

The Metropolitan Action Commission Responds to the Challenge on our ability to Serve

I am writing with a heart that is filled with greater resolve and a deep sadness over the article that ran in the December 30, 2005 edition of The Tennessean titled, “*Metro had to Give Feds back \$98,000 intended to help Needy Pay Bills.*” While it is clear to us the story, reporter Anne Paine was attempting to write, the information was grossly misrepresented and failed to give a remotely accurate picture of the facts or the work of the Metropolitan Action Commission. I am compelled for the sake of the people we serve, the citizens of our city, and our staff who work tirelessly to assist our clients to write this editorial.

Despite repeated attempts to explain to The Tennessean the funding process, the reporter insisted on stating that dollars were returned to the feds. This is inaccurate. Dollars that are not spent are reallocated by the state and redistributed to the 19 community action agencies of which we are apart, and are used in this current fiscal year which began July 1, 2005. It was accurately reflected in the article that we requested that the full amount be returned to us. Our request was made because unlike other agencies in the state, we have consistently spent down all of our dollars. However because our funds were not received until the end of May 2005 due to an allocation error acknowledged by the state in a letter to us in March, we requested that the full amount be returned to us this fiscal year. We asked for the full amount and not simply the allocated portion (which is a lower amount), so that we could have ample time to spend the full remaining funds in this fiscal year. We felt that since the state made an error in the allocation process, which delayed the receipt of the funds, consideration was warranted. To date, we have not heard officially the state’s decision on this request.

The Tennessean was accurate to reflect that remaining \$98,000 of the \$133,000 that we received for the remaining 25 days of service we had left in the last fiscal year were not exhausted in that time period. However, it is also essential to note that the photos contained in The Tennessean’s article reflect persons standing outside our building prior to our doors opening at 8am the days immediately following the Christmas holiday. It is inaccurate to use those photos to imply that our numbers at the end of June were remotely close to the numbers we have seen this year already. Historically we see an increased amount of families immediately following the Christmas holiday due to families having other expenses during this time of the year.

I was further disheartened that The Tennessean found it important to note a sign inside of our building that indicated we will not see additional clients until after 2 p.m., but failed to mention that when we reached the 75 person capacity in our main waiting room, we gave those beyond the 75th customer the option of remaining and explained that should they decide to stay they will have a long wait. Only two people that day requested to return at a later time, the others stayed and were served. Our agency has both federal and state funds available to assist our customers.

I do agree with The Tennessean that it is difficult to know that our clients are arriving at 6am. We also certainly understand a statement by a mother waiting with young children about being upset about us not opening earlier than our regular hours of business. It was

curious to me however, that The Tennessean reporter included this comment but failed to mention that she witnessed that once our doors open at 8 a.m. we provide milk and snacks for children as well as hot beverages and snacks for our customers because we realized they have waited and we are unsure as to whether they have eaten.

Any belief that an agency has failed to utilize dollars to serve customers would be alarming to most of us. It is my hope that in the future an accurate series of information can be used to tell a story. I recall clearly during the two days that The Tennessean reporter was in our building, overhearing her questioning the customers about the services they were receiving and if they had been served. I wonder why none of those quotes were in the article? Perhaps because those stories failed to support the slant that the reporter covering this story for The Tennessean was so keen on filing.

I end by saying thanks to all of you who have called to lend your support to our work, and to our staff. Finally to the more than 10,000 persons we serve, thank you for allowing us to do so.

Cynthia Croom
Executive Director, Metropolitan Action Commission