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PORTLAND HEAD START TOPS FOR *CHILDREN'S LEVY* CASH

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Summary: A Portland commission recommends that 23 early childhood programs get money in the first year

A committee overseeing Portland's ***children's levy*** has issued its first recommendations, allocating $4.1 million among 23 of 47 applicants for the levy's early childhood money.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs were among the winners, along with services for Latino and immigrant families. Independent centers providing child care for poor children generally struck out, in part because they had trouble providing statistical evidence that their programs make a difference.

Voters passed the five-year, $50 million property tax levy in November. The vote put Portland among a small group of cities nationwide, including San Francisco and Seattle, that have set aside money for children's programs.

The five-member allocation committee's first cut came Tuesday night, after a marathon seven-hour meeting and months of wrangling between the city and Multnomah County. In making its choices, the committee rejected $8 million of requests for the first year.

The committee's recommendation will go before the county Board of Commissioners Aug. 28 and the City Council Sept. 3. After that, the committee will recommend spending on child-abuse prevention programs and on after-school and mentoring programs.

Portland Commissioner Dan Saltzman, an allocation committee member, acknowledged Wednesday that some of the groups recommended for grants are making up for cuts in social service spending by the state, county and city since the levy passed. But most of the grant recipients will be serving more children and families, he said.

"Not to say there couldn't be improvements, but I think we came up with a pretty sound approach," said Saltzman, who led the ballot effort. "This package is going to make a difference in the lives of children."

The allocation committee also includes Multnomah County Commissioner

Lisa Naito, a representative appointed by the Portland Business Alliance and two experts in child services.

The committee recommended two years of grants for a broad range of programs serving expectant mothers and children up to 5 years old.

Trying to "even out the bar"
Head Start and Early Head Start, national preschool programs with the largest body of performance research behind them, would receive $1.3 million in the first year. Morrison Child and Family Services would receive nearly $800,000 to help children with mental health problems and provide health services to 125 Latino families.

"What we're trying to do with both of these proposals is even the bar for what's available in the community," said Bruce Baker, the group's executive vice president.

The committee favored programs that received the highest ratings from two subcommittees that delved into the applications in detail. The subcommittees ranked the research backing the programs, the strength of the supporting organization, its "cultural competency" and other factors.

An early literacy program submitted by the Multnomah County Library Foundation ranked high but was rejected in part because the library passed its own operating levy last year, Saltzman said.

Four lower-ranked programs received at least a portion of their requests, including one independent child-care center and programs aimed at children with AIDS, Native American mothers with young children and health education for 100 Latino families. Those programs would receive a total of $295,000 in the first year.

The Peninsula Children's Center in North Portland, an independent center, made the cut in part because its request included $9,600 to begin collecting data and tracking its performance. The committee granted $65,000 of the center's $235,000 request.

Deborah Murray, the center's associate director, said the committee cut her proposal and shot down others from independent child-care centers such as the YMCA because of a lack of performance data.

Levy boosters emphasized during the campaign that the money would go only to "proven" programs. But Murray asked the committee Tuesday to place less weight on the hard numbers in future decisions involving child care, a request committee members said they would consider.

"We have lots of evidence that quality child care makes a difference," Murray said. "What we haven't been able to do is research how Peninsula Children's Center is making a difference in North Portland because we haven't had the resources and the expertise to do that."

The committee expects $8.7 million in levy collections this year. On Tuesday, it set aside as much as $500,000 for administration, including financial audits.

Of the remaining $8.2 million, the committee decided 40 percent should go to early childhood programs, 40 percent to after-school and mentoring programs and 20 percent to child-abuse prevention and intervention.

The committee allocated half of the child-abuse money Tuesday and plans to decide on the remainder later this year. It will allocate the after-school and mentoring money this winter.

The process needs work, Saltzman said. Among other flaws noted by reviewers, it needs to allow easier comparisons of applicants' budgets and cost per client served.

"I think everybody is cutting us some slack because this has never been done before," Saltzman said. "But they're expecting improvements next time around."

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