



Richland County  
 Coronavirus Ad Hoc Committee  
 February 25, 2021 – 3:00 PM  
 Zoom Meeting  
 2020 Hampton Street, Columbia, SC 29204

Yvonne McBride District 3	Paul Livingston District 4	Joe Walker District 6	Gretchen Barron District 10	Chakisse Newton District 10
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Committee Members Present: Gretchen Barron, Chair, Paul Livingston, Yvonne McBride, and Chakisse Newton

Others Present: Bill Malinowski, Cheryl English, Jesica Mackey, Michelle Onley, Angela Weathersby, Kyle Holsclaw, Tamar Black, Mike King, Ashley Powell, Bill Davis, Christine Keefer, Clayton Voignier, John Thompson, Elizabeth McLean, James Hayes, Leonardo Brown, Lori Thomas, Mike Maloney, Beverly Harris, Ronaldo Myers, Ashiya Myers, Dante Roberts, and Michael Byrd

1. **Call to Order** – Mr. Livingston called the meeting to order at approximately 3:00 PM.
2. **Approval of Minutes: July 28, 2020** – Ms. McBride moved, seconded by Ms. Barron, to approve the minutes as distributed.

In Favor: McBride, Livingston, and Barron

Not Present: J. Walker

Present but Not Voting: Newton

The vote in favor was unanimous.

3. **Adoption of Agenda** – Ms. McBride moved, seconded by Ms. Newton, to adopt the agenda as published.

In Favor: McBride, Livingston, Barron and Newton

Not Present: J. Walker

The vote in favor was unanimous.

4. **Election of Chair** – Ms. McBride moved, seconded by Mr. Livingston, to nominate Ms. Barron as Chair.

Ms. McBride moved, seconded by Ms. Barron, to bring nominations to a close.

In Favor: McBride, Livingston, Barron and Newton

Not Present: J. Walker

The vote in favor was unanimous.

Ms. Barron thanked her colleagues for their vote of confidence and noted that when she came on Council she was excited and willing to serve.

5. **Emergency Rental Assistance Program** – Mr. Brown noted they want to get a framework established that they can work from to move the Emergency Rental Assistance Program forward, so the local citizens can have access to the program.

Mr. King stated the newest opportunity to help the citizens with additional relief related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Emergency Rental Assistance Program is part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which provided about \$900 billion dollars in COVID-19 relief funds. Approximately \$25 billion dollars have been made available directly to the states. These funds are specifically allocated to assist households that are unable to pay rent and/or utilities due to the pandemic. We may use existing or newly created rental assistance programs. Richland County did not have any previous rental assistance programs funded through the CARES Act, so we are building this program from the ground up. We have three (3) guiding principles: fairness, equity and transparency for this program. This program is designed to benefit all of Richland County. The County was awarded \$12,573,547.20 on January 20, 2021. The program will expire December 31, 2021, so by September 30, 2021 unspent funds will be recaptured from slow spenders and reallocated to grantees who have spent at least 65% of funds. Maximum assistance, to an eligible household, is 12 months with an option to extend for three (3) months to ensure housing stability. This is a renter and utility assistance program. To be eligible, the household income cannot be more than 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI). In addition, one or more household members must demonstrate a risk of experiencing homelessness or housing instability, and qualifies for unemployment benefits or experienced financial hardship due to the pandemic.

Mr. Livingston inquired what qualifies as a hardship.

Mr. King responded it is basically in the eye of the beholder. The treasury is going to be lenient with that and require the applicant attest to a hardship under penalty of law and provides an example that proves it was directly or indirectly a result of the pandemic.

Ms. Newton inquired what income level 50% AMI equates to.

Mr. King responded it is listed in the policy and procedure manuals, which is on p. 17 in the agenda packet. He stated once the individuals meet the basic eligibility requirements they are going to be prioritized even further. The statute requires that households with incomes of no more than 50% AMI be given priority, to look at households that one or more member is unemployed, and has been for 90 days. We are going to force our funding on housing related arrears. We can take the arrears back to March 20, 2020.

Mr. Livingston inquired if the funding will be paid to the individual tenant or landlord.

