

Daly and friends bash mayor's policies

BY TOM CARTER

SUPERVISOR Daly's agenda dominated a committee hearing that he had billed as the first public critique of the mayor's homeless policies. It turned out to be a gloves-off bashing that seemed to drive a wedge even deeper between the disaffected and city government.

All four dozen homeless, nonprofit workers and others who testified at the City Operations and Neighborhood Services Committee hearing April 19 complained about something. Many said the Newsom administration had struck out on its own to attack homelessness and griped bitterly that the mayor wasn't listening to them. Most despaired over budget cuts and policies they said imperiled the indigent.

Daly had invited them, though he is not a committee member. His e-vite intimated that people were afraid to speak out. Possible reprisals from the mayor's office had created a "culture of fear that has stymied debate on local homeless directions," he wrote. This hearing would be their chance to speak out.

PACKED ROOM, STACKED AGENDA

The legislative chambers were so packed that some speakers waited in the hallway to be called.

Daly had placed six topics related to homelessness on the agenda. With dozens testifying, and Daly's questioning, the hearing ran 4½ hours.

In a prelude, Daly inveighed against his irritants, chief among them "top down" policy changes from the mayor that ignored the supervisors and didn't listen to public input. The creation of Project Homeless Connect was one example, he said, and the redesign of the long-time drop-in program at Hospitality House another. Some people have been waiting seven months for SRO space under Care Not Cash, he said, and he questioned how the rooms are distributed.

Processes and policies aside, several testified, the culprit in the homeless conundrum is lack of money.

At the front of the packed legislative chambers, seated across from the committee behind lustrous wooden fencing, Newsom administration reps sat stoically like a pilloried choir. Among those taking the heat were DHS Director Trent Rohrer, who had designed Care Not Cash; DHS Supportive Housing Operations Coordinator Dariush Kayhan; Barbara Garcia, deputy mental health director; Dr. Bob Cabaj, director of Community Behavior Health Services; and Matt Franklin, director of the Mayor's Office of Housing.

Housing activist Calvin Welch said the city doesn't have enough money for Care Not Cash. In "a public policy fraud," he said, it had depended on the \$250 million housing initiative Prop. A, a point Rohrer later refuted.

M e n t a l health funding cuts will cost the city far more if the mentally ill go to jail instead of getting treatment, said Mary Kate Connor, director of Caduceus Outreach Services.

Project Homeless Connect, Newsom's increasingly popular outreach that helped 1,000 people at its fourth session April 21, was dissed as "culturally incompetent" by one speaker and an "empty gesture" by another.

Others claimed that DHS, which runs Care Not Cash, wasn't communicating with the homeless-savvy, and that the program is a failure.

"One month after Care Not Cash started, we averaged 40 a day in our pews," said Shelly Roder, who runs a daytime sleep area for the homeless in the St. Boniface sanctuary. "Now on a slow day it's 100. It (CNC) provides housing to a lucky few. I hope the legislation gets implemented in a more responsible way."

DHS housing coordinator Kayhan assured Daly that the administration was not trying to redesign the Ten Year Homeless Plan that 35 citizens created, but trying to be efficient in a dire financial environment.

DRAWING A LINE

"We're following the plan," Kayhan said, "but we had to have a strategy. My great worry is that a line will get drawn between folks providing the services and folks in city government, and we'll get stuck and entrenched."

Daly said he appreciated the plea but declared, "There is a line, and it has been drawn by the administration. It's been there some time."

A criticism right off was that Care Not Cash doesn't address all of the homeless. It aims at the 2,400 people in CAAP (County Adult Assistance Program), not the estimated 15,000 homeless whose services are being diminished by budget cuts.

Several men testified that they had spent months in shelters under Care Not Cash, their welfare checks reduced to \$59 and no prospect for a permanent room.

Project Homeless Connect was criticized by some as nothing but a "media buzz." Emilie Hurliaux, of the Women's Community Clinic, said only 2% of the homeless who came to the March event got emergency shelter. She maintained that most homeless show up only "to get a sandwich."

