

2016 Local Government Excellence Awards
Category: Community Health & Safety
City of Evanston, Illinois - General Assistance Services

Prior to May 1, 2014, Evanston residents received municipal services from two units of government: the City of Evanston and the Township of Evanston. The two units were coterminous and though each had its own tax levy to fund separate services, there was a lack of collaboration and communication that often led to a degree of overlap in the provision of services.

The primary service provided by the Township was general assistance to low-income residents. However, the Township's ability to provide services in an efficient and cost-effective manner was increasingly becoming a topic of contention among residents. Some residents began to voice concerns that more units of government existed than were necessary, and that the City might be more adequately suited to provide services than the Township. With time, the idea of dissolving the Township into the City gained momentum. It was believed that the City could streamline services, utilize funds more effectively, and provide better service to residents.

The City Council and Township Board, which were composed of the same group of elected officials, each held numerous meetings beginning in 2010 to hear public comment and discuss a variety of issues related to a potential Township dissolution. During that time, the City began an analysis of the Township's budget, functions and efficiency, as well as an examination of statutes related to the discontinuance of townships. The City also worked with a consulting group to provide an efficiency assessment of the Township's operations. Following the analyses, several options were identified, including dissolving the Township, sharing resources between the City and Township, and other measures to increase Township efficiency and reduce expenses.

In December 2011, the City Council adopted a resolution to include an advisory referendum on the March 2012 General Election ballot, which voters later overwhelmingly approved. City staff and elected officials then worked with State representatives to lobby for legislation to allow for the dissolution of the Township. In February 2012, a senate bill was introduced to allow for a binding election on the Township dissolution and to make other changes to law that would allow the City to assume the functions of the Township. The bill, however, was never heard in the State Senate and did not move forward.

The following year, Evanston's State Senator sponsored legislation to allow for the City Council to dissolve its township. In August 2013, the Governor signed legislation that allowed Evanston (and only Evanston) to pass an ordinance through city council or resident petition to place a binding referendum on the ballot. In October 2013, the City Council adopted a resolution to include a binding referendum on the March 2014 General Election ballot, which voters also later overwhelmingly approved.

In April 2014, the City Council passed a resolution to approve the dissolution of the Township. On May 1, 2014, responsibility for general assistance was transferred to the City and then assigned to the Health and Human Services Department (formerly the Health Department) by the City Manager.

While a majority of residents believed there were too many units of government and/or the Township's performance was unsatisfactory, there were still concerns among some residents that transferring human services to the City might result in the elimination of what was primarily viewed as a "Black" institution. As most residents receiving services from the Township were of African American or Hispanic descent,

and in the context of a local community hospital having been recently shut down, there were concerns that the City would reduce services to those most in need in an effort to reduce spending.

Following the transference of services, the Health and Human Services Director and City Manager's Office staff performed an extensive analysis of client needs and services offered by the Township. The analysis identified ways the Township was positively serving clients, but also several inefficiencies that contributed to its poor performance. Inefficiencies included: a group of less than qualified caseworkers, the systematic awarding of general assistance aid to ineligible clients, a lack of identification of instances of double billing for client medical expenses, and poor communication and relations with intergovernmental agencies, among others.

The analysis led to the implementation of a vastly different approach to providing human services. Several positions were reclassified, while other non-essential positions were eliminated. Reclassified positions were filled by licensed clinical workers with increased capacities for casework, grant writing, and the identification and enrollment of clients into Affordable Care Act health insurance programs and Social Security. The General Assistance program itself was also changed to reflect a new vision of providing clients with aid and resources to increase the likelihood of becoming self-sustaining individuals, rather than solely providing monetary aid.

General Assistance clients were screened to ensure eligibility for assistance. Though some were no longer eligible due to changes in residence, income or disability status, others were otherwise eligible for State or Federal aid which superseded what was provided by the City. A "Job Club" program was implemented as a partnership with

community organizations to provide mandatory GED, financial literacy, computer use, and basic education classes for clients. Work programs and donations of work attire and pantry items were also provided. Additionally, dental services, substance abuse and mental health treatments were made available. The Department became more actively focused on addressing the causes of poverty, rather than the symptoms.

Partnerships with community organizations and intergovernmental agencies also improved significantly. Funding for community sponsored services increased compared to Township levels, allowing for an expansion of referrals for services not offered by the City.

The overarching goal of the new comprehensive approach was not only to provide clients with opportunities and resources to help increase the likelihood of becoming employed, and ultimately less reliant on financial assistance, but to do so in a way that would help restore the community's faith in their local government's ability to run efficiently and equitably for all individuals. Doing so required a significant amount of outreach to the community through community meetings, resource fairs, and individual interactions to rebuild trust and relationships.

The reorganization and other cost-saving measures, such as shared offices, shared information technology and human resources functions, more attentive screening of applicants and billing procedures, and the enrollment of eligible clients into State and Federal programs, ultimately resulted in improved efficiency and increased service levels that came at no net increase in costs to taxpayers. A fiscal analysis of the Township's final year of operation with that of 2015 revealed expenditure reductions of \$871,298 (equal to 52% of the Township's annual expenditures) and the replacement of

the Township's \$282,017 annual deficit with the City's \$524,889 annual surplus. Since the date of transference, over 50 General Assistance clients have been enrolled in State and Federal programs, allowing for City assistance to other eligible clients. More importantly, resident satisfaction has improved and concerns over the closing of minority-serving institutions have close to disappeared.

The process of planning for and implementing the transference of services to the City was one that required a great deal of community outreach and transparency. While City staff and elected officials understood the need to keep residents apprised of the process and its outcomes, there was an underestimation of the amount and frequency of outreach required to reassure residents that human services to low-income residents would not be eliminated. Similarly, providing full transparency and disclosure to residents proved difficult as staff analyses revealed a much greater extent of inefficiency (and borderline unethical/illegal activity) from the Township than what was originally perceived. As the same group of elected officials responsible for the Township were still responsible for the City, conveying those issues to the public called for a carefully thought out approach. Once clients began to buy-in to the program, and as residents saw evidence of improvement through budget documents and word of mouth, the process became much more manageable. To this day, staff continue to work to improve the efficiency of our human services programming so that it can one day serve as a model for other municipalities to follow.