

Hands

FROM PAGE 1

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, aiding in their learning and growth through learning curricula and play time. Families eligible to enroll in the program are typically at or below the poverty 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 and Early 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 providing livable wages — and behavioral health. Prior to the pandemic, Siembor said they would see about three children identified as having behavioral health needs or a developmental disability. Now, she said they’re “at a point where we may have three that don’t.”

“This funding is really going to enable us to continue to 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 some innovative projects.”

One project is the creation 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 the classrooms.”

Children in the classroom, aged 3 to 5, gifted Trahan 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 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 Trahan “the best congresswoman 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 us.”

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

“There are trusted programs out there, Democrats and Republicans agreed on,” she said at the event. “This is one of them.”



CAMERON MORSEBERGER — LOWELL SUN

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 MORSEBERGER — LOWELL SUN

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.

Briefs

FROM PAGE 3

is required. For information, 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 provides free or reduced-cost bikes for children 5 to 10 years old, Tuesdays through Thursdays from 1 to 5 p.m., at

its 47 Lee St. location; and Wednesdays by appointment only. The nonprofit also runs do-it-together workshops on how to maintain and fix bikes. The shop pro-

vides all the tools, parts and knowledge for students, as well as an earn-a bike program for teens and adults and a learn-to-ride workshop for younger bicyclists.

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.

“I’ll 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 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 solicitor’s letter prior to hiring outside counsel.”

Before her departure as city solicitor, O’Connor, now town counsel in North Andover, sent an email to the School Committee and Superintendent 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 DeRossi and Mayor Sokhary Chav voting present, and Dominik Lay voting no.

That motion required the Law Department to draft a scope of services and present the committee with the bid process to acquiring outside counsel to conduct the internal complaints 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

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 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 to delay taking further action.

Resident Angela McCarthy said her family members were all proud graduates 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 her 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 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 Forsythe, who served on the 2019 Superintendent Blue Ribbon Committee for the search that resulted in the hiring of Boyd, and has two children at the high school, said she supported hiring outside counsel to determine if “Lowell Public

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 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, Connie Martin and Stacey Thompson questioned Tomlinson’s qualifications to manage a municipal human resources investigation given her background as a court-appointed criminal defense and family law attorney.

Martin added that even O’Connor, a litigator with 27 years in the city’s municipal Law Department, suggested outside counsel in her November email.

“This kind of investigation needs to be undertaken by an external entity, one with a deep abiding understanding of human resources law,” she said.

Chau, who also serves as chair of the City Council, yielded to Doherty to make closing remarks before the 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 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 Department 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 DeRossi 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

FROM PAGE 3

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

licing and crisis response and assigned by an employing law enforcement agency to work with schools using community-oriented policing concepts.”

In recognition of School Resource Officer Apprecia-

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

about the officers, including their hobbies and interests.

“Our school resource officers work in one of our most important positions, on the forefront of our efforts to build rela-

tionships with youth, our schools, and our community,” Lowell Police Acting Superintendent Barry Golner said in the release. “The Lowell Police Department and Lowell Public Schools enjoy an

excellent and close working relationship, and I am excited to have Officer Torres join our SRO team.”

Follow Aaron Curtis on Twitter @aselahcurtis