Supervisor Bevan Dufty, Operations and Services Committee vice chair, countered that the hundreds of Homeless Connect volunteers are people who want to contribute, and this is a "simple way to learn."

"It's an empty gesture," Hurliaux responded. She suggested the program is "a useless tool."

Daly included her comments in his blog the next day along with the diatribe from Richard Marquez, a Mission activist who called the program "culturally incompetent." "Call it out for what it is - Care Not Cash has failed," Marquez said. "And just because you put sugar on shit doesn't make it ice cream," a comment that drew applause.

The mayor's midyear budget cuts and a policy switch that drops mental health treatment for the uninsured medically indigent is "antithetical" to the city's long-standing single standard of care policy, said Connor, of Caduceus Outreach. A third of her budget is covered by federal McKinney homeless funds, and more of that money now is to be shifted to housing.

The McKinney funds from HUD were a particularly sore spot. The county receives \$16.8 million, with strings, from the federal government for the homeless. Most goes to services and only \$1 million to housing. The Local Homeless Board, consisting of government

and community representatives, votes on the disbursement. Just the week before this hearing, the board had voted 5-3 to raise the housing cap to \$3 million, necessitating cuts in services. The community viewed the losses such as medical detox, legal services, child care vouchers and a homeless employment program, as devastating to delicately balanced nonprofit budgets.

The \$3 million cap translates to about 100 units, or an estimated loss of \$50,000 in services for every unit.

CITY OFFICIALS HAVE THEIR SAY

Daly was angry because all the department representatives had voted in favor of more housing and against the community's wishes for services. The grudge shadowed the afternoon until Kayhan, a committee member who had voted for it, explained at the end.

The previous month, HUD told San Francisco to move toward a 70%-30% housing-services ratio or risk losing funds, "a fairly aggressive change," Kayhan said.

"We collectively in the city were worried about the entire \$16.8 million being at risk if we didn't do something seriously this year," he said. "The cap doesn't mean we will do the cap, but we need to send a message to HUD. It's not a process that's out of control."

Daly was far from pacified. He saw the "community process," a point HUD insists on for making McKinney grants, as "zero" in this case. Ignoring the community is "worse than having no public policy at all," he said. "It's the ultimate form of disrespect."

Rohrer cited statistics to show Care Not Cash progress since it began in May 2004. The program has 794 SRO units under contract with 776 clients in them. Each month, 25 leave. Another 653 get the \$59 a month (down from \$410); 327 of them live in shelters and the rest found accommodations for themselves, or didn't.

Out of 1,126 who were offered housing, Rohrer said, 280 refused.

"I have constituents in shelters (who are) subsidizing rooms for folks who have been able to walk in through outreach," Daly said. "What can I tell them?"

"The same thing our social workers tell them," Rohrer said. "We are prioritizing them. Now it is clear we need to focus on long-term shelter-stayers." He said DHS is zeroing in on an estimated 200 long-term clients who have been in shelters four to five months.

Rohrer said Care Not Cash doesn't follow a first come-first serve policy because it would be too easy for a newcomer to get into the system and after 30 days end up with housing.

Contrary to claims earlier, Care Not Cash is not bankrupt but self-supporting so far, Rohrer said, and it had never counted on Prop A. From the welfare cash reduction, and the much larger savings from CAAP's caseload decline, Rohrer said, Care Not Cash has \$14.5 million for SRO subsidies and support. Each unit costs the city \$1,000 per month.

Matt Franklin of the mayor's office soothed some feathers by promising "more access" for the community working on homeless issues. He said 3,600 units of housing are in the city's pipeline, a third of them for the chronically homeless. His office's policy, he said, is to serve the 3,000 chronically homeless targeted by the 10-year plan, less than a third of whom are General Assistance recipients.

At the end Daly went over to shake hands with the administration reps, one of the day's surprises. ■

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