Mr. King responded it can be both. He noted the largest amount of the payments will be directly to landlords and/or utilities. This program does provide, if the landlord chooses to not participate,

we are authorized to make payments to the individual resident. The landlords can actually apply on behalf of their tenants. Part of the evaluation process is going to ensure there is not duplication of benefits from federal programs. As far as income calculation, the statute allows us to look at it two (2) different ways. The easiest, and best way, is if we can look at the applicant's total income for 2020. If we cannot do that, we can take an application based on the applicant's monthly income at the time of the application. The problem with that is we will only allow them three (3) months of assistance before we have to re-evaluate their income every three (3) months. A case worker will contact the applicant to ensure they are still in need, and are re-qualified as eligible until they meet the maximum. The Treasury allows one other proof of income. If an applicant cannot provide proof of income documentation due to an impact of COVID (i.e. place of employment closed, they were paid in cash, or have no qualifying income), they can attest to their income. The applicant would have to qualify and re-qualify every three (3) months.

Ms. McBride noted she liked that the policy did not require such stringent paperwork. She inquired about situations where renters were not able to pay and the property owner did not provide repairs. Is there anything in the package that would address these issues?

Mr. King responded there was not any provisions for that. The law did not reflect that and they were trying to mirror the law as closely as possible. However, if the landlord is going to apply on behalf of the tenant, they must notify the tenant and obtain written consent, so the tenant may not give written permission until the repairs have been made.

Ms. McBride inquired if there is a maximum amount a landlord can receive.

Mr. King responded it has to be the amount agreed upon and documented on the lease.

Ms. Barron inquired about the process that would ensure the landlord and tenant have not received other federal funds from different programs to eliminate "double dipping".

Mr. King responded a part of the caseworker's job is to provide their due diligence to check with other agencies to ensure there is not a duplication of benefits. Also, the applicant has to attest and certify they did not receive any duplication of benefits, under penalty of Federal Law. If they lie, they will potentially face significant penalties from the Treasury Department.

Ms. Barron inquired how the caseworkers will contact the applicants to re-certify or re-qualify them.

Mr. King responded the telephone would be the quickest, and email would be second. They will try to make personal contact, when possible to develop a relationship with the applicant. It will be up to the applicant how they prefer to be contacted. We are going to make sure that after the 2 to 2 1/2 -month period we start reaching out to the applicant, even though the Treasury put the onus on the applicant.

Ms. Newton inquired who is going to be handling and administering this program and how we are going to ensure we are adequately staffed.

Mr. King responded currently Richland County does not have the capacity, nor personnel. This program provides for administrative funding for a professional agency to assist us. Other programs in the State have been inundated with requests and had to shut down the program

within the first. We want to avoid that, if possible. We anticipate an influx and we want to ensure we have the capacity to help people, have accurate records and are properly trained because there are a lot of reporting requirements for the Treasury Department. He noted a lot of leasing agencies and utilities have already reached out about the program. There are going to be many applications and we have to prepare accordingly. We have to document the tenant's inability to pay, the tenant does not have sufficient income or resources to pay, ensure they did not receive duplicate benefits from the same program. Again, the tenant household income is no more than 80% AMI, with a priority of 50% or under. We need to provide proof of job loss or unemployment for 90 days, the lease and residency in the County. We want to make sure all information used in submitting reports is confidentially maintained. If, and when, this program is approved, and when a vendor is approved, there will be a website where people can apply for the program. For those that do not have internet access, we will establish a toll-free hotline to connect directly to a caseworker who will help them with the application process. We will also have outreach resources (i.e. Richland Library). The library has mobile hotspots the applicants can use to apply. In addition, they have social workers they will allow us to utilize to assist applicants. We will be providing in-house training for the library's personnel to ensure they are highly trained. Other agencies have contacted us that want to partner with us. Once the application is filed, they are going to review the application to ensure eligibility. It will then go directly to a case manager. The applicant will be notified they have met initial eligibility requirements, and they will move forward to Step 2. Step 2 is the formal eligibility review where the caseworker will work one-on-one with the applicant by looking at four (4) gateways: (1) Verify identity; (2) the location of the household is verified; (3) the household is financially qualified; and (4) ensure there is a COVID tie-in. If all four (4) of the gateways are passed, they will conduct a duplication of benefits review. If there is duplication of benefits found, that amount will be subtracted from the benefit requested through the ERA program. The caseworker will determine the amount the applicant is eligible for and forward the recommendation for approval to the special case panel outlined in the policy. The final step is to process payments. The case will remain open until the maximum amount is received.

If it does not meet basic eligibility, an ineligible letter will be sent to the applicant, with a follow-up call from a case manager. We will attempt to help the applicant to understand why they are ineligible, and if there is anything they can do to become eligible. We are also going to try to identify additional assistance available outside of our program.

