



Date: June 3, 2013

To: Chairwoman Romo West, Vice-Chair Stamper, members of the Committee

From: Sherrie Tussler, Executive Director, Hunger Task Force

Hunger Task Force was last in front of this committee in December 2012. At that time, Director Hector Colon was seeking approval to lease the Coggs Building to the State of Wisconsin Department of Health Services, effectively requesting that Hunger Task Force be removed from a well-established self-help center located at Coggs in Room 105. This Committee and the full County Board attached an amendment to the resolution requiring Director Colon to continue to work with Hunger Task Force to assure services for the needy at the Coggs Center.

Ultimately Hunger Task Force left Room 105, dismantling the self-service center on January 1 2013. Two bi-lingual/bi-cultural employees were then stationed inside Room 102A in order to meet the continuing needs of the limited English proficient households that visit the Coggs Center.

Hunger Task Force filed a Civil Rights Compliance Complaint in October 2009 with the State of Wisconsin after noting uncorrected and ongoing disparate treatment of people who do not read, write or speak English well enough to manage their application or ongoing receipt of FoodShare without translation assistance. Our complaint was substantiated and the State has been working to remediate the issues by hiring translators and bi-lingual staff.

Yet the single most important corrective action has not been implemented—the translation of vital documents. Vital documents are the applications, award notices, review appointments, rights information and fair hearing forms. Under the law they must be translated. Our State has incorporated a “language dialogue box” to accommodate people who speak another language. The box explains that if you need an interpreter you have to call a hotline. The hotline is answered by private sector employees who can obtain language interpretation services but cannot make changes to a case. This results in both disparate treatment, and now—after almost four years of knowing about the problem, but not fixing it—disparate impact. Our staff routinely meet people who have had their case closed, received an overpayment or underpayment, or not been given rights information because they do not read, write or speak English. This is illegal.

The State would prefer that we leave the Coggs Building because we collect evidence of maltreatment of FoodShare-eligible customers and share it with the Civil Rights Office and the USDA. The State has bullied Director Colon, demanding use of the self-service area in Room 105 and threatened to leave the Coggs Building. Now working in Room 102A, Hunger Task

FREE & LOCAL



Force staff are challenged to greet customers due to a required ticket issued by the reception staff. No one can enter the room without proper screening. In late May we rolled a computer cart into the waiting area to allow people to skip the wait, get help from our staff and use the computer and printer to conduct their business independently. Carts of this type are in use at the NW W-2 agency, UMOS and Independence First, and allow customers to manage their case without a wait.

The State complained to Director Colon, and the Director demanded that we leave the area and remove the rolling cart. Today we are before you with a simple request—can we stay inside the Coggs Building and use our rolling computer stations to allow people who are waiting to help themselves? Is it the will of the County Board to direct policy on the use of County-owned buildings? Can Director Colon be directed by this Committee, or is he the sole authority for use of the Coggs Building?

Hunger Task Force has served the community for nearly 40 years. Our interest is in helping the poorest of the poor obtain equal and reliable access to food. Since occupying the Coggs Building under agreement with prior administrators, Hunger Task Force has assisted over 37,000 people to obtain or maintain access to FoodShare. The total value of benefits captured for this group, assumed to be spent on food here in our community, is over \$26 million.

In January 2015 the State of Wisconsin will roll out a Food Stamp Employment and Training Program for the 28,982 estimated able-bodied working adults in Milwaukee County. People who fail to cooperate with a 20-hour per week work requirement will be limited to three months of FoodShare in a three year period. The State estimates 14,491 people from Milwaukee will be cut off from receiving food benefits. The impact of a program of this type on homeless shelters and soup kitchens is untold.

We believe Director Colon should learn how FoodShare abates hunger in Milwaukee so that he can be a strong public servant. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

FREE & LOCAL