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# Concern in Greenburgh Group's fund distribution drawing criticism WestHELP sees criticism grow in town

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VALHALLA - An annual \$650,000 payment to the Valhalla schools for enrichment programs brings cutting-edge technology to classrooms, sends students to the Grand Canyon, buys discount orchestra seats at the Metropolitan Opera and provides a principal \$50,000 a year to manage it all.

The money comes from the WestHELP homeless shelter, which gives the town of Greenburgh \$1.2 million a year. The town keeps \$450,000, gives \$100,000 to the Fairview Fire District and the rest goes to Valhalla to mollify opposition to the WestHELP homeless shelter in the Mayfair-Knollwood neighborhood.

The deal has fueled praise and criticism.

Valhalla parents such as Lori Adelsberg adore the partnership, which is used for enrichment and cultural activities for students and residents of the district.

"The partnership has been a wonderful thing for Valhalla and good in every way," Adelsberg said.

Her daughter, Sara, who participates in the high school drama club, which is partially underwritten by the partnership, attended summer art and jewelry classes and received \$1,000 this summer to defray the cost of a \$4,000 three-week program at Yale University.

"It gives our kids opportunities they would not ordinarily have," Adelsberg said.

However, criticism has been growing in the district and the town. Critics of the district question how the operation is run and how the money is being spent. Some Greenburgh residents don't want to share the money, and question if the partnership is even legal.

In response, on Thursday, the Town Board allowed Valhalla to spend \$439,000 this year, roughly half of what Valhalla requested, after Town Attorney Tim Lewis questioned whether providing a grant for programs restricted to residents in the small section of town served by the Valhalla schools violated the state constitution.

Meanwhile, state Comptroller Alan Hevesi's office is still working on an audit of the deal that began in June 2004.

"We did a risk assessment to see if it warranted an in-depth look, and it did," said Hevesi spokesman Dan

Weiller. He wouldn't say when the review would be finished.

In the town's northeast corner, the Valhalla school district, which also includes parts of North Castle and Mount Pleasant, is the smallest of 10 districts in Greenburgh. Between 400 and 500 of Valhalla's 1,560 students come from the homes and multifamily complexes in the Greenburgh section of the district. This year, 13 students from WestHELP also are enrolled.

The funding under scrutiny comes from a 2004 accord that helped sway public opinion about WestHELP in the Mayfair-Knollwood neighborhood, which abuts the homeless shelter on the Westchester Community College campus. The agreement helped convince one-time shelter opponents to back WestHELP's bid to operate the 108-unit shelter for another decade.

The shelter opened in 1991 following a dispute between Mayfair-Knollwood and Westchester County that ended in a compromise whereby the county agreed, after 10 years, to give the complex to Greenburgh for senior housing.

But in 2001, the county still needed the shelter, which provides an array of services to homeless people. A new 10-year pact was struck following talks among Westchester, Greenburgh and WestHELP, in which the county kept its promise to turn the facility over to Greenburgh and allowed the town to lease it to WestHELP. In the deal, \$1.2 million annually that during WestHELP's first decade had paid off its construction loan was given to the town as rent.

The rental income is divided each year. The town keeps \$450,000; the Fairview Fire Department gets \$100,000; and the Valhalla schools, \$650,000.

Greenburgh puts \$350,000 into its general coffers and sets aside \$100,000 for police overtime in Mayfair-Knollwood, where residents now fear a nearby shelter for sexual offenders.

The fire department devotes its payment for new equipment, including a \$65,000 trailer to promote fire safety.

Greenburgh resident Robert Reninger doesn't think the town should share the money. He contacted Hevesi's office in 2003, maintaining the state constitution prohibits Greenburgh from giving what he characterized as "gifts" to the school and fire districts.

Greenburgh Supervisor Paul Feiner stands by the pact, which he said was vetted by several lawyers. He supports rewarding Mayfair-Knollwood for accepting the shelter.

He maintains it is essential to stand by the accord, noting that the annual \$650,000 grant helped shifted public opinion there.

"How could we change our minds now?" Feiner asked. "We made a promise. If we changed the agreement, then our residents wouldn't trust government any more."

Westchester County, which pays WestHELP to house the homeless, has no objection to Greenburgh's use of its rental income, said spokeswoman Susan Tolchin.

