

April 10,2006

To: The Honorable Mayor Kevin Foy, Council Member Sally Greene, and other Honorable members of the Chapel Hill Town Council.

Re: Request for town participation in exploring the effectiveness of IFC services to the homeless population and addressing immediate concerns related to the safety of clients residing at Project Homestart

Honorable Council Members:

I have been personally involved in homeless advocacy in Orange County since December of 2004. In that time, I have been involved in the Community Initiative to End Homelessness (CIEH), participated in the CIEH Community Assessment committee dealing that organizes the federally mandated point in time counts of the homeless population, and have had extensive interactions with IFC officials, staff members, volunteers, clients, and community members. Working with my co-editor Bruce Whealton and others, I have set up a website and community portal called The Other Side Of The Hill, which promotes community advocacy on homeless issues and provides a forum for persons experiencing homelessness and others in the community to share their viewpoints and perspectives. As part of my efforts, I have made regular visits to IFC's offices and its Community House facility and I have gotten to know the personal stories and experiences of a large number of IFC clients and residents of both Community House and Project Homestart over the course of the past 16 months. It is from this perspective that I am writing to you tonight and asking for your assistance.

Tonight the IFC is presenting a petition requesting town appointments to working groups dealing with the task of relocation of IFC's facilities. I, of course, applaud the extensive commitment the town of Chapel Hill has been willing to make on the issue of homelessness in our community. Mayor Foy has been personally involved in many local efforts to combat homelessness to a far greater extent than the majority of mayors in North Carolina and elsewhere. Council Member Greene has put in a great deal of work as the town's representative to the Orange County Partnership to End Homelessness, an organization dedicated to ending homelessness in our community within ten years. Town officials have been extremely informed about the issues relating to homelessness and understanding the needs of persons experiencing homelessness. For that, the community should be grateful. In addition, there are several staff members at the IFC who are extremely dedicated to assisting persons experiencing homelessness through very difficult times. Nothing in this letter is meant to disparage the hard work and dedication of people who put so much time, effort, and hard work into addressing homelessness.

But while praise should be given where it is due, there are also numerous issues that cannot simply be sugar-coated or ignored any longer. Although I would prefer to not be involved in the specifics of offering services and I would certainly prefer to address issues within IFC as opposed to the public sphere, I am involved in this issue in an attempt to help clients, not agencies. Therefore, considering the systematic problems

within IFC's facilities that I have become aware of over the past year and after numerous fruitless attempts to address these issues directly with IFC management, I feel compelled to speak out. My purpose in speaking out is not to air a laundry list of petty grievances of individual clients. If that were all that I had to speak about, I would not waste either my own time or that of the Council. But it has become clear to me over the course of a year that this issue is not one of petty complaints by a few disgruntled residents. Rather, it is a systematic problem of an agency that often operates in an arbitrary and power-hungry manner that does not serve clients effectively or help them make the transition out of homelessness. In fact, IFC policies and procedures often increase the adversity that people who are already going through very difficult times in their lives have to face.

My concerns do not come from talking to one or two disgruntled clients. Rather, they come from listening to a large number of people over a period of many months who have all had similar problems and complaints, along with my own observations of staff interacting with clients. Thus, it is increasingly difficult to explain these complaints away as isolated incidents. While I want to believe that IFC has the best of intentions, what I have too often encountered is a culture of denial and indifference to the plight of many clients. IFC management does seem to realize there are problems with their facilities and they seem unwilling to listen to anyone who suggests that any problem might exist. Listening to some IFC officials describe the environment in their facilities, I am reminded of the claims of our President that Iraqis would greet American troops with flowers and that all is well in Iraq to this day. Thus, it is not difficult to understand why many clients simply give up or leave without speaking out about their experiences or the IFC policies that create additional obstacles for people trying to get their lives together and be a part of this community. Clients too often seem afraid of losing their housing or needed services and staff members who see what is going on seem afraid of "rocking the boat" or losing their jobs.

