



125-pound Ferri a giant





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LOWELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Solicitor: Complainants air hiring concerns

Law Department given one month to present findings to School Committee

By Melanie Gilbert

mgubert@loweltsun.com
LUOWELL» City Solicitor Helene
Tomlinson told the School Committee the Law Department is
moving forward in an investigation against Lowell Public Schools
regarding its hiring practices.
She said she and First Assistant
City Solicitor Corey Williams had
already interviewed one person,

with perhaps at least four others coming forward to meet with them.

"Today we met with someone... who told us she had some complaints," Tomlinson told the committee by Zoom during the Wednesday night meeting held at City Hall. "And the information that she gave us sounded compelling. There are other people that we need to speak with. They're

coming forward."

Williams said the meeting was productive in establishing cause for what had been described by Tomlinson and others as unknown complainants. However, Kara Pigeon, a district teacher, said she brought her grievance to former City Solicitor Christine O'Connor last fall, and O'Connor Nov. 20 letter to the School ComCONCERNS. » PAGE 7



The Lowell School Committee on Nov. 2, 2022. Front, from left: Eileen DelRossi, Mayor Sokhary Chau and Stacey Thompson. Rear, from left: Susie Chhoun, lackie Doberty. Jackie Doherty, Connie Martin and Dominik Lay.

JULIA MALAKIE — LOWELL SUN

THESE HANDS ARE GONNA DO BIG THINGS'



U.S. Rep. Lori Trahan reads to preschoolers at Community Teamwork's James Houlares Early Learning Center Feb. 16, 2023. While there, Trahan presented CTI with a check for more than \$4.5 million, which will go toward the nonprofit's Head Start programs.

Trahan announces \$4.5 million for Community Teamwork's Head Start programs

By Cameron Morsberger

LOWELL.» With filing deadlines, bill negotiations and legislative agendas, U.S. Rep. Lori Trahan's day-to-day life in Washington, D.C. can often be filled with the minutiae and red tape of Congress. gress.
Thursday was not that kind

of day.

In a room of eight preschoolers at the James Houlares Early Learning Center, Trahan read a children's story, received a bit thank-you card filled with little handprints and presented a check of more than \$4.5 million to Lowell's Community Teamwork Inc., a nonprofit that will use that federal funding for its

Head Start programs.
Having grown up in Lowell, the congresswoman said she had admired CTI before she was elected and the organization's multifaceted work. When people ask Trahan where to go for assistance, she said CTI is "the first place" she suggests they turn. they turn.

Trahan said she was hon-

ored to return and acknowledge the "incredible work" of CTI through more funding — a total of \$4,566,022 awarded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
"Our community action agencies, writ large, were our heroes in our communities," Trahan said, referring to the pan-HANDS »PAGE7

Fire kills 3 cats, displaces family of 8

Fourth house fire in less than a week

By Aaron Curtis

DRACUT » A family of eight was displaced and three pet cats were killed in a two-alarm fire on Nashua Road on Wednesday — the fourth house fire in Dracut in less than a week. The fire damage was contained

the fourth house fire in Dracut in less than a week.

The fire damage was contained to the basement of the single-family home at 232 Nashua Road, but there was extensive heat and smoke damage throughout the rest of the house, Dracut Deputy Fire Chief Alex Voulgaris said from the scene.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, though it appears to have been accidental.

Shortly before 3:35 p.m., Dracut firefighters were called to the home for a reported dryer fire that had spread to the basement. A neighbor said she was at her house next door when she heard someone yell "fire." Thinking it was possibly her home that was in danger, she quickly investigated the warning.

"I looked out the window and saw (the neighbor's) house was covered in black smoke, "she said.

According to a press release from the Dracut Fire Department, Engine 3 was the first company carrive at the scene, where they encountered the heavy smoke showing from the Cape-style home. A second alarm was struck to bring in additional manpower.

The release states Engine 3 quickly stretched a hose line into the home's basement and attacked the blaze from inside, knocking down the fire by about

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IIII MediaNews Group







Hands

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demic, "doing everything that they've always done, but then at a scale that we never could have imagined

and then innovating on what else we needed to do." The Head Start programs cater to children from 6 weeks to 5 years old, aid-ing in their learning and growth through learning curricula and play time. Families eligible to enroll

in the program are typically at or below the powerty line, are on public assistance or do not have stable housing, according to the CTI website. Children in foster care or living with disabilities can also participate.

With five Head Start Learning programs — based at child development centers — scattered across Greater Lowell, CTI aims to support the social-emotional, cognitive, physical and language development for children, as well as promote family well-being for "life-long success of their child," according to the website.

Division Director of Child and Family Services Meghan Siembor said the financial support will ensure CTI provides education and care for the "most vulnerable children." Siembor said they serve 631 children in Greater Lowell while also offering health, mental health and nutrition services in a "two-generational model," for both children and their families. Siembor highlighted two

crises the field currently faces: workforce — such as employee retention and pro viding livable wages — a behavioral health. Prior the pandemic, Siembor said they would see about three children identified as hav ing behavioral health needs or a developmental disabil ity. Now, she said they're "a a point where we may have three that don't."