Ms. Harris stated the Public Information Office will be working with Government and Community Services to get information out to the community about the program through four (4) different areas: Community Media Platforms; Community Partnerships and News Media; Paid Media and Signage; and Program Website. PIO plans on using their usual platforms and ensure we have a presence on our website.

Ms. Keefer stated Government and Community Services have used Constant Contacts for targeted emails to specific constituent groups. They also have a newsletter that goes out to a broad audience of community partners on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. They will ask them to share the information with their co-workers and clients to keep the community updated on what is going on. They plan to distribute fliers and contact community organizations that would typically contact people who need rental assistance. In addition, they have partnerships with municipalities and State agencies.

Ms. Harris noted they have already been contacted by news media outlets that are interested in what Richland County is doing and when the program will start. In addition, we can engage

Facebook advertising, Tele-Townhalls, Zoom or Livestream meetings.

Ms. Keefer stated they have worked with the COMET about putting signage inside the buses.

Ms. Harris stated they want to have a link on the County website that will direct the public to the program website.

Mr. King stated the recommended target go live date is Monday, April 5, 2021.

Ms. Barron inquired if they have identified a vendor or started the bid process.

Ms. Powell responded their current disaster recovery vendor has put forth a task order that sets forth a model for how they could assist the County with this program. There will need to be a policy decision made around that. We could go to RFP on this to select another vendor, but based on the timeline that would not be staff's recommendation. She noted her final act as ACA would be to put forth a recommendation to move forward with the current PR vendor in a hybrid approach that points to some internal staff departments supporting these efforts.

Ms. Barron inquired if we have identified the number of staff needed for the hybrid model.

Ms. Powell responded she has done some preliminary analysis of what departments she plug in, and who should be the point of contact, but she would like to touch base with those directors before solidifying her recommendation.

Ms. Barron inquired how long it would be between the application submission and an award being made.

Mr. King responded the onus is going to be on the applicant, but once all the information is received, the check will be cut at the first opportunity. The plan is to make weekly payments.

Ms. Barron responded "as soon as possible" is vague. She understands there is a lot of variables, but based on the model presented, are we looking at five to seven days, seven to twelve days, or do we know.

Mr. King responded, once the application is verified and recommended for approval, the payment should be made in one (1) business week.

Ms. Barron inquired about getting the information out into the community. A lot of the ways appear to be digital. What are our traditional modes of communicating with the citizens, outside of the digital platform?

Ms. Harris responded that is where the community partnerships and news media will come into play, as well as the Richland Library.

Ms. Keefer noted some of the non-digital resources often the churches, schools and libraries. They are already taking steps to make sure we are in contact with those organizations and to make sure we are available to them, as needed.

Ms. McBride noted she has concerns about the implementation and would like to speak with Administration separately. One of her major concerns is the April 5<sup>th</sup> implementation date. This

does not give us a lot of time, and based on prior programs and implementations, April and May could be tied up with getting the kinks out. She noted many programs in other counties and states have started their implementation process. Like Ms. Barron she also is concerned with the PR. Many of the underserved communities do not get the needed information. She wants to ensure the larger landlords do not work the process and overtake the program. She also is concerned with who we get to implement the program. Overall, she is pleased with the requirements from the Federal Government.

Ms. Newton inquired if we have already been in contact with the organizations that are frequently asked for this type of assistance. For example, United Way, 2-1-1, Cooperative Ministries.

Ms. Keefer responded she has not spoken to them directly because it might have been premature to do so, but they are on her list to contact.

Ms. Newton inquired, while there are guidelines from the Federal Government, we will customize the parameters, so we have latitude, in terms of how we are shaping our requirements.

Mr. King responded the policies and procedures were designed to reflect the requirements of the statute. However, the guidance from the Treasury puts the onus on us in areas of self-certification.

Ms. Newton inquired if the City of Columbia has a similar program.

Mr. King responded the City of Columbia did not qualify because they did not meet the population-base qualification.

Mr. Livingston inquired if a person could receive both utility and rental assistance.

Mr. King responded in the affirmative.

Mr. Livingston inquired if that requires separate applications.

Mr. King responded in the affirmative. If the utilities are included in the rent, there would only be one application.

Mr. Livingston inquired if individuals would be allowed to be paid retroactively.

Mr. King responded they can pay arrears rental and utilities back to March 20, 2020.