"Whatever Greenburgh decides to do with the money is fine with us," she said.

The partnership's supporters call the payment their "social dividend" for backing the shelter's operation for another decade.

According to the contract, the money is earmarked for enrichment, not regular school expenses. Schools Superintendent Diana Ramos-Kelly works with the Board of Education and Kensico Elementary School Principal Sal Miele, who administers the program, to create a list of events, projects and programs to fund.

Miele was appointed administrator by the school board 18 months ago at an annual stipend of \$50,000.

Valhalla school Trustee William Rosenberg questions Miele's dual role. The WestHELP Partnership contract states that its administrator shall "devote a majority of his or her time to the administration of the grant."

"I cannot see how a school principal can devote the majority of his time to the grant and a majority of his time to the job of principal," wrote Rosenberg in a Sept. 15 e-mail to Feiner. "You cannot have two majorities."

While the contract has not been amended, this year's proposal states that Miele's job is part time. Miele, whose pay as principal is \$168,351 in salary and stipends, said he finds time in the evening, on weekends and during his vacations, averaging 12 to 14 hours a week.

"It doesn't interfere at all," Miele said.

Ramos-Kelly, meanwhile, said she is taking another look at Miele's assignment.

"It's fair to say we are reviewing it," she said. "It's a lot for him."

He submits the list of recommended programs to the Valhalla Schools Committee, which is appointed by the Greenburgh Town Board.

Seven Mayfair-Knollwood residents are members; there are two vacancies. The group reviews the list and sends it to the Town Board for approval.

According to the contract, the Valhalla schools superintendent must establish a citizens committee to generate funding ideas. District spokeswoman Evelyn McCormack, whose husband, Ned, heads the Valhalla Schools Committee, said the panel was not set up by former Superintendent Thomas Kelly, who resigned in 2005. His successor, Ramos-Kelly, has yet to establish one.

"The system has been working," said Evelyn McCormack. "We get tons of grant proposals from everywhere in the community. There's never a shortage of ideas on how to spend the money."

Under the 2006-07 proposal, there's a \$42,000 trip to the Grand Canyon for 20 high school students and four teachers to study ecology, funding for \$5,000 interactive "SMART boards" in every kindergarten through fifth-grade classroom, and free SAT prep by Princeton Review for scores of Valhalla teens.

There are field trips to Ellis Island, funding for math and reading consultants, and \$50,000 in seed money for innovative math or science programs at Valhalla High. There's also \$22,000 to provide tuition help for Valhalla students studying overseas or at sleep-away summer programs at elite universities.

Although the partnership contract makes no mention of using WestHELP money for programs that serve adults, when Miele became the administrator 20 months ago, he was asked to develop a program for Valhalla adults and children for enrichment activities outside the school day.

This year's \$65,000 for that part of the partnership, called Valkyrie, includes such offerings as a Museum of Modern Art tour and lunch; dinner and a candlelight tour of Washington Irving's home in Tarrytown; and sessions on food preparation at Macmenamin's Grill & Chef Works in New Rochelle.

This summer, a series called "Piano for Adults" provided lessons for six participants, including at least one teen, said Ned McCormack.

In August, the partnership sponsored a Saturday sunset dinner cruise for 45 around Manhattan on Dove Yacht.

The Manhattan cultural events are popular. Last month, Abby Carsten boarded a packed bus at the Kensico

School headed to Manhattan for lunch at O'Neals' and \$160 orchestra seats at her first opera - "Madama Butterfly" at the Metropolitan Opera.

Carsten was among 54 who paid \$80 for an excursion that actually cost \$204 apiece. The program subsidy totaled nearly \$7,000.

Ned McCormack said almost all Valkyrie programs are open to both students and adults.

"We thought it was good to have kids and parents learn together," he said. "I guess you could call it a program for children of all ages."

Greenburgh Supervisor Feiner said providing programs for adults, as well as Valhalla students, was the reward Mayfair-Knollwood deserved for giving up its objections to WestHELP.

"You might not think government should be doing this, and a trip to the Grand Canyon is not the typical trip offered to a kid," Feiner said. "But this is what it takes for a neighborhood to support homeless housing in their backyards."

**westhelp: Benefit or burden?  
community**

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