

Highland Park Neighborhood Association

August 2022 Minutes

Meeting Date: August 9, 2022

President Elizabeth Sanfelippo called the August 2022 meeting of the Highland Park Neighborhood Association (hybrid meeting being held in person and via Zoom) to order at 6:00 pm. She welcomed everyone and introduced herself as President, Mark Ritter as Vice President and Judy Jones as Secretary.

Sanfelippo asked if residents had reviewed the July 2022 meeting minutes and whether there were any changes or corrections needed. Jones reported one correction had been reported to her, that her references to the 'Alabama Historical Society' should be changed to 'Alabama Historical Commission'. No other changes or corrections were noted. Mary Helen Crowe moved to approve the July 2022 minutes as corrected. John Somerset seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously.

Sanfelippo performed a roll call as required by the city for virtual meetings.

Sanfelippo noted there were no representatives from Public Works or the Birmingham Police Department in attendance. She introduced Captain King from the Avondale Firehouse Station. Captain King talked about the importance of having working smoke detectors in homes. He noted that statistically most fires start in the kitchen. Captain King said the fire department would come and install fire detectors in your home, interested residents can call 205-250-7540. He recommended checking detectors monthly. King told the group that there is an ordinance against residents in high rise buildings having grills on their patios or decks. A resident asked if the Fire Department provides the smoke detectors. Captain King answered yes saying the fire department had to install the detectors, they couldn't just leave them with the resident. He shared that Highland Park was covered by three fire stations - #22, #2 and #10. Sanfelippo thanked them for coming and for their continued service.

Speaker: Gun Violence Intervention Program/Dr. Mark Wilson

Dr. Mark Wilson introduced himself as Highland Park resident and head of the Jefferson County Department of Health. He said he'd been with the Department for almost 11 years and emphasized it was there to serve all residents of Jefferson County. Wilson said he was here tonight to talk about homicides in Birmingham and Jefferson county - and their efforts to address that as a public health department. He said he wanted to brief residents on a new initiative called 'Hospital-linked Violence Intervention Program'. Wilson said historically local health departments in the South have not been involved in violence intervention, their role has been just tracking data on homicides. He said starting in about 2018 they identified homicides as a major public problem in Jefferson County and added to their strategic plan to start exploring ways in which the health department could help address the problem. Wilson said they did a lot of engagement with experts in the field as well as community stakeholders, including the City of Birmingham's Office of Peace and Policy. Wilson said they helped the

city with a strategic planning process to get some community engagement and input on how to best address violence, especially things that go beyond law enforcement or police activities. Representatives from groups including Moms Demand Action, Faith in Action, Every Town for Gun Safety, and the UAB Department of Trauma Surgery were among those *at the table* as early as 2019. Wilson said they looked at what might be acceptable to the communities that were most affected by violence because there have been some efforts in the past that were not accepted by the community. He said they settled on an evidence-based model that is in about 40 other cities in the United States called 'hospital-based violence intervention program'. Wilson said they will call Jefferson county's program 'hospital-linked' because it will not be based in the hospital. He shared that in 2014 they actually had one of the lowest rates of homicide in the last 30 years or so. Wilson said after 2014 the numbers started shooting up dramatically to where the levels city and county wide are the highest they've been in over 30 years. He said it is a huge problem, it is primarily affecting African American men in the 15 to 45 age range, adding that represented about 90% of the cases. Wilson said, to the Public Health Department, this represents a health disparity problem, that this is the number one cause of death for these young men. He said beyond the deaths it was having a huge impact on families in those communities where the homicides are occurring and the communities more broadly. He said it appears it's just a vicious cycle and a culture of violence that is very hard to break.

Wilson said when people make it to UAB Trauma Center after being shot they have a very good chance of surviving. He said UAB, in the last couple of years, has treated over 600 gunshot victims from Jefferson County each year. He said there is a huge opportunity to intervene in the lives of those people when they are in the hospital still recovering from a gunshot wound and before they go home. He said the model for the 'Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program' is to hire and train people from the community as 'Violence Intervention Specialists'. He said they were looking for people with at least a high school diploma who know the community and have some lived experience, have been affected by violence in their own lives or families. He said they will receive extensive training. Their job is to go to the hospital when the hospital identifies someone who has survived a gunshot wound who is interested in getting help. The specialists will meet them at the hospital, sign them up for the program (get consent) and then offer them some case management services over the ensuing six to twelve months. The goals of the program are 1, to reduce subsequent acts of violence. Wilson said some national statistics show that people who survive homicide attempts and are hospitalized have a 20% chance of dying in the following 5 years and a 40% chance of being re-hospitalized with another violent injury. Wilson said the first thing was to keep them safe when they leave the hospital, that sometimes this involves relocation. 2nd goal is to assess their propensity to retaliate and try to intervene. 3rd goal is to offer them other services with additional goals, to make sure they heal physically, emotionally and mentally and have the resources they need to get their lives back on track. Wilson said there was another statistic that showed people involved with this program versus those who are not; those who are not are six times more likely to end up shot again than the people who have been enrolled in a program like this. Wilson said they put out a Request for Proposals last winter for non-profits organizations in the community to actually run this program. He said our Health Department has committed to fund the start up of the program and sustained

