

Cheektowaga could reallocate \$50K from Catholic Charities program

By **Jim Herr** - October 24, 2018

CHEEKTOWAGA – The Chief Executive Officer for Catholic Charities used the town’s public hearing on the 2019 budget Tuesday night to make a last ditch effort to save funding for a thirty-year program that supports Cheektowaga school students in crisis.

The School Intervention Service Program serviced by Catholic Charities has historically received around \$113,845 from the Town of Cheektowaga. It provides comprehensive counseling for any student and their families who attend schools within Cheektowaga, Sloan, or Depew.

Supervisor Diane Benczkowski’s 2019 budget, however, is proposing a 47% cut to the budget line, reallocating \$53,845 to the police department to create a more in-depth program building on their Crisis Intervention Program.

The SIS program was started thirty years ago after the police department’s youth bureau tried to curb dropout rates and help at-risk kids so they would be productive citizens of the community later in life. Catholic Charities ran also ran the program in Kenmore, Amherst, and Lackawanna.

Ms. Benczkowski says the problems facing kids today go beyond dropout rates and the town’s leadership is looking at ways to curb today’s problematic issues like the opioid crisis and an increase in teen suicide. She says today’s police force is better equipped than thirty years ago.

“Our chief of police is the state representative for the police organizations. He’s on the cutting edge of mental health. They know what they’re doing. They’re right there when somebody is dealing with addiction,” says Ms. Benczkowski.

The reallocated funds will be used to help the police department get a program, which is still in the planning stages, off the ground. Once it’s running, Ms. Benczkowski says the town may follow the lead of Kenmore and Lackawanna and completely cut funding to the Catholic Charities SIS program. Cheektowaga would divert the funds to the police department to expand the program further.

“They’ve all pulled out years ago, so there must be a reason. Society changes and our needs change. Maybe years ago dropout was a big issue, but right now

we're dealing with something even bigger," added Ms. Benczkowski.

Dennis C. Walczyk, Chief Executive Officer for Catholic Charities does not agree with the town's premise and says its program is working.

"We're nine months into the program and we're already at 90% of our goal as far as the number of students that were served. We have outcomes that are negotiated with the town; they're in the contract and we have to meet," he says. "We do deal with kids who are suicidal, we do have cases where children are abusing drugs. Our program is for the long term, it's counseling it's case management, and it involves the whole family."

SIS program services are not billed through an insurance company which most times ask for a mental health diagnosis before treatment starts. The funding from the town supports 1.6 counseling staffers and 10% of a supervisor.

"We could not handle the volume of the students and cases that we have right now if the budget was cut," added Mr. Walczyk. "More than ever, the people in the town need the services and my hope is the town board and the supervisor sees fit to at least maintain the level of funding we had last year."

The program was in the cross hairs of Ms. Benczkowski last December when she pulled a resolution which would fund the program for 2018. The [Cheektowaga Chronicle](#) reported that she questioned the town's support of the program, saying at the time that the charity's annual appeal should pay for the program.

"I contribute to Catholic Charities all the time. They almost make it sound like these services are available to everyone, but yet they're charging us for the services," she said last December.

Ms. Benczkowski and Councilmember Christine Adamczyk then met with the police department last December to solicit their thoughts of the program.

"They said, 'We didn't even know about this program. We never send anybody to Catholic Charities,'" Ms. Benczkowski says.

The supervisor was told that the police department was working with Crisis Services, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and Child and Family Services.

The funding for the SIS program was approved a few weeks later, but it sparked a conversation with the police department leadership about how they could

better use the allocated funds.

Fast forward to Tuesday evening and now Ms. Benczkowski alleges that there is no true accountability with the program saying Catholic Charities provides raw numbers, but the reports don't go any deeper.

"They're just saying per school. How do I know it's Cheektowaga residents when they won't give me any further information. There's no accountability as far as if those services are in fact going to our residents or is it just to man an office on Union Road," she says.

Catholic Charities disputes that allegation.

"We've been communicating with the supervisor, with the town board, almost continuously since the summer. Sending them information," said Mr. Walczyk.

He says the 41% reduction in funding will cut the number of clients Catholic Charities helps, but says the program will continue.

"We want to do whatever we can to maintain the level of service we provide. The need is ever increasing," added Mr. Walczyk. "The town has invested money for years into the program and it's a good investment. It heads off future expenses by the taxpayers down the road because we can intervene now in these situations."

Copyright 2018 Crabapple Media, LLC. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed without prior permission.

Send a News Tip to Cheektowaga Chronicle

Subscribe to our mailing list below and read the latest news from Cheektowaga Chronicle in your email every morning at 9 am.

* indicates required
Email Address *

First Name

Last Name

Subscribe

