

Poor Relief, Assistance, Welfare

By Kenneth E. (Ken) Lindsay, Harris Township Trustee

In the same way Indiana townships have a responsibility to maintain certain cemeteries, they also provide state-mandated welfare. Through the years (since 1894), the program has been referred to as "Poor Relief" and "Township Assistance." The intent remains the same, for taxpayers to pay certain expenses of fellow residents who qualify.

In Harris Township (HT), those in need may contact the township at 574-272-2371 or HarrisTrusteeLindsay@gmail.com to initiate the process. The township will check residency and recent household income. If the type of assistance sought is one the township can provide, a formal application is taken. When an award is made, the township informs the provider (for example, NIPSCO) it will pay the bill in question. Direct cash awards are not available.

The most common awards pay for utilities when shut-off is imminent, and for shelter when an eviction is imminent. In some instances, food, medicine and burials are eligible. Assistance is typically narrowly focused and short term, as opposed to the many federal and state programs designed to provide ongoing payments.

It's common for charitable organizations to require evidence of contacting a trustee office as a prerequisite. Therefore, the township plays a role in referring people to other organizations, public and private, which may have available resources. With so many entities looking to "help" those in need, there is value in a process designed to hear needs, qualify individuals, and get them to the right place—even if the township makes no award.

For example, the pandemic resulted in a large amount of federal and state assistance being made available. Given the related uncertainty, in March of 2020 HT authorized an emergency "additional appropriation" (i.e., officially budgeted more money) in anticipation of higher need.

But in practice, the increased federal and state funding was distributed locally by St. Joseph County, as opposed to being made available through each township. HT was in a position to refer people to them.

"Meeting minimum requirements" for administering the program means being fair and respectful, in my opinion. Fair includes being clear and consistent about who is eligible and what is covered. To that end, the township board annually approves specific guidelines which include income thresholds for eligibility, by household size. Respectful includes being accessible, responding in a timely manner, and understanding it is a stressful time for applicants.

Meeting minimum requirements was admittedly a pretty low bar, but it was not being met when I took office. Written guidelines didn't exist, treatment appeared inconsistent, and record keeping was minimal. In my first month, HT approved and published written guidelines, began collaborating with neighboring townships to share good practices and improve consistency, and automated record keeping.

HT doesn't see anywhere near the volume of requests experienced by more populated or less affluent townships.

(Continued on Page 16)



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(Continued from Page 14)

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In rough numbers, 50 inquiries come in each year, the majority are referred elsewhere (often to their own township), some opt out after being explained the program, relatively few are denied, and about 10 receive an award.

The program is funded by property taxes. The 2021 rate is .0019 (which is pretty low), and is paid by businesses and homeowners alike. The township is projected to end this year under budget, meaning the 2022 rate may be lower. Accounting is via a "fund" separate from general operations. All township financial dealings are subject to state audit, plus the township hires a third party to conduct periodic audits.

From 2010 through 2014, the township's compound annual growth rate of assistance expenditures was 30%, with average assistance awards per recipient 9 times the Indiana state average. By the end of 2015, service was improved, and HT was no longer an outlier when compared to other townships.

Beyond that minimum referenced earlier, in-township churches have agreed to partner with HT, including through a monthly paper pantry (items typically not available at food pantries), grief classes, and hands-on help in certain circumstances. Because we see needs up close, we're sometimes in a position to assist other organizations—the Granger Lions, Knights of Columbus, or St. Joseph County Police—reach deserving people for holiday food basket programs, for example.

Based on what we learn over time, we make changes. The board approved an increase in the maximum shelter award to better reflect rental rates. Given the growing importance of smartphones in the job search process, some expenditures are no longer classified as "wasted resources," which can reduce awards.

My philosophy is to help people when they need it, fairly and efficiently, without borrowing, while working to improve the odds recipients will not need it again. To that end, HT now has a Workfare program for able-bodied award recipients, with the first assignment being guided financial literacy education.

My experience is that giving away more money is a poor proxy for actually helping people more. We're delivering higher service levels at a lower cost, simply by being smart about how we do it. That said, in case more could be done, I once again invite people to get involved. If you have related insights, ideas and a good-hearted passion for positive change—let's talk.

Bar Louie Granger's one-year anniversary

A family-friendly event is planned in celebration of Bar Louie Granger's one-year anniversary. On Monday, Aug. 9, the Granger Bar Louie restaurant will be providing free face painting from noon to 2 p.m. during the lunch hour, and then a free balloon twister from 5 to 7 p.m. for the dinner hour. It will be a nice way to enjoy a family meal while providing a bit of fun for the kids.



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