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Why public health, social service funding surged in Austin budget

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By **Andra Lim** - American-Statesman Staff

Shannon Jones has worked for the health department for 16 years, but he'd never seen the Austin City Council inject such a large dose of extra dollars into his budget as it did this year.

The council added \$7.6 million in ongoing and one-time funds for public health and social services, from continuing to promote enrollment in Obamacare to a health initiative in the Rundberg neighborhood.



Tod Marvin, left, chair of One Voice Central Texas and CEO of Easter Seals, speaks at an Aug. 25 press conference ... [Read More](#)

The health department's total budget ended up at \$87 million, which is about a 16 percent increase from this past year.

Other city departments that rely on the property and sales-tax-supported general fund saw their budgets grow anywhere from a low of 5 percent for the police department to a high of 12 percent for the library system — a sign of where the new council's priorities lie.

Jones, the health department director, said the city is “actually looking to make a difference as a result of these investments,” though it's not going to happen overnight.



Barnetta Emerson, left, adjusts a blood pressure cuff for Teresa Bledsoe in February during a screening at the Austin/Travis County Health ... [Read More](#)

For instance, Jones said, the city wants to reduce the teen pregnancy rate among Hispanics — 61.6 per 1,000 among 15- to 19-year-olds in Travis County, which is nearly double the county's overall teen pregnancy rate — and next year's budget will help expand the department's Peer to Peer sexual education program.

The added funding was the product of several key ingredients, from the opening some advocates saw with the new 10-1 council, the groups all pushing for more investment in the name of the same general cause, new data that underscored inequities in Austin, and a growth in the tax base that put more money at the council's fingertips.

"We reached the place where the people who live here were able to benefit from that economy," Mayor Steve Adler said. "This is how you share that economy."

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'Very fortuitous timing'

Two of the largest adds were \$2.5 million for the health department and \$1.8 million for social service contracts, which stemmed from a resolution the council approved last December largely crafted by One Voice Central Texas, a coalition of nonprofits.

The resolution contained a "social service calculator" meant to close gaps in public health and social service funding by tying dollars for those areas to population growth and the consumer price index.

Per that calculator, this year's budget should have added \$3 million for the health department and \$3.7 million for social service contracts meant to help lift people out of poverty — but that wasn't in the proposed budget released at the end of July.

"I think a lot of us called in vacations early and came back from the beach a few days ahead of when we had hoped, because we had a pretty big wake-up call at the end of July, early August," said Tod Marvin, One Voice chair and CEO of Easter Seals Central Texas.

One Voice met with council members individually, testified at budget hearings, sent newsletter blasts and held a press conference.

One thing on their side, Marvin said, was recently released information that helped them paint a picture of "two Austins," such as an oft-cited Martin Prosperity Institute report saying Austin is the most economically segregated large metro area in the U.S.

"It was very fortuitous timing, in ... kind of a weird, sick and twisted way, in terms of understanding these really disturbing trends and the full impact of them," Marvin said.

Council Member Delia Garza, who pushed for increased health funding, cited the same report in a written statement.

"I believe that our historical underfunding of health and human services is a factor in that ranking, which is part of what led to the policy adopted last year to take an aggressive approach to closing that funding gap," she said.

Foreseeing opportunity

The council also allocated about \$1 million for contracts for community-based groups to address health disparities, such as maternal and infant health for black and Latina mothers and mental health for immigrant families.

As an example of the types of initiatives that money could fund, Priscilla Hale, the director of Allgo and an advocate for the funding, said, “If you’re going to do outreach to trans women of color, then you want trans women of color actually coming together and creating programs, deciding what it is that they need and then also implementing that.”

That funding grew out of a **council resolution**, passed in May and championed by Garza, calling for the city to develop an “equity assessment tool” that would help gauge whether city policies and practices promote inequities and to form a working group to study health disparities.

That resolution, in turn, has its origins in a **report** produced by Mama Sana/Vibrant Woman — a volunteer-driven health initiative that provides free prenatal care to low-income women of color and also has a grassroots advocacy component — when it saw a key opportunity last year with the advent of a council elected by 10 geographically based districts.

Paula Rojas, a project coordinator with Mama Sana/Vibrant Woman and a licensed midwife, put it like this: “Now that we’re going to have a city government that’s more receptive to these issues, how do we prepare ourselves to come in proactively, not with some critiques but concrete proposals for work we can do?”

Listening and asking

Two items on the budget priorities list drafted by **Austin Interfaith** — a coalition of churches, nonprofits, unions and schools — were funding for the Prime Time free after-school program in more than 20 city schools and funding for “parent support specialists” who are located at schools with concentrations of lower-income students and help families connect with social services.

The council approved \$520,000 for Prime Time and \$684,000 for parent support specialists.

Kurt Cadena-Mitchell, an Austin Interfaith leader and a member of Wildflower Church, said the coalition develops the budget list from small group conversations about what pressures families face and what the city should prioritize. He estimated at least 3,000 people participated in such conversations.

“That process of having conversations and listening to stories and asking the right questions, that’s built into the fundamental part of our work,” he said.

Austin Interfaith also started making its priorities known when council members were on the campaign trail last year. At forums for council contenders, Austin Interfaith would ask whether participants supported items like increased funding for Prime Time, parks and a career development program, Cadena-Mitchell said.

How the funding breaks down

The council added \$5.6 million in ongoing funds for public health and social services:

- \$2.5 million for the health department, which will pay for additional employees who will work on areas such as chronic and communicable diseases
- \$1,825,000 for social service contracts
- \$1,050,000 to address health inequities
- \$175,000 to continue supporting the Rundberg health initiative

The council added \$2 million in one-time spending. This means the council will have to decide again next year whether to include the funding in the city budget.

- \$684,000 for parent support specialists
- \$520,000 for Prime Time after-school program
- \$400,000 for healthy food initiatives
- \$300,000 for Obamacare enrollment
- \$140,000 for River City Youth Foundation's Summer of Safety program