funding at \$1.1 million per year indefinitely and the city of Birmingham, thanks to Councilor Abbott and other City Council members, approved for some of the American Rescue Plan money to come from the city to help expand this program after its first year – and an additional commitment of \$2.1 million total. Wilson reported that the Department of Health awarded a grant to the Offender Alumni Association (OAA), which has done similar work in Atlanta with ex-offenders. He said they were in the process of working with OAA along with a representative from UAB Trauma Service to do the interviews and hiring. He said the initial staffing will be three Violence Intervention Specialists, one Supervisor, one full-time Social Worker – and some additional staffing to help the families of the victims. He said some of the hiring has happened. He told the group if anyone knows social workers who might be interested in working with this type of program to let them know. Wilson said he thought the training for staff may start in September or October. He said they were hoping the first Intervention Specialist would be in the hospital starting in December or January at the latest. Wilson said they have a lot of hope this will help the individuals who are enrolled in the program. He said they are putting a lot of money into this effort but despite that it will still only represent a drop in the bucket in terms of the number of people we can help versus those that need help. He said it was only one small piece of what needs to be a much larger effort if we are ever really going to turn this around and see significant improvement, not only just in the statistics but in the lives of the families and communities that are most affected.

Wilson asked if there were any questions. A retired physician expressed significant frustration in the reality of the number of guns there are in our society. He said he knew the government was trying to do things with respect to background checks, etc. that will hopefully help to some degree. He said he didn't want to be a pessimist but he just felt it was too late, past the point of no return, that we're never going to get these guns back, that we're in trouble. He said he hopes people like Wilson are successful in trying to do good, that he know they are really trying but that he just feels a little pessimistic. Wilson said he tends to agree, that it is a huge problem. He said we as a Health Department can't do much about the number of guns that are out there. He said we are also in a political environment where certain gun control laws are not likely to occur. Wilson said a lot of the teenagers, the kids, growing up in these neighborhoods, who carry guns – are doing so because they don't feel safe, they feel like they have to have them for protection. Wilson said there are other programs, very small fledgling programs, that are trying to help kids with conflict resolution, that there needs to be more of that. Wilson said one program he likes is 'Cure Violence' – a program where you have 'violence interrupters' hired and trained, but instead of what they are doing (after someone is shot) they are out in the community, in the hot spots, identifying conflicts as they are emerging and intervening to de-escalate them. Wilson said they didn't want to try and initiate that program at this time, it is higher risk – but he does think a 'Cure Violence' type program would be a good 'next step' if they can find funding for it for Birmingham. John Somerset said 'desperate people do desperate things' especially when they feel hopeless – and that one of the things we can do is make them feel like there is hope.

Sanfelippo said there was a question from an online attendee – 'how much of the gun violence is related to drugs'? Wilson said he didn't know specifically, he said he felt a lot of it

is but he didn't have the statistics on that. He said the drug problem was something else they were trying to address, that it had skyrocketed pretty much in parallel with the homicides. He said the opioid deaths started going up in about 2012. The homicides started going up in 2015.

Resident Marcy Morgenbesser said she was a social worker – and is encouraged at the work being done – that all we can do is start where we can with respect to stable housing, jobs and poverty - and just build up. She said she wondered if there would be 'back to school support. Wilson said he felt that part of the funding for this is to pay for some of that wrap-around support needed to be successful. He said one of the things they most worry about is housing and emergency housing. He said they are having conversations with 'partners', in particular that they are talking to 'One Roof' about some possibilities there. He said if nothing else they will be funding to put people up in an inexpensive hotel room somewhere at least to keep them safe for a while.

A resident spoke about meeting a fellow, a Shriner, in Birmingham, who told him about a raffle (\$20 tickets) August 27 in which the Shriners were giving away, he thought, 130 guns. He said, to him, this seems like pouring gasoline on a fire. He said he googled it and found it was a national event.

