

## STRATEGIC PLANNING

Tuesday, November 21, 2017 – 7:35 p.m.  
Council Chambers – Olean Municipal Building

Present: Members: Vice Chairman George, Alderman Witte, Alderman Gonzalez, and Alderman Smith. Others: Alderman Dougherty; Alderman Crawford; Mayor William Aiello; Nicholas DiCerbo, Jr., City Attorney; Bob Ring, Director of Public Works; Tiffany Taylor, Managerial Confidential Administrative Secretary; Ed Jennings, Code Enforcement Supervisor; Linore Lounsbury, Executive Director, Genesis House, and Katie Ralston, Board Member, Genesis House.

### 1. Roll Call

Alderman George called the meeting to order at approximately 7:35 p.m. and asked that the record show that all committee members were present except Alderman Andreano, who was excused.

### 2. Approval of Minutes of the Previous Committee Meeting (Tuesday, August 15, 2017)

A motion to approve the minutes of the August 15, 2017 meeting was made by Alderman Dougherty, seconded by Alderman Gonzalez. Voice vote, ayes all. Motion carried.

### 3. Unfinished Business

None

### 4. New Referrals for Consideration

#### a. Discussion – Genesis House with Katie Ralston, Board Member

Alderman Gonzalez stated that given the heightened comments at meetings regarding the Genesis House, he felt that it would be beneficial for the Council to speak with a member of their Board of Directors to get a better understanding of the organization and what they do. He feels that there are a lot of conceptions regarding the Genesis House flying around in the public and on social media, and he would like to clear up any misconceptions that there might be. He introduced Ms. Katie Ralston, a Board Member from the Genesis House.

Ms. Ralston stated that in light of a lot of misinformation on social media, she felt the need to speak out. She feels that for any organization, where people are actively campaigning for the destruction of something that she feels is important to the community, it is important to clear misconceptions and get appropriate information to those who are unclear on what the organization does. She provided handouts to the Council that included such things as the

Genesis House's mission statement, statistics regarding how much help they provide, and information regarding what services they render for those in need.

She stated that the Genesis House is not only a place to stay. They offer meals, aftercare, case management, direction to necessary counseling, and various other services. She stated that children are a big part of what the organization helps. There were ten children in the home in July alone. She stated that we, as a small city, are fortunate to have a place for the homeless to go to find help. She stated that it is alarming how many people need their services.

She welcomed anyone to come to the House, and stated that if they stood in the hallway for thirty minutes, they would be absolutely amazed by what goes on there. The House functions on donations and the good faith of the community. In 1995, the first family moved into the House. Now, in 2017, it is still functioning, which shows that homelessness is still a very real issue in the Olean area.

Ms. Ralston stated that there are a lot of questions about the Oxford House. She stated that the Genesis House and the Oxford House are two separate houses, with two separate organizations, and two separate missions. She stated that rather than seeing information and understanding, people jump to conclusions. She thanked the Council for allowing her to come speak to them to clear up some of the misconceptions that are out there. She stated that it is not about the person, it is about the organization.

Alderman Crawford stated that the statistics that she presents are very insightful. As a resident of Olean, he has known about the Genesis House for as long as he can remember. He stated that he thought that this was a shelter that catered to women and children. He questioned when the transition began to make this a homeless shelter for all.

Ms. Ralston replied that this is actually a misconception. The Genesis House began as a shelter for the homeless, regardless of age or gender. The reason that it appeared to transition to a shelter for women and children was because society itself, and its needs, had transitioned. At one time, the shelter was primarily for single mothers. Needs in society have changed, not the mission.

Alderman Crawford questioned the duration of stays at the House. Ms. Ralston replied that she can't speak for the average length of stays, but there is a thirty day window to stay at the House for those who require their services. She stated that after that, they provide aftercare and case management services. She stated that, in the case that they can't take someone in, that they still provide case management.

Alderman Crawford questioned if an aspect of case management is setting up social services for residents of the House. Ms. Ralston replied that the organization does put those in need in contact with the right agencies if they require it.

Alderman Gonzalez stated that he commonly hears that the Genesis House does not necessarily take in people from the immediate community. He asked if Ms. Ralston could speak to that, and how the procedure works. Ms. Ralston replied that unfortunately, the phrase “brought in” has a negative connotation to people. She stated that we do not “bring in” people, as there are already plenty of people in the immediate area that require the aid of the Genesis House. Many people move to the area because it is not as rural as surrounding communities, and it provides an opportunity to walk to school, work, and other necessary places. It is also safer than a big city. Olean is a very possible, safe place for families. When people move to the area for one situation or another, they move to live in an area where resources that they need are available.

