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Alliance of Boston anti-poverty agencies severed in bitter dispute

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 5, 2012 04:00 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Two longtime Boston anti-poverty agencies have abruptly severed ties, in a break that has sparked bitter accusations and recriminations.

The controversy, which led a neighborhood preschool center to close and relocate its students indefinitely, flared one month ago when Action for Boston Community Development fired two longtime employees, accusing them of mismanagement and misconduct.

The employees lead the Allston Brighton Area Planning Action Council, an agency that oversaw some grant distribution and programming for parent organization ABCD. The workers deny the accusations and responded with a lawsuit accusing ABCD of defrauding the federal government to maintain a program's public funding.

ABCD denies the lawsuit's claims.

One of the region's largest nonprofit human service agencies, ABCD formed 50

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years ago. In the mid-1960s, it created the Allston Brighton APAC along with 11 other independently incorporated APACs around Boston, to allow those smaller nonprofits to provide more neighborhood-level control of public anti-poverty funding.

In last month's firings, ABCD terminated Allston Brighton APAC's director Paul Creighton and assistant director Paula Torrone-Maxwell. In addition to the leadership roles with APAC that they still retain, Creighton and Torrone-Maxwell were also considered employees of ABCD.

ABCD receives about \$24 million annually to run about 30 Boston centers that enroll about 2,500 children in Head Start, a federally funded early education program for preschoolers from low-income families.

The APAC helped run two Allston-Brighton Head Start centers that together receive about \$1 million annually in federal funds.

ABCD CEO John Drew said that Creighton and Torrone-Maxwell abruptly stopped providing Head Start services to about 60 families enrolled in the program. Those families were also simultaneously enrolled in a different publicly funded day-care program run through the APAC, a spokeswoman for ABCD said.

Drew said the two former employees intentionally under-enrolled the Allston-Brighton Head Start centers and tried to steer Head Start-eligible families to join the APAC daycare.

APAC, Creighton, and Torrone-Maxwell filed a lawsuit against ABCD and Drew in Suffolk Superior Court one week ago. A judge denied a preliminary injunction request this week.

The lawsuit says Creighton and Torrone-Maxwell believed that having the 60 children receiving "duplicate" services from two separately funded public programs – the day care and Head Start – would violate new government standards for Head Start.

But, Kenneth J. Wolfe, a spokesman for the federal department overseeing Head Start, said that "generally," the practice of children enrolled in Head Start simultaneously receiving services from another publicly funded source, like through a daycare program, is "pretty common and permitted."

APAC's leadership maintains that while other program partnerships may be legal, the way ABCD had combined the Head Start and daycare services was not.

The lawsuit also says ABCD added at least 20 students who did not exist when it recently counted 140 children enrolled across the Allston-Brighton Head Start programs.

ABCD spokeswoman Susan Kooperstein denied that. "There was no fudging of the numbers," she said.

ABCD is due for a triennial federal audit of its Head Start programming in the fall. It will be ABCD's first review since last fall when federal officials announced they will more closely monitor the nearly 1,600 programs in the 48-year-old, \$8-billion-a-year Head Start system. Programs found performing below federal benchmarks will have to compete for funding.

ABCD continues to run its location on Washington Street in Brighton where officials hope it will reach a total enrollment of about 100 students, the facility's capacity. But, Head Start is no longer operating on Cambridge Street in Allston.

Drew says ABCD was forced to move and locked out by APAC; Creighton said that ABCD moved out on its own.

Creighton and Torrone-Maxwell also oversaw about \$200,000 in annual public community development grants that ABCD allocated to APAC for use in Allston-Brighton. ABCD has taken over control of that funding alleging that the two former employees did not maximize the use of those resources. Creighton and Torrone-Maxwell deny that.

In recent months, ABCD executives said they received anonymously written letters accusing the former employees of misconduct and mistreating workers. ABCD leaders do not know who wrote those letters, a spokeswoman said.

The lawsuit says the letters' accusations are defamatory and that ABCD committed breach of contract because Creighton and Torrone-Maxwell can only be disciplined or fired by APAC's board of directors.

"I have no apologies for firing Paul and Paula," Drew said last week. hours

I have no apologies for firing Paul and Paula," Drew said last week, hours before making similar statements during the ABCD board of directors' monthly meeting at the agency's downtown headquarters. "Did I make a hard choice? Yes. I've known Paul for 40 years. They're nice people, but maybe we needed a fresh start."

At the meeting, the 50-member board voted to ratify the firings of Creighton and Torrone-Maxwell and to never again work with the APAC.

The Allston Brighton APAC independently receives about \$900,000 each year in public contracts to run anti-poverty programming.

"With their present funding, they're not going to disappear anytime soon," said Jefferson Boone, an attorney representing APAC.

Creighton called the firings by ABCD "cowardly, mean-spirited and cold-hearted," and denied the claims against he and his APAC colleague.

"It's more or less a power money grab," the APAC director said. "It was a set-up. They're trying to destroy my reputation. We had built something here and they're trying to demolish it."

E-mail Matt Rocheleau at mjrochele@gmail.com.

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