

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Amherst Survival Center (ASC) is a very special place, and it serves a critical need. But after thirty years of invaluable service to Amherst and the region, the organization has developed many serious deficiencies that hinder its ability to be effective and fulfill its mission. Policy Development was retained by the ASC Board on November 1st 2006 to conduct a three-month independent assessment of **programs, administration, and finances**. Key elements of the assessment and recommendations are as follows.

Programs

Assessment:

ASC's programmatic impact is substantial. Seven thousand delicious, healthy, and varied lunches were served last year. One hundred twenty-five thousand pounds of food, and seventy-six thousand pounds of clothing, were distributed last year. While these programs are clearly effective, they could be managed better. Policies and procedures are often not communicated and enforced effectively, and the program space is too small and often dirty or messy. These deficiencies, combined with a sometimes unpredictable clientele, leads to several negative consequences: complaints, occasional confrontations, diminished quality of service, and an unwelcoming atmosphere for some.

ASC also succeeds in creating a generally welcoming community feel where everyone has an opportunity to participate in service delivery. In fact, ASC could not function without its volunteers. Volunteer opportunities are thus another important programmatic outcome for ASC. ASC is also able to provide a low level of informal counseling and referral services. ASC does not, however, provide clinical services.

Recommendations:

ASC must accelerate its efforts to:

- Rationalize its core services
- Maintain a clean space
- Provide substantial professional development and training for volunteers and staff

Though many ASC clients are in need of more formal clinical services (not just informal counseling and referrals), ASC does not have the capacity to provide them right now. Clinical services would be an appropriate element of a long-range range planning process.

Administration

Assessment:

ASC's Executive Director of twenty-nine years, and its Assistant Director/Volunteer Coordinator have recently stepped down. The current Board President and Interim Director have both announced their intention to step down as soon as replacements have been recruited. As an interim situation, the current staff is adequate. The Board is recruiting new members and is making progress on ASC's organizational priorities. But there is much work to be done.

ASC lacks accountability, clear role definitions, behavioral expectations, program oversight, well-maintained space, IT infrastructure, and opportunities for professional development and training. Some policies and procedures are being re-evaluated by staff and Board, and promising changes are being made.

Many instances of discrimination, verbal and physical abuse, and human rights violations at ASC have been alleged. But no instances have been verified. While it is clear that discrimination and abuse are not formally sanctioned, ASC's organizational deficiencies create an environment where individual cases of inappropriate conduct can easily take place.

Recommendations:

- A new Executive Director should establish new expectations, revise job descriptions, and consider staff changes.
- The Board should put diversity at the top of every agenda, and the Nominating Committee should meet frequently until there is some diversity.
- A Treasurer should be recruited, and the Finance Committee should begin meeting immediately.
- The Board should be more public, proactive, and constructive. In turn, it should receive the full support and cooperation of the community.
- In order to help prevent discrimination, verbal and physical abuse, and human rights violations from happening, ASC should aggressively address its organizational deficiencies.
- Multicultural awareness and conflict resolution should also be at the top of the list of training topics for Board, staff, volunteers, and consumers.
- The Board should consider issuing a formal apology, recognizing the failings described in this report.
- ASC should pursue a variety of communications, transparency, inclusion, and participation measures to immediately begin interacting better with ASC's many stakeholders.

- ASC should be more integrated into the community of human services providers, and get more engaged in the policy issues that affect the organization and its target population.
- ASC should develop a monitoring and evaluation plan that addresses the kinds of outcomes that funders want to see, and which helps ASC manage its program and maximize performance.
- ASC should pursue more suitable space.
- Merging with a larger or similarly sized organization is a good “plan B” if the organizational reform process breaks down.
- ASC must get a proper server, network design, modern workstations, a more sophisticated web site, better email service, and appropriate training.

Finance

Assessment:

ASC’s financial position is strong. The current (FY07) operating budget is \$252K. Finances have been managed fairly well, and the organization’s windfall reserve fund, worth \$336K, is a major source of stability. The neglect of the reserve fund however, and a lack of a Finance Committee and Treasurer, are ASC’s obvious financial vulnerabilities right now.

While fundraising is stable at the moment, mistakes and substandard work is common. Many basic elements of a sound fundraising approach are missing.

Until recently, ASC’s practice was to pay wages that were too low to attract talent consistently. ASC has committed itself to higher salaries going forward.

Recommendations:

- Convening the Finance Committee and voting in the prospective Treasurer must be a top priority for the organization.
- Better management of the reserve fund is financial priority number two.
- The Fundraising and Communications Committee, with the involvement of the fundraising consultant, should immediately begin planning for the kinds of capacity it aspires to, including: timely acknowledgements of all financial contributions of any size; a funder database; new funders; and better communication with individual and institutional donors, consumers, the media, and other key stakeholders. [Update: underway]