discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status, and disability. NYS also provides protections through the Human Rights Law which prohibits discrimination on the basis of age, marital status, sexual orientation, military status, domestic violence victim status, and source of income.

LAWNY provides services to anyone and everyone who needs them. Cases are brought in and assigned to an attorney on a weekly basis. LAWNY tests properties, provides outreach, and is always available for any client who feels they may have been discriminated against. All testers use audio recording whether it is a site or telephone test. Tests reveal that there has not been discrimination 90% of the time. In cases where discrimination has occurred, evidence is able to be collected to help the case.

3. Seneca County Housing Coalition Updates

Ms. Nesbit noted that the last meeting was held in December 2019. An event for Fair Housing Month will need to be planned for 2023 as April is nearly over. The previously held event was a success with landlords, caseworkers, and tenants benefitting. There are still remaining donations.

Mr. McGrath discussed details on the grant that was awarded to Seneca County for a housing needs assessment. Ms. Nesbit noted that an assessment has been pursued for many years now. Mr. McGrath is hopeful that the assessment will be complete by early 2023. There will be opportunities for public input and meetings during the process in both the north and south end of the county. The County Department of Planning & Community Development is working on an RFP to get out next month. The County adopted a housing plan in 2011. Since then, many things have changed and part of the assessment is quantifying demographic, geographic, and economic data to determine how many units the County has and needs as well as what type and at what income levels. Government and the private sector can then make informed decisions about development. The assessment will be the first step in the process and will return projections, numbers, and light recommendations.

4. Agency Updates

Mr. Devay, employment and training counselor, expressed that there are many homeless people in need of housing. There currently is not enough housing within the county. He expressed that the homelessness rate has remained steady throughout his employment.

Samantha Lotz further expressed that housing for the homeless is an urgent need. Housing is either unaffordable or landlords are not willing to work with DHS. DHS is currently partnering with FLACRA under the Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program. People receive help for things such as with filling out forms, paying utility bills, and temporary assistance grants.

Donna Stivers shared a website created by the Finger Lakes Landlord Association (FLLA) that lists available rental units in the area. At www.rentinthefingerlakes.com, the information is updated regularly and a search option is available to narrow down results for users.

Jessica Chase gave an update on the ESG and FLACRA. The grant enables FLACRA to help those that are past due on rent, paying up to 6 months of arrears. Ms. Chase noted that Ms. Lotz often sends FLACRA referrals which allows for increased communication with the homeless population. Case managers go out and meet with individuals and families. Ms. Chase stated that Mr. Bowman will be available at Seneca County one day per week and will be adding those that are homeless to a coordinated entry list. This will open up opportunities for FLACRA to be awarded permanent housing grants that can provide people or families with a permanent rent stipend. Mr. Bowman is stationed at other counties throughout the week.

Mr. Hampshire explained that Seneca County Weatherization provides energy efficiency and upgrades for low income families in Seneca County. They also work with DHS, Joe McGrath, Menzo Case of Generations Bank and Habitat for Humanity, and provide repairs and maintenance for seniors in Seneca County, allowing them to remain in their homes. A dollar limit does not exist for seniors but they must provide the cost of materials while Weatherization provides the labor. Mr. Burlison also stated that the Weatherization Readiness Fund will allow staff to get back into homes that were deferred due to structural issues or contamination. He

believes they will be doing mostly vermiculate remediation as a lot of homes contain it. Homes with vermiculate are also always assumed to contain asbestos as well. This is very common in Seneca County due to the age of the housing stock. Mr. Burleson added that more people become eligible every year for their programs due to changed guidelines, however, the number of clients they are able to serve is fixed due to lack of funding for additional staff. Seneca County Weatherization recently moved to a new location at 2156 State Route 5&20 in Seneca Falls. Their phone number remains the same. Mr. McGrath also suggested that for those organizations that have utility bill funding, that information can be shared amongst the Coalition to aid more clients and exhaust the funding.

Seneca Housing, Inc. provides subsidized housing for low income families. As with other agencies, they are facing a lack of housing for clients. Ms. Nesbit said they recently received more funding and a couple more programs. Their section 8 program currently serves approximately 500 families that they actively work with. The program was recently approved for another 10 years and after the pandemic began, they received Cares Act funds to help with security deposits. Ms. Nesbit stated that the utilization of the program throughout the state is stagnant. NYS will be using reserves to give landlords an incentive bonus for section 8 that equals the 1st month's rent to encourage renting. Ms. Chase stated that landlords have more security renting with those clients that FLACRA works with as they are visited each week through case management services. Ms. Nesbit often educates landlords about the program and its various benefits to landlords and clients. Ms. Nesbit also noted that because of the Covid pandemic, they were not allowed to inspect rentals for a period of time. Landlords signed off on paperwork, and tenants were living in unsafe conditions and not speaking up.

Ms. Fay of the Community Action Program (CAP) is the coordinator for the programs in Seneca County. Currently their transitional housing is under repair and it should be finished up within the next two weeks. Clients have been placed in hotels until the repairs are complete. CAP has a food pantry and offers housing assistance with limited funding. Through their Food Recovery Program, donations are collected from stores and are distributed evenly to all food pantries in the area. Ms. Fay said the need for food donations is growing. CAP also has a baby pantry and a diaper drive is currently being held. Ms. Nesbit noted that CAP has often filled in the gaps as far as funding for Seneca Housing clients.

Mr. Ritter discussed the risk to children of families that do not have a place to live or that live in a home that is inadequate. These situations create stressors for parents and can impact how they are able to parent their child. Housing is relevant when it comes to children and adult's mental health.

Mr. McGrath spoke about the Finger Lakes Regional Land bank which acquires condemned, vacant, and abandoned properties off tax foreclosure. Most often, the Land Bank acquires properties that require demolition. The Land Bank has partnered with Habitat for Humanity to build new units on site and Weatherization works to get those places insulated. Mr. McGrath

stated that if an agency or organization is interested in housing development, the Land Bank is seeking new partnerships beyond Habitat for Humanity. He also stated that there is money available for land banks in the NYS budget but the specifics on how to apply and how funds need to be spent are not yet clear.

Ms. Jasper is from United Way of Seneca County which provides mental health outreach and houses the Seneca County Suicide Prevention Coalition and Substance Abuse Coalition. They also provide emergency services. UW works with CAP, Catholic Charities, and housing charities. UW is serving as the chair for a local Emergency Food and Shelter Program (ESFP). Federal money is coming into Seneca County and how it is being divvied up is still being determined. Agencies can reach out to UW for more information. UW also acts as a resource hub, referring people to other places. A need has been recognized for scenarios that occur after hours. House of Concern is willing to become the first line of contact for those who have become homeless. Seneca County Dispatch will soon have a contact number to give to those in need. UW is working with Catholic Charities to bring in connections. Another resource is 211 that people can call or text anytime, or chat with a representative between 8 am and 11 pm.

Respectfully,

Amanda Forney