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Nonprofit leader charges racism

Alleges bias in city's distribution of funds for groups

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The executive director of Hopkins House, a minority-run Alexandria nonprofit that provides day care and other services for low income children, has charged city administrators with racial bias and favoritism in distributing city funds.

The charge was denied by city officials who said they were shocked and surprised by the allegations.

They cited their longstanding working relationship with the executive director, Glenn Hopkins, who bears no relation to the name of the organization, and consistent increases in city funding received by Hopkins House over the last three years.

"It was mystifying for us," said Deputy City Manager Beverly Steele. "His own organization is a perfect example of the city's commitment to funding minority-run nonprofits."

But Hopkins points to recent changes in the city's funding policies that he believes have forced Hopkins House to compete for resources with several other minority-run nonprofits while protecting one of the city's largest nonprofits, Campagna Center, which has a white executive director and a mostly white board of directors.

"I don't think racial recriminations do any of us any good," said Katherine L. Morrison, director of the Campagna Center. "We are two longtime Alexandria organizations that deliver services to the children in the city in different ways."

Morrison said the Campagna Center is a diverse organization in which more than 80 percent of the employees are minorities.

Steele acknowledged that the city does have two sole-source contracts with the Campagna Center, and that those contracts, for the federally funded Head Start program and the Campagna Kids after-school program, have never been opened to competitive bidding.

Those contracts funnel roughly \$1.5 million to the Campagna Center every year.

"I can imagine no justification on any reasonable basis for denying the opportunity for all the city's community youth agencies - especially the minority-run youth agencies - to participate in the search for funding and the implementation of youth programming contracts in the city of Alexandria," Hopkins wrote in a letter to Steele earlier this month.

Starting this year, all the nonprofit agencies that receive money from the city's Community Partnership fund had to go through a competitive grant process for a piece of the \$1 million fund.

This year, Hopkins House received \$159,000 from the fund, slightly more than 10 percent of its

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budget, according to Hopkins.

In previous years the city's contribution to Hopkins House was relatively secure, but because of the new competitive system, the nonprofit cannot rely on city money in future years, according to Hopkins and city administrators.

Like Hopkins House, the Campagna Kids program was funded out of the Community Partnership fund until 1998. Campagna Kids received roughly \$400,000 every year.

The Campagna Center's money was moved out of the Community Partnership fund and into the city's Human Services budget before the city changed the rules and forced nonprofits to compete for funding.

Hopkins believes that was done to protect the Campagna Center from a competitive process and that the move illustrates blatant favoritism.

"The fact that this contract has not been open for a public bid raises tangible suspicions about the arrangements for funding reserved for the Campagna Center and the very different arrangements given to minority agencies in the city," he said.

The money was moved, according to Steele, because the Community Partnership Fund is for contributions, not contracts, and the city has a contract with the Campagna Center.

Steele said that the Campagna Center's contract had no fixed expiration date and that before it was awarded it had never been opened to public bids.

"It is very possible that if the City Council wanted to go ahead and open it to the bidding process they could do this," Steele said. "It is possible that the time will come when we bid this contract out. It just happens that this is a contract that we have had for many, many years."

Steele and Carol Farrell, director of early childhood development, both cited the need for stability in children's programming as one of the main reasons that the city does not force the Campagna Center to compete for social service funding.

"We have an ongoing commitment with them to run this program," said Farrell. "I can't answer why it would be any different for Hopkins House programs. I just don't know."

The U.S. Health and Human Services Department, which funds Head Start, has a policy of continuing to fund programs without opening them up to a bidding process.

The city could not give the Head Start contract to another organization without approval from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services because the federal government funds the program.

"If a program maintains quality service and they reach a diverse population of eligible kids the decision about funding becomes pretty much automatic," said Michael Kharfen, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "The general policy is once an agency has been designated as a grantee they generally remain designated as a provider."