Of immediate interest is the current situation at Project Homestart, IFC's facility for women and children. In a recent email from an IFC official in response to one of my many attempts to bring serious problems at Homestart to the attention of the main office, I was told that everyone was enjoying their experiences at Homestart. No mention was made of wanting to speak to any of the five different people I have spoken to at length who have a far different view of the facility. In one case, a lengthy written explanation of some of the issues at the facility written by a client who has since left the facility was given to IFC and even posted on the Other Side Of The Hill website. IFC did not even bother to respond to that letter in any way, even though it and other entries posted to our website extensively document a culture of bullying, harassment, special treatment, and homophobia that exists at Homestart. I have attached a copy of that letter here and the other entries may be viewed at <http://www.wordsalad.net/StreetExposure/>. The other residents I have spoken with describe similar circumstances at the facility. I have also heard numerous reports of staff members berating clients and being verbally abusive. This sort of behavior is against IFC's own stated values, as well as simple common standards of decency and humane treatment. Being subjected to bullying, harassment, and verbal abuse is also not conducive to individuals getting their lives back together. From what I have learned, it also appears to be creating tensions that at least two clients

believe create a serious risk of someone being hurt. One client has told me specifically that she does not feel at all safe at Homestart. Another has said, "I just want a safe place to live!"

Aside from the very immediate and serious safety issue, there is no real stability for clients at either Community House or Homestart. In large part, that is because of IFC's policy of requiring extensions every two weeks to continue to stay at the facilities. The reasons for granting or denying these extensions are not at all clear and are often arbitrary. The extensions lead to another immediate problem at Homestart. Two clients, a mother and daughter, are about to be thrown out into the streets of Chapel Hill in ten days with no transportation and nowhere else to go. This is in spite of the fact that the mother is in poor health and that they have numerous obstacles they are trying to overcome. They have been making tremendous efforts to get their lives back on track in spite of the repeated harassment and even stalking by other clients that they have been subjected to at Homestart that has required both of them to focus most of their energies merely on day to day survival rather than doing what they need to do to rebuild their lives.

This harassment seems to be at least in part based on untrue rumors that have been spread that the daughter is gay. She is the second client I have spoken to in recent weeks who has been subjected to taunts of "lesbo" and other such behavior that should be considered entirely unacceptable in a facility built on the values of respect and decency. The daughter has ambitions to go to college one day and it is clear that given the chance, she has a lot of ability. I have been personally involved in recent weeks in trying to help her overcome the obstacles to achieving that goal. That is difficult with the lack of stability and IFC's seeming eagerness to toss her out onto the street where she is ill-equipped to survive. Both of these clients have also found it difficult to complete even basic steps like the lengthy application process for SSI due to constant uncertainty about whether they will have any place to stay.

The case I have described is only one illustration of the numerous problems clients face in trying to make the transition from homelessness back into the community. I have cited this example specifically because there is still time to take specific action to relieve this situation before IFC has said that these individuals will be thrown out on April 20. I will not reiterate the serious obstacles people face in overcoming homelessness, because the Council is for the most part familiar with them. This is particularly true of Council Member Green and Mayor Foy who were present at the March 22, 2006 Partnership to End Homelessness meeting where data was presented from JQUAD and Associates as well as a community assessment team from UNC's School of Public Health. This community has the information they need to realize that several weeks will often not be enough time for clients to get their lives together. Finding jobs, saving money, applying for disability or other services, and other things that people need to do to help themselves are often slow processes. The processes become even slower when clients also have to deal with unwelcoming and unsafe environments in IFC's facilities or verbal abuse from IFC staff. IFC staff should be trained and willing to help and encourage people rather than deal continued blows to their self-esteem and drive to succeed.

In getting to know so many of the people in our community who are experiencing homelessness, it has become quite clear to me that many of these people have a lot to contribute to our community if given the chance. These are people who need support and encouragement from the agencies who serve them. There is talk in our community of raising \$5 million—over 3 times IFC’s annual budget—to build another shelter. We are told that this upgraded men’s facility will like Homestart, a model of a facility that exists to help people get back on their feet. But Homestart is no more a model facility than Community House is. Its residents are subjected to the same obstacles and the same culture of denial and indifference as the men at Community House are. These services need to be investigated and improvements made where necessary. Since IFC does not seem willing to address these issues on their own and since no progress seems to have been made on issues that have been repeatedly brought to IFC’s attention over the past year, it has to fall to the rest of the community. To that end, I ask that the Town Council establish some way that we can continue to get information to the town as we work on compiling and documenting what is going on at IFC facilities. I also ask that the town and the community encourage IFC to be willing to address needed improvements and work with the community in the light of day as opposed to hiding behind denial, stalling, and vague allusions to confidentiality.

I am including on this letter the signatures of others who have read it and endorsed its message.

I thank the Council members for their time and attention.

Regards,

R. Michael McGee
Co-editor, The Other Side Of The Hill/Street Exposure website
Community activist