

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

A proposal to the Board of Directors of the Amherst Survival Center

October 9, 2006

The Amherst Survival Center (ASC) has a lot of work to do. There are serious organizational problems, and a public relations crisis to accompany them. The good news is that a) the Board does not need to be convinced that this is the case, and b) the steps required to fix the problems are entirely doable.

This proposal, requested by the Board on 10/5/06, is informed by our discussion at that meeting, Town of Amherst Human Rights Director Eunice Torres' 8/06 report on the Survival Center, the initial assessment undertaken by William Marcello and John Manning (dated 9/7/06), the informal meeting of concerned citizens on 9/12/06, and numerous articles, Op-Eds, and letters to the editor in the local newspapers.

The following is an outline of ASC's programmatic, administrative, fiscal, and public relations challenges, and some things we can do together to address them (i.e., deliverables):

Programs

How effective are ASC's programs? Is the portfolio of services proportionate to the organization's capacity? Is ASC trying to do too much? PD will do a thorough and hands on assessment of the operations and outcomes of ASC's programs. The results of this participatory assessment will help the Board answer these questions.

Administration

Board / executive director

ASC is operating without an Executive Director. There has been recent turnover on the Board, and calls for its dissolution. Developing a Board strategy must be a priority, and the first assignment for a reinvigorated Board must be the search for an executive director. PD will help the Board develop a strategy that conforms to industry best practices and responds to various stakeholders' concerns. PD will also help initiate an ED search.

Space / merging

Some have questioned whether the current space is adequate, and if folding into a larger organization would make sense. A programmatic and administrative assessment should clarify this issue. If there is a consensus that a new space or a partner/parent organization is needed, PD will help facilitate that transition (though the completion of such a transition is likely to be outside the scope of this contract).

Mission / bylaws

There is also some interest in re-examining ASC's mission statement and bylaws. While this may in fact be needed, this activity can be time consuming and is likely to be outside the scope of this contract. That said, a plan to address these areas will be important for building confidence among ASC stakeholders.

Staffing / organizational culture

Staff and volunteer morale is low, and the issue of ASC's culture has also been discussed: Is there something about the culture of ASC that makes it special and worth preserving? Or instead (or in addition), is the culture stressful or hostile for both staff and patrons? PD will conduct an initial personnel review and propose some ways to improve morale, reduce stress, and prevent alleged hostility. These "ways" could include professional development, job descriptions, staff or volunteer changes recommendations, and assistance with recruitment.

Fiscal

PD will conduct a basic fiscal assessment (bookkeeping, accounting, and oversight practices). This review will not have the detail of an audit, but it will help determine if ASC is stretched too thin. PD will also assess fundraising efforts to date, and help develop a fundraising strategy (incorporating public and private donors, as well as individual contributions). While composing grant proposals is likely to be outside the scope of this contract, PD will develop a strategy document, prospect lists, and identify qualified grantwriters if needed.

Public relations

All of the activities proposed above will be informed by an initial needs assessment and ongoing outreach initiative involving all relevant ASC stakeholders, including: Board, staff, volunteers, clients, funders, the media, town officials, elected representatives, and others. This approach will make our work more effective, but it will also create buy-in, contribute to constituency-building, and restore credibility and legitimacy. People want ASC to succeed, and communicating simply and without spin about the basic steps ASC is taking (described above) will remedy ASC's PR problem quickly.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this project, ASC will be back on its feet. The fundamental elements of a stable organization will be in place, there will be a clear plan for continuing ASC's development, and ASC's reputation among its stakeholders will be largely restored.

Thank you for your consideration.