

Committee Hears Input From Community

by Bob Lothian

The five-member committee appointed by the county to look into how mental health services should be continued in North and Northeast Portland held a public meeting at the North Portland branch library last Wednesday.

Seven witnesses, including present and former employees of North-Northeast Community Mental Health Center, Inc., rehashed problems at the center and made recommendations for improvement.

According to committee chairwoman Kay Dean Toran, the committee will submit a report with recommendations to Multnomah County Executive Dennis Buchanan by Monday, August 18. After a review of the report, the county will make recommendations about how mental health care will continue to be delivered in North-Northeast, Toran said. While the issue is being studied, North-Northeast Community Mental Health will continue to operate through August 31.

The investigating panel was appointed by Buchanan July 17 after the county refused to renew the contract for North-Northeast Community Mental Health. The Multnomah County Social Services Division took that action after 34 of 42 staff members signed a petition asking that the contract not be renewed and that a new board be appointed. The 34 staff members also took a vote of no confidence in center director David Cramer.

Protesting staff members said conditions at the center had become intolerable due to harassment of staff by board members and the center director, because staff were being threatened with firings, and because the center board and management were making incompetent decisions that threatened delivery of services. Fifteen staff members filed stress claims.

The first part of Wednesday night's meeting centered on Delaunay Mental Health Center. Apparently, one option for the county is to have Delaunay take over management of North-Northeast Community Mental Health.

Mick Reynolds, president of the board, and Delores Morgan, executive director, appeared on behalf of Delaunay, located at 5215 N. Lombard.

Toran and panel member Teletha Benjamin questioned the witnesses about Delaunay's ability to serve the minority community, and about minority representation on the board and staff. Reynolds responded that two out of 20 of Delaunay's board members are black and one is an American Indian. According to Morgan, 19 percent of Delaunay's staff are minorities.

Other questions dealt with communications problems between Delaunay and North-Northeast, problems that, according to Reynolds, resulted from the upheaval at North-Northeast.

But Ozodi Osuji, clinical supervisor at North-Northeast, said that part of the communications problem was the perception by staff at North-Northeast that Delaunay does not care for the poor. "That's the reason we do not send our clients to them," he said.

In the same vein, Jim Foster, welfare assistance worker with the Adult Family Services Division, reported that Delaunay had inappropriately billed some of his clients who had been referred to Delaunay. That intimidated the clients and

caused them not to want to seek mental health care, Foster said.

Regarding the internal problems at North-Northeast, Osuji attributed those problems to actions taken "behind the scenes" by a group with a "hidden agenda." That agenda was aimed at undermining Cramer's leadership, Osuji said.

"It seems to me that Mr. Cramer was not given a chance when he came on board," Osuji said. "It was very clear to me there was a power

struggle within the management team."

Dr. Edward Green, a psychiatrist who was fired after a year at North-Northeast and who worked there later for one additional year, read a list of 13 points alleging management and board incompetence.

"This is not a racial issue but a competence issue," Green said. "I think the program itself is salvageable. I think it was sabotaged by the board of directors."



Ozodi Osuji, clinical supervisor at N/NE Mental Health Center, testifies before a five-member county-appointed committee at North Portland branch library last Wednesday. Photo by Richard J. Brown

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