Mr. Malinowski noted he does not want to see the larger landlords getting the bulk of these funds to the exclusion of the individual residents. He wants to ensure we have fair distribution to make sure individuals benefit also.

Ms. McBride inquired about how much will go to administer the program.

Mr. King responded the maximum is 10% of the grant allotment, which equates to \$1.25M. He noted they are going attempt to minimize administrative cost with a focus on maximizing the dollars for our residents in need.

Ms. McBride noted, when we tried to use staff in the past, there was not enough staff or was not their area of expertise. She does not want to risk not distributing the funds by the September

deadline.

Ms. Powell responded Ms. McBride is correct, and that is the reason for the hybrid approach.

Ms. Barron suggested using a temporary agency with implementing this program because it is imperative they get these funds out to the community as quickly as possible. She wanted to ensure that local landlords have an opportunity to these funds. We may want to go into the community and help people with this process because there will be landlords that might not want to go through the process. Hopefully the application process will not be so convoluted that people can move through quickly and understand.

Mr. Brown stated he would strongly suggest the committee consider the recommendation we are going to make. Not only is the staffing part important, but the documentation is very important because we will be dealing with Federal dollars. When incorporating other organization into Richland County, we are asking them to make sure they are compliant with Federal guidelines on behalf of Richland County, even though Richland County will be responsible if someone inadvertently takes a misstep. He did not want to portion it out to multiple agencies because you open yourself up for exposure with potentially inconsistent documentation and processes that Richland County would ultimately be responsible for.

Ms. Newton inquired when the recommendations and policies would be before Council.

Mr. Brown responded this would have to go through committee. They would like to have time to present again in March, so it can go to Council for approval in March, which would allow us to stand up this program as early as April.

6. **COVID-19 Relief – Disaster Recovery Funds** – Mr. Brown wanted a brief moment to bring the members not familiar with the actions Council previously took related to the COVID Disaster Recovery Funds. Council allocated funding from the Disaster Recovery Funds to be used for COVID-19 relief. Council gave the Administrator the ability to use those funds as necessary to support the operations related to COVID-19 relief. Since that time, we have tried to apply for grants to assist agencies in need of funds. For example, using partitions in the Magistrate facilities. Some of those grants required that we start doing those things in 2021. Obviously, for us that is too late. There are steps we have already taken to try to mitigate COVID issues. We have departments with bills that we need to try to accommodate. He is specifically asking the committee to allow the Administrator to use those funds associated with COVID-19 relief to pay for those items that do not have a line item to afford those expenses in their current budget. For example, we have one invoice that is \$120,000 - \$150,000 for services related to partitions that we do not have separate funding to deal with.

Ms. McBride inquired if Mr. Brown was referring to governmental departments.

Mr. Brown responded in the affirmative.

Ms. McBride stated, for clarification, the funds provided were for constituents, and we did not expend those funds.

Mr. Brown responded over \$1M was expended, but there are some funds that have not been used.

Ms. McBride stated the need was so great that all the money should have went to the constituents, not the departments.

Mr. Hayes noted Council voted for \$250,000 to go to Senior Resources and it was fully expended. Besides that, Council voted for a grant program totaling \$750,000; \$250,000 was for non-profits and \$500,000 was for small businesses. To date, \$694,000 of those funds were expended, which is roughly 93% of those funds. A lot of the delays were due to the program being new and a lot of the grantees having trouble being compliant. He noted the amounts Mr. Brown referenced were for funds outside of the program, and is available for Council to redirect, if they choose to do so.

Ms. McBride responded she appreciated the hard work staff has done. She noted there was still confusion about the \$250,000 that went to constituents.

Mr. Brown responded there are two things he is trying to accomplish. One was to allow Council to be aware of the funding that is still available, and to communicate the funding needs. Several resources are available to citizens that are not available to County Government. With that being the case, we have some initiatives that have been put in place that the County has to address in some shape, form or fashion. In terms of COVID-19 Disaster Recovery Funds, that is the only line item the County has where they set aside any money related to COVID-19 relief. He noted he may have to come to Council at another time and say, "We have some outstanding invoices that we need to address through amendments." This is an opportunity not to do that.

Ms. Newton inquired if Mr. Brown needs action at this meeting.

Mr. Brown responded he does not need it today, but we do have invoices we are going to have to address. By the next meeting, he will need some type of decision.

