



City of San Antonio

Agenda Memorandum

File Number:21-2059

Agenda Item Number: 2

Agenda Date: 3/10/2021

In Control: Culture and Neighborhood Services Committee

DEPARTMENT: Neighborhood and Housing Services

DEPARTMENT HEAD: Verónica R. Soto, FAICP, Director

COUNCIL DISTRICTS IMPACTED: All Council Districts

SUBJECT:

Briefing on the Right to Counsel program.

SUMMARY:

The Right to Counsel program consists of legal services for renters at or below 100% area median income who are facing landlord/tenant issues such as eviction, tenant Know-Your-Rights trainings and support to city staff working at the courts on eviction interventions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The FY 2020 Adopted Budget included a recurring earmark of \$100,000 in existing Risk Mitigation budget of \$1,000,000 for a Right to Counsel (RTC) pilot program. This program provides help to renters at or below 100% area median income who are facing landlord/tenant issues, such as eviction. It currently administered by Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Inc. (TRLA). Through the program, tenants receive advice and representation. TRLA also conducts monthly tenant Know-Your-Rights trainings for the general public in English and Spanish.

The Right to Counsel Pilot Program began in March 1, 2020. Since that time TRLA has provided 349 households with legal services, all below 80% AMI. TRLA has also provided 13 public 'Know Your Rights' trainings on tenants' rights to over 1,000 individuals.

In June 2020, the pilot program expanded using federal CARES Act funding in order to meet further need attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to advice and representation to tenants and monthly Know-Your-Rights trainings, TRLA helps train and provides 'virtual help-desk services' to the eviction court support team from the Neighborhood and Housing Services under this contract. The services were key in several instances where parties had questions about the CDC moratorium and the process for filing appeals with courts.

TRLA further supported tenants in filing appeals by submitting the required payment to the court in the amount of one-month's rent to process the appeal that allowed their cases to be re-heard.

The FY 2021 General Fund Revised Budget includes \$200,000 in funding for the Right to Counsel program as well as \$300,000 for a new legal kiosk intervention so that Right to Counsel services could have a broader reach. This funding was approved as part of the FY 2021 Adopted Budget to transition the "pilot" phase of this program could transition to a recurring permanent program since the program proved its value to help tenants. The new legal kiosks funding allows for the purchase of technology for 4 to 6 legal kiosks to be located throughout the City and materials for one mobile kiosk. It is anticipated that not all the \$300,000 will be utilized for technology acquisition. ITSD, NHSD, and the Municipal courts are working together to launch the kiosks. The legal kiosks will serve as intake points for low-income San Antonio households in need of legal aid services. Residents can use these kiosks to connect to Right to Counsel (RTC) and municipal court services, as well as video chat with court staff or Right to Counsel attorneys.

ISSUE:

The City issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Right to Counsel (RTC) Program on December 23, 2020. The RFP included core legal services such as streamlining the eviction settlement and dismissal process, providing training to City staff on the eviction process, and providing legal consultation to resolve pending eviction cases. In addition to RTC services, the RFP sought a vendor to staff new legal kiosks in development in collaboration with ITSD and the Municipal Court. These kiosks will be located in the courts, in libraries, and other to-be-determined locations. They will serve as intake points with video conferencing ability for RTC clients to speak with TRLA staff directly. In addition to stationary kiosks, the selected vendor will staff a mobile legal aid kiosk to ensure access for people living unsheltered.

Staff recommends awarding a contract in an amount not to exceed \$200,000 to Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA) for legal services related to the Right to Counsel Program and will present that item for Council consideration on March 18 so that the services can continue.

Performance measures will be submitted monthly and tracked on a regular basis. They will include number of households given legal advice, receiving representation in court or administrative hearing, number of Know-Your-Rights trainings, and others as well as demographic information about all households.

ALTERNATIVES:

For briefing only

FISCAL IMPACT:

For briefing only

RECOMMENDATION:

For briefing only