This funding is really go ing to enable us to continue raise salaries to have some parity with the public school system... The needs have definitely increased," Siembor said at the event. "We are very fortunate with

this funding that we can do

this funding that we can do some innovative projects."
One project is the cre-ation of the Rita O'Brien Dee Center for Behavioral Health and Development, Siembor said, and CTI is now identifying the gaps of mental health services and how to "close those gaps and really put more resources in

Children in the class-room, aged 3 to 5, gifted Trahan a paper card filled with their handprints be-

Iranan a paper card filled with their handprints before she read from "I Am Enough," a picture book by Grace Byers.

"These hands are gonna do big things," Trahan said to the children. "I'm going to bring this to my office so I remember all of you, every single day I go in there."

Trahan's two daughters, who are 8 and 12 years old, no longer make their mom the cute cards and crafts they once did when they were younger, she said, but "they never get old."

To come to CTI and visit children supported by that funding is "a dream," she added.

"When you're talking "when yo

children supported by that funding is "a dream," she added.

"When you're talking about the funding and the programs, you could easily lose sight of the beneficiary and the impact," Trahan said in an interview. "Investing in those early learning programs, it really does set these kids up for success while helping working families get the affordable child care that they need."

CEO Karen Frederick said the Head Start continuation grant is "critically important," especially now, and she expressed her thanks to Trahan's commitment to their work. Frederick called

their work. Frederick called Trahan "the best congress-woman in the country."

"We are fortunate to have Lori as our congresswoman, and I think we all know that," Frederick said. "She knows the work we do, she cares about the work we do and is always there to help

And unlike most other funding sources or pro-grams, Head Start garners bipartisan support, Trahan said.

"There are trusted pro grams out there, Democrats and Republicans agreed on," she said at the event. "This is one of them."



U.S. Rep. Lori Trahan looks at preschoolers' handprints in a card they presented her at Community Teamwork's James Houlares Early Learning Center Feb. 16, 2023. While there, Trahan presented CTI with a check for more than \$4.5 million, which will go toward the nonprofit's Head Start programs.



CAMERON MORSBERGER — LOWELLS From left, Community Teamwork CEO Karen Frederick introduces U.S. Rep. Lori Trahan at CTI's James Houlares Early Learning Center Feb. 16, 2023. Trahan presented CTI with a check for more than \$4.5 million, which will go toward the nonprofit's Head Start programs.

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Briefs

is required. For informa-tion, contact Sanary Phen

at 978-226-8889 or sanary phen@cbacre.org; or Liam Skinner at 978-435-2070 or liam.skinner@cbacre. org.

Bicycles for kids

LOWELL — The Bike Connector pro-vides free or reducedcost bikes for children 5 to 10 years old, Tues-days through Thurs-days from 1 to 5 p.m., at its 47 Lee St. location; and Wednesdays by ap-pointment only. The nonprofit also runs do-it-together workshops on how to maintain and fix bikes. The shop pro-

and knowledge for stu-dents, as well as an earn-a bike program for teens and adults and a learn-to-ride workshop for younger bicyclists.

vides all the tools, parts

Residents can also donate used bikes to the Bike Connector's recycle and reuse program. For information, call 978-502-3919 or email info@ bikeconnector.org.

Concerns

FROM PAGE 1

mittee pointed to others within the district who also came forward with a range of hiring and retaliation concerns. Further, sources have indicated others who have not come forward for fear of retaliation.
"Ill say that it was a complaint, it was a lot of information about an experience that they had with the School Department," Williams said about the unidentified person the office interviewed. "It was about an hour and a half; they provided a lot of information."

The revelation came on a The revelation came on a night when the committee was considering a motion by member Susie Chhoun to allow Tomlinson "no more than one month to determine and review the types of claims that actually exist related to the former solicities," letter writer to historical states. itor's letter prior to hiring outside counsel."

Before her departure as city solicitor, O'Connor, now town counsel in North An dover, sent an email to the School Committee and Su-perintendent of Schools Joel Boyd in late November, stating her office had received multiple complaints "alleging ongoing violation of the District's hiring policies, regulations, and state law."

Due to the nature of the allegations, as well as "claims of retaliation" from individuals making the complaints, O'Connor advised the committee to seek outside counsel, as opposed to just using the "available grievance procedures." Those who have filed complaints should also be "viewed as falling under the protection of the Whistleblower Act," the letter states.

In response, committee Vice Chair Jackie Doherty's motion on Dec. 14 to "move forward and get outside counsel to look into the allegations addressed in the former City Solicitor's letter "passed by a vote of four yeas, with Eileen DelRossi and Mayor Sokhary Chau voting present, and Dominik Lay voting no.

