

Mayor vows to fight for block grant funding Says US program cuts have 'drastic impact'

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By Matt Viser, Globe Staff | March 23, 2008

A homeless man got a job, medication, and reconciliation with his family. A 17-year-old's life was altered when he started learning to play guitar. Countless others were able to buy their first home, repair their businesses, or learn a new language.

They are among the many Bostonians who have been helped by federal grants and who came together yesterday in East Boston to rally to make sure their programs aren't eliminated.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino met with community leaders who run a variety of programs that rely heavily on a dwindling pot of federal dollars. The programs - and the residents who depend on them - are at risk under a federal budget proposal that would reduce by 18 percent the amount of money Boston would receive next year.

"It's not saving money; it's hurting people!" Menino said, jabbing his index finger as he spoke. "This is an issue that has a drastic impact."

"We've got to make this a fight," he added. "We can't just say, 'The president is going to cut it.' Hogwash."

The grant money that the city receives through the Community Development Block grant program has been steadily declining - from more than \$25 million in 2001 to about \$15 million allotted for next year.

The program, which began in 1975, allows funding to go toward a variety of programs that work to improve housing, parks, and homelessness.

"It galls me that the federal government would get rid of programs that work so well in the city of Boston," said Mossik Hacobian, executive director of Urban Edge, which provides home buying and foreclosure prevention courses. "It's important that everyone can afford to be here, not just the wealthy."

Boston would lose \$3.6 million next year under President Bush's budget proposal, affecting nonprofit agencies across the city.

City officials said yesterday that it was still unclear which programs would be impacted, but preliminary estimates suggest there would be 740 fewer spots for homeowner education courses, 20 fewer storefronts improved, and 190 fewer spots in English as a second language courses.

"The money is so small, but the impact is so great," said Al Calderelli, director of the East Boston Community Development Corporation, an organization that provides low-income housing.

Menino held an hourlong, round-table meeting yesterday at the Barnes School Apartments, an apartment complex recently renovated in part through federal grant funding.

Matt DiFeo, 17, a junior at Boston Arts Academy, provided the music, playing his guitar and talking about how much he was affected by Zumix, an organization in East Boston's Maverick Square that teaches music and art as a way to provide teenagers with an outlet for anger and frustration.

"It's like my second home," said DiFeo, who has been a part of the program for seven years. "Right after school, I go there."

His mother signed him up for the program seven years ago. It helped him open up, he said, after the trauma he experienced after their house burned down.

"I'm still shy," he told the crowd. "But I've come out of my shell a bit."

About 70 residents came for the discussion, taking postcards to send to Massachusetts congressional members to encourage them to help restore funding.

"This is more than just statistics," said George Caponigro, whose alcoholism and bipolar disorder drove him to

homelessness for three years.

He came yesterday wearing an olive-colored suit and a crisp white shirt, and he is now a board member of HomeStart, which helps homeless people obtain housing.

"People need that vital end of the tunnel," he said. "That's what these things are about: Second chances in life."

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