Alderman Crawford questioned if Ms. Ralston has any idea what the percentage is of residents who the house services that are from Olean, versus how many are from outside of the immediate area. She was unsure of this information.

Alderman Smith stated that he has been a supporter of the Genesis House, and he believes in their mission. He stated that he is aware that they are working with government agencies in some capacity. In New York State alone, we are spending billions to fight poverty. He questions how the State and Federal agencies who are fighting poverty are failing, and if the Genesis House is only plugging a hole in the problem. Ms. Ralston replied that she would say that the Genesis House is only plugging a hole if they are offering a place to stay and food for those in need. However, they provide education, job skill training, referrals for medical needs and counseling, and various other services to attempt to prevent the same problem from happening again for the same people. She stated, however, that homelessness in our community is a problem that we can't fix 100%.

Alderman Witte stated that she has always been a supporter of the Genesis House. She remembers a case where a man lost his job after a back injury, and his wife had to leave her job later in a pregnancy. They ended up homeless, and the Genesis House helped them get back on their feet. She stated that not everyone who ends up at the Genesis House is straight out of jail or rehab. They are helping families get back onto their feet in the community.

Alderman Gonzalez stated that in general, people are very eager to jump on generalizations of impoverished people. There are two types of poverty – generational, and situational. Ms. Ralston added that if you look at the statistics, not one hundred percent of those that are homeless have drug and alcohol problems, or mental illnesses. That is just not the case.

Ms. Ralston continued that if you are constantly living in stress, it causes damage to your brain. This damages your emotional response to things. This is why the Genesis House works on the counseling piece.

Ms. Ralston stated that a part of stopping the problem is to ensure that we have a strong community partnership. For example, a local business has volunteered to have House residents come to see what is expected on a job. These real world job skills will benefit greatly as they transition back into the working world. These types of experiences would not be happening if we didn't have the community on board.

Alderman Witte questioned how difficult the Genesis House finds that it is to get people into good rentals after their time at the House. Ms. Ralston stated that she is not directly involved in that part of the process, and someone who works in case management may be better suited to answer the question.

Ms. Linore Lounsbury, the Executive Director of the Genesis House, stated that a single person on social services receives \$362 per month, in addition to food stamps and Medicaid. It is very difficult to get these people into good rentals. She stated that all cases are different. A lot of people that the Genesis House helps are children, including adult children who for one reason or another no longer have family who are able to help them. They had a 92 year old whose children would not help her. At Olean General, a patient will not be released unless they have a place to go. It takes a long time for Federal aid to kick in for veterans, so they have used the services of the Genesis House.

Ms. Lounsbury continued in stating that we always try to get people somewhere, one step at a time. Advocates will go to appointments with House residents, if they need additional assistance.

Ms. Ralston stated that with all of the negativity that is out there regarding the Genesis House, especially on social media, people in the community are ashamed and feel that they can't reach out when they need help. Part of their mission is to change this mentality. She added that she would love to see more volunteers to aid in the Genesis House's mission.

Mayor Aiello stated that he met with three members of the clergy yesterday, as they had requested a conversation to explain both sides of the issue. They had a discussion regarding what is going on, especially regarding social media. He stated that he learned a lot, and it was a very informative and productive discussion.

Ms. Lounsbury stated that approximately 30% of the residents of the Genesis House do not stay. If they do not come back to the House by curfew, or are caught drinking or using drugs, they are no longer able to stay there. However, every single person who leaves is still offered

case management. They just cannot stay there. She stated that the 70% that do stay are sent to CARES to see if there is an issue, as well as to mental health counseling. Those who don't want to change can leave, and there are plenty more people out there willing to change that the House can help.

Ms. Ralston stated that people need to stop thinking about the Genesis House as a treatment facility, because they are not. The Genesis House offers shelter for the homeless, and all resources that come with that. If you are using drugs and alcohol, you can't stay at the House; however, the Genesis House will still do everything that they can to help you. Alderman Gonzalez stated that this is a great distinction.

Alderman Crawford questioned if the Genesis House would report a resident who was on parole, and broke their parole restrictions. Ms. Lounsbury replied that they would be reported, because they are hurting themselves by doing so. Ms. Ralston added that there is a lot of love, but it is tough love.

Ms. Lounsbury concluded by stating that they are overseen by the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. They are audited regularly, and they have fire drills as well to ensure that residents are aware of the necessary procedure in the case of an incident. Everything is in its place.

#### 5. Approval of Committee Reports

None

#### 6. Adjournment

A motion to adjourn was made by Alderman Smith, seconded by Alderman George. Voice vote, ayes all. Motion carried. Meeting adjourned at approximately 8:15 p.m.