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Charity asks review of city youth contracts

Hopkins trustees wonder why some bids exempt

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Leaders of Hopkins House, one of Alexandria's oldest private social services agencies, have urged city officials to establish a committee to investigate how city contracts are awarded to youth service providers in Alexandria.

The call comes less than a month after the executive director of the minority-run organization, Glenn Hopkins - who is unrelated to the organization's founders - accused the city government of favoritism and racial bias in its dealings with nonprofit agencies.

"We believe strongly that the core question does need to be addressed in a competent and impartial manner," Valeria S. Henderson, chairwoman of the Hopkins House Board of Trustees, wrote in a statement. "The goal is to determine the most fair and impartial process for awarding city youth contracts to private youth agencies."

City officials have yet to respond to the request.

Hopkins alleged that recent changes in city policies have forced several minority-run nonprofits to compete for a limited pool of city resources while protecting one of the city's largest nonprofits, the Campagna Center, which has a white executive director and a mostly white board of directors.

 Until recently, City Council member David Speck and Vice Mayor William Euille served on the board of trustees of Hopkins House. Both have now resigned.

"This letter had an impact on my decision," Euille said, citing split loyalties between his position on the City Council and his work at Hopkins House.

Euille, who is black, added that he found the racial allegations "distasteful."

"I myself have decided the less that is said about this, the better," Euille said. "I want this issue resolved in the best interest of Hopkins House and the city and, most importantly, for the children that we are all trying to serve."

Speck could not be reached for comment last night.

City officials and the director of the Campagna Center denied the charges of racism and favoritism, but earlier this month Mayor Kerry Donley announced that the city would phase in competitive bidding for after-school programs in response to the allegations.

That step apparently did not go far enough to satisfy trustees at Hopkins House who took issue with "the city's long-standing practice of exempting selected contracts with the Campagna Center from open and

public bidding" and asked the City Council to put together a group to examine the issue.

"If the city wishes to re-examine how they do their contracts, we would be more than happy to participate," said Campagna Center Director Katherine Morrison.

Morrison added that she was pleased with the tone of the comments from Hopkins House trustees, saying they were "conciliatory," and helped lay groundwork to move forward.

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"I think Glenn [Hopkins] has a perfect right to question public allocations of funds," Morrison said. "I am glad that he and the board spoke positively about us. There are too many problems in Alexandria for us to be working on to waste time and energy arguing."

Hopkins questioned two contracts between the city and the Campagna Center that have never been open to public bidding: the federally funded Head Start program and an after-school program called Campagna Kids.

More than \$1 million in federal money for the Head Start program is funneled through the city, but the contract is administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The city could not open that program to public bidding even if it wanted to, according to Michael Kharfen, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Department of Health and Human Services has a policy of renewing Head Start contracts automatically, without public bidding, unless there is a problem with the program. Kharfen called Campagna Center's programs "excellent."

The contract to run Campagna Kids, an after-school program, is worth more than \$400,000 a year.

Until last year, money for Campagna Kids and Hopkins House programs had come from the same part of the city's budget, the Community Partnership Fund. Last year the City Council changed how the fund worked - organizations were forced to compete for money by writing grants and fulfilling specific program goals set by the city.

The Campagna Kids program, however, did not have to go through this process. 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.

"I can understand why Glenn was concerned," said Morrison. "But the real irony here is that we have to raise extra money just to support these programs. We are not getting fat off these contracts. Every year, we raise more than \$100,000 in contributions to support Head Start and \$30,000 to \$40,000 to support Campagna Kids."
