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City awards grant for homeless outreach

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May 11, 2010 08:55:00 PM

TOSHA SKETO / News Herald Writer

PANAMA CITY — The City Commission awarded \$28,000 to the Homeless and Hunger Coalition of Northwest Florida at last night's meeting, despite concern from several commissioners.

Michael Johnson, director of Community Development Block Grant and State Housing Initiative Partnership programs, said the money would be used to hire a social worker to assist the local homeless population by providing case management, referral services and food and housing assistance.

"My recollection of the budget workshop was that this money was going to be allocated for assisting folks to get home," Commissioner John Kady said during the meeting. "It seems like the purpose we agreed upon has been changed."

Johnson said assisting homeless individuals in obtaining bus tickets home "may be part of it," but it is not the main purpose of the grant.

"You can give them a one-way ticket home ... but then there's more folks coming in," Commissioner Jonathan Wilson added.

Wilson was alone in his unquestioning support, as Commissioners Billy Rader and Nancy Wengel also expressed confusion about the purpose of the grant, as well as which agency would receive the grant. Although the grant contract lists the Homeless and Hunger Coalition, the agenda item stated the award would go to Anchorage Children's Home of Bay County Inc.

"There's also an added layer of bureaucracy," Wengel said. "To trickle it from this agency to another agency is just too many layers for me."

Johnson said that the coalition is responsible for "the administration of the continuum of care for Panama City," and therefore, the appropriate agency to receive the grant. However, the coalition has no employees, so the city selected Anchorage.

The term of the grant ends at the end of this fiscal year, Aug. 31, so it might not be used in full. Johnson said he doubted Anchorage would spend \$28,000 on a social worker in four months.

"They're going to spend the money," Kady countered.

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Panama City resident Dwight Hicks approached the commission regarding the expenditure, saying the police department already was doing a good job of addressing the homeless population downtown.

But Wilson countered that he's had a lot of people ask him what the city was doing about homelessness, and until now, he's had nothing to tell them.

"People look to the City Commission to get some lead and guidance on the things that affect them," he said. "This social worker, in my estimation, would go a long way in helping a lot of these people out of their problems."

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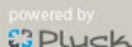
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the money doesn't need to buy bus tickets out of town, worked in healthcare and social work for many years, this is NOT the solution! Educate, teach job skills, teach basic living skills! Large population of homeless young adults ages from average of 17-28 are living from pillar to post in Bay County. They can't get jobs, no permanent address, get into drugs, get in trouble and end up in jail, look at statistics of jail population... they need help, they are our future generation of adults to run things when we are older. I guarantee if you had a "free giveaway" setup for say "example: fast food" just one day, you would get thousands in this age range that are homeless, jobless, and helpless...



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