That motion required

ing no.
That motion required That motion required the Law Department to draft a scope of services and present the committee with the bid process to ac-quiring outside counsel to conduct the internal comconduct the internal com-plaints investigation. The process was significantly delayed by illnesses, end-of-year holidays and staff turnover within the Law

Department.
The office has seen other high-level departures since O'Connor's November exit, with First Assistant City Solicitor Kerry Jenness, and both Second Assistant City

olicitors Helen Ander

Solicitors Helen Anderson and Mark Jorgensen leaving the department.

Tomlinson and Williams were hired to the top legal positions last month in an office that is operating at half capacity. According to City Manager Tom Golden, four of the eight positions allocated to the Law Department are currently vacant.

Following a special meeting held Feb. 6, the committee requested the Law Department send queries to three different attorneys, one of whom the committee would theoretically choose to conduct an investigation and provide recommendations.

The committee planned

The committee planned to choose an attorney at Wednesday's meeting, until Chhoun's motion was placed on the agenda, effectively contradicting the earlier, approved vote to move forward. Lay also had a similar motion, which he later withdrew.

Several members of the public spoke in support of the committee's original plan to select outside counsel, and urged the body not The committee planned

sel, and urged the body not to delay taking further ac-

Resident Angela McCarthy said her family members were all proud gradu-ates of Lowell High School, and she was a social worker in the district for 32 years before retiring.

"I respectfully request that Ms. Chhoun remove her motion to delay, and I support the hiring of outside counsel to investigate the allegations that have come before this committee," McCarthy said. "I know of several highly qualified, dedicated employees who have left the school system because of unfair treatment. This is a great loss to our community."

The committee also heard from Phala Chea, who said she resigned from per position in the district as a coordinator of English language education in January, saying the district had taken "detours" around transparency, standards, compliance, practices and procedures.
"My colleagues and I ex-

compliance, practices and procedures.

"My colleagues and I experienced these detours and they have impacted our morale, our trust and our agency in a negative way," she said. "As a result, I was compelled to leave the district, and I am compelled this evening to be here and speak to you respectfully and request the removal of the motions."

Heather MacKay Forsthe, who served on the 2019 Superintendent Blue Ribbon Committee for the search that resulted in the

search that resulted in the hiring of Boyd, and has two children at the high school, said she supported hir-ing outside counsel to de-termine if "Lowell Public chools is following our dis-

Schools is following our district hiring practices."
Chhoun thanked the speakers for their "courage" to speak up, but said she wanted to give Tomlinson the "opportunity to do the research and have her team do the research and have her team do the research to dive deeply into the investigation."
Although the committee had not approved the Law Department's involvement in the case beyond the vetting of outside firms, Williams said the aggrieved party reached out to the office independently.
"We took no steps to investigate anything," he said. "Unprompted on their own (they) called into the office and requested to come into the law department. We felt like it was our responsibility, and we allowed this individual to come in and speak with us. This happened a few hours ago."

Members Doherty, Con-nie Martin and Stacey Thompson questioned Tomlinson's qualifications to manage a municipal hu-man resources investiga-tion given her background as a court-appointed crim-inal defense and family law

attorney. Martin added that even Martin added that even O'Connor, a litigator with 27 years in the city's mu-nicipal Law Department, suggested outside counsel in her November email.

"This kind of investi-"This kind of investi-gation needs to be under-taken by an external entity, one with a deep abiding un-derstanding of human re-sources law," she said. Chau, who also serves as chair of the City Council, yielded to Doherty to make closing remarks before the vote.

vote. He noted the complexity

vote.

He noted the complexity of the situation, and suggested giving Tomlinson the time to continue to look into the matter.

"I'm not against outside counsel — I am for that," Chau said. "At the same time, there's never been a time where we completely skip over our city Law Department. This time should not be any different. We repartment. This time should not be any different. We really want to have the right process that will allow us to make a decision as an elected body."

Chau asked Chhoun to amend her motion to set a deadline of March 15, for a report from the Law De-

a report from the Law De-partment to be presented to the committee

On a roll call vote called by Lay, Chhoun's motion passed 4-3, with Thompson, Martin and Doherty voting no, and Chhoun, Chau, Lay and DelRossi voting yes.

and DelKossi voting yes.
"Let me just be clear, we are moving forward with hiring outside counsel," Chau said. "But we just need time to have our city department to be part of the process."

Officer

ment officers with sworn law enforcement authority, trained in school-based po-

licing and crisis response and assigned by an employ-ing law enforcement agency to work with schools using community-oriented polic-ing concepts."

In recognition of School Resource Officer Apprecia-

tion Day, the Lowell Police Department released indi-vidualized graphics and photographs to introduce all eight members of the unit to the community on social media. The graph-ics included information

about the officers, incl ing their hobbies and in-

terests.
"Our school resource officers work in one of our most important posi-tions, on the forefront of our efforts to build rela-

tionships with youth, our schools, and our commu-nity," Lowell Police Act-ing Superintendent Barry Golner said in the re-lease. "The Lowell Police Department and Lowell Public Schools enjoy an

excellent and close working relationship, and I am excited to have Offi-cer Torres join our SRO team.

Follow Aaron Curtis on witter @aselahcurtis