Ms. Newton inquired, if they use the funds, what are we repurposing from? Were they previously designated for something specific? She noted it would be helpful if we could get a general projection of the type of expenditures related to COVID.

Mr. Brown responded, when they came back to us, regarding the funding we applied for, they said, "You have to have used these funds starting January 1, 2021." We have been dealing with the information before January 1<sup>st</sup>, so that created the necessity we did not know would be required.

Ms. Barron stated for clarification, the invoices that need to be paid, fits into the category of the funds that have to be expended starting in January 2021.

Mr. Brown responded the invoices are for work done in 2020. The grant funds we were approved for, and hoped would cover these invoices, require the work to be done in 2021.

Ms. Barron inquired if we have other items that could be used for the grant funds starting January 2021.

Mr. Brown responded, unless we get another qualified project within this particular jurisdiction, the funds would not be able to be used by Richland County.

Ms. Barron inquired as to the total amount of COVID Disaster Relief Funds received.



Mr. Brown responded it was about \$1.5M.

Ms. Barron inquired, when they awarded grants to the non-profits and business, how many rounds did they do.

Mr. Hayes responded \$1.9M was awarded, of that \$1M was for grants and he believes there were five (5) rounds.

7. **Resuming Limited In-Person Services** – Mr. Brown stated he broached the subject last year about offering limited in-person services depending on what was happening with the pandemic. Staff acquired a program which will allow for appointments. The IT Department has been working with several agencies that require a certain level of in-person services. They have made headway in verifying those program partners are up and running. We are looking to implement some of those things.

Ms. Newton inquired if there was a tentative and/or phased reopening plan. She is concerned about being able to offer more in-person service support for the constituents that may not be internet savvy.

Mr. Brown noted we do have some limited in-person services taking place now. He stated they do recognize we have individuals in our community that have internet connectivity issues; therefore, we have to provide a level of in-person services. He noted departments have mixed feelings about opening up for more in-person services. The Auditor's and Treasurer's Offices receive request for in-person services. Next week, we plan to have conversations with those offices and the IT Department to determine whether we can get the green light to implement the program. We will continue to do this with all agencies so we can begin to implement the software program. He noted the Auditor and Treasurer have indicated their staffs are ready to move forward when given the green light.

Ms. Newton inquired if Mr. Brown could let her know which departments have a high demand for in-person services, and what in-person services we are currently providing.

Ms. McBride inquired how we are going to address the litter problem. In addition, she inquired about the position of Council on meeting in-person.

Mr. Livingston noted he would make that an agenda item for Council discussion.

Mr. Malinowski stated he has received a lot of calls and emails from individuals complaining about the County not being open, and not getting return calls. They do not know where their applications stands or what they can do. He stated there appears to be an extraordinary amount of time taken for some of the matters residents are asking of County departments. We need to do a better job of responding to individuals.

Ms. Barron noted she was ready for the County to offer more in-person services in a limited capacity. She echoed Mr. Malinowski's sentiments that constituents not getting responses from the business department. She inquired about a target date to start in-person services. Will there be a dry run before they start the services, and would there be a telephone line dedicated to people who do not have access to the internet to make appointments.

Mr. Brown responded, with the appointment system, they know there are individuals that will not be able to go online. When they call the offices, they will be able to make appointments directly. We have citizens that come to the County almost every day. We anticipate we will have people who will walk-in who may not have an appointment. We want to try to work them in as long as the individuals are willing to wait, and maintain social distancing. We have not identified how to deal with person waiting in line outside (i.e. social distancing or waiting in their cars in inclement weather). Those are his biggest concerns. Once we start the limited in-person services, hopefully staff will feel comfortable and there will be no incidents with citizens that are coming in. He does not want it to seem like Richland County provides an unsafe environment. His hope is to have those programs in place in mid-March.

Mr. Livingston inquired if the courthouse was currently open.

Mr. Brown responded there are departments within the courthouse (i.e. Register of Deeds Office) that are open by appointment.

Mr. Livingston inquired how he would get needed information from the courthouse.

Mr. Brown responded, if the documents cannot be accessed electronically, you could setup an appointment to see to those needs.

Mr. Livingston noted he has received complaints from citizens they do not have enough time to complete their business.

Mr. Brown noted he had heard about this issue early on in the pandemic, but he has not heard those complaints recently, but he will still check into that.

Ms. Newton requested information about the draft plans for reopening.

8. **Adjournment** – The meeting adjourned at approximately 5:13PM.