Mary Helen Crowe asked if there had been a pilot for this program. Wilson answered that they are calling this program, what is happening right now in Birmingham, a pilot. He said that is how they labeled the project in their Request for Proposals. He said they intend to re-evaluate and make adjustments after the first year and reiterated that this program is currently underway in about 40 cities nationwide.

Sanfelippo thanked him for his service to the community and for speaking to the neighborhood this evening. Wilson said he has an excellent team of people at the Health Department.

City Council Update/Councilwoman Valerie Abbott

Councilwoman Abbott reported today was Council meeting day. She said Trash & Brush pickup has been a huge topic lately. She said the city has 27 trucks but only 21 drivers, and that the city is desperately trying to hire drivers. Abbott said the Water Works has shared with her that they were also having staffing problems, not enough individuals to read meters. Abbott said there was now a point person for billing issues, Geraldine Davis. Abbott reiterated the City doesn't have anything to do with the Water Works. Abbott said another issue for which complaints are being received was traffic calming, that the city was receiving a lot of complaints about speeding, drivers doing strange things. She said traffic calming is something the city is working on - but there's a lot of neighborhoods wanting assistance with this. She said they are creating a list and investigating the locations. She said the city had put money in the budget for calming measures but that neighborhoods or groups of concerned citizens were going to have to pay for half the costs of whatever is done. Abbott said if residents had a location to suggest for calming measures to call 311. Abbott reminded

residents to call 911 in the case of emergencies - and the non-emergency number is 205-328-9311. She recommended people get the SeeClickFix app to report issues.

Resident Wink Chapman reported working with Eliza Bigham in James Fowler's office regarding the intersection at 28th and Highland Court. He said the city had documented traffic sometimes exceeding speeds of 50 mph coming down that hill on Highland. He said Bigham had agreed that after the World Games they would put a three-way stop at that intersection. He said then last week he received an email from Bigham saying the Neighborhood Association has said they were going to take that intersection on themselves, so the city was now not going to do anything. Chapman said they used Sanfelippo's name specifically. Chapman said if the Neighborhood Association can take over, that he was going to order the stop signs, and he is going to put speed bumps in and he will paint the crosswalks - that people were not going to go 50 mph down his street anymore. Sanfelippo said she was wholly unfamiliar with the neighborhood taking on these projects at the current time, but the Friends of Highland Park 501c3 was in talks to help with projects. She said she would get in touch with Fowler, find out more on the situation, and will get back with him because that's not correct. Councilor Abbott added that no private citizen can take on any kind of that work so that's confusing. Jones said that Friends of Highland Park (FOHP) had met with Fowler to discuss traffic calming measures for the neighborhood. She said the group was discussing various projects and raising some funds to do some of those things. Marian Wilson said FOHP did discuss that intersection and that perhaps someone had mis-communicated and incorrectly said it was the neighborhood association. Both Wilson and Sanfelippo said more would be discussed about crosswalks and other calming measures at the October neighborhood meeting.

Announcements

Sanfelippo reminded the group that recycling is the 1st and 3rd Wednesday of each month, and that the next recycling pickup would be on July 20. She said the next large trash and brush pick-up will be on August 23 - and they're running behind. Sanfelippo said if residents are missed to report it but perhaps wait a few days before doing so because they trucks may come back through. Sanfelippo told residents that Sidewalk Film Festival is August 22-28. She said there is a Folk Festival in Avondale Park on the 27th.

Sanfelippo said she had learned the City was prepping paperwork to take Robert Keller to Circuit Court about his derelict properties. She said we were waiting on some clarification from Parks & Rec on replacement of the lights in Rhodes Park. She said there were some residents in the Hanover Circle area interested in putting some benches and planting in the park there, for residents to expect a survey in a month or two. She said someone had asked about the Planned Parenthood building - she spoke to the owner yesterday and learned they now have a few office tenants and are continuing to look for others. Sanfelippo reported the on the building next to the EATS property, that has at times been a contentious issue for nearby residents. She learned the owner, a doctor who uses it for storage, is putting it up for sale.

Next Meeting. Sanfelippo said the next meeting will be held 6 pm Tuesday September 13, in person and Zoom, at the Highland Golf Club.

Phillip Foster moved to adjourn the meeting. Ray Davis seconded. The August 2022 Highland Park Neighborhood Association meeting was adjourned at 7:00 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,
Judy Jones
Secretary, Highland Park Neighborhood Association