

May 28, 2024

Via email to Christopher.Constant@anchorageak.gov

Christopher Constant
Chair
Anchorage Assembly
PO Box 196650
Anchorage, AK 99519

Re: Contracts for Congregate and Non-Congregate Emergency Sheltering Services

Dear Chair Constant:

This letter follows media reports and actions by the Anchorage Assembly (the “Assembly”) related to excerpts of text messages from current and former employees of Henning, Inc. (“Henning”), as well as Alexis Johnson, that the Assembly received and put into the public record. These messages have caused members of the Assembly to publicly raise concerns regarding Henning’s ethics and to direct the Anchorage Health Department to conduct a full review of Henning’s contracted operations with the Municipality of Anchorage (“MOA”).

As an initial matter, we are saddened and disappointed the Assembly would attack an Alaskan and Woman-led nonprofit company in a public forum without even seeking Henning’s input or even requesting context for the text messages the Assembly received and made public. As the text messages were incomplete and covered various timeframes, the individual who provided these text messages to the Assembly likely did so with the intent to paint Henning and its employees in the most negative light possible and with the hope the Assembly would assume the worst of Henning and its employees. This strategy appears to have been effective. No benefit of the doubt existed in the Assembly’s comments or its actions. Henning was publicly lambasted, again, by the Assembly.

What is particularly difficult is the fact that this situation mirrors last spring when the Assembly raised “concerns” with Henning’s operations based on undisclosed comments and criticisms from the community, resulting in the Assembly ordering third-party oversight of Henning’s operations. Since that time, the third-party oversight contractor, Restorative and Reentry Services, LLC (“RRS”) has conducted numerous reviews and issued multiple positive reports of Henning’s operations. These reports highlight the work Henning has done to improve operations during difficult times of uncertainty and emergency actions. While opportunities to improve continue to exist, as they always do, the reports confirm Henning’s commitment to providing housing and services to Anchorage’s most vulnerable citizens. But, the unfortunate reality is, the results from these reports never make it into the newspaper or into the soundbites offered by Assembly members.

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Henning recognizes some of the out-of-context text messages the Assembly publicly shared were not professional and may have reflected poor judgment by the sender. To be clear, the statements shared in those text messages by current and former Henning employees do not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of Henning. Some of the messages also reflect the dark humor that is common in difficult professions. Other messages were entirely explainable if the Assembly had the relevant context, which is why Henning would have hoped the Assembly would have requested Henning discuss the text messages in a work session or similar forum before jumping to the worst-possible conclusions in an Assembly meeting.

It remains unclear what Henning has done in its short history to warrant the Assembly's repeated ire, other than maintaining a close working relationship with Ms. Johnson, who is employed as part of Mayor Bronson's administration. A close working relationship with the Anchorage Health Department is critical to our work and required under our contracts. Either way, we would hope the Assembly's actions are not politically motivated.

In any event, as we have in the past, Henning welcomes any review or oversight the Assembly and the MOA deem necessary to ensure Henning and the MOA are meeting our joint commitment to provide housing and services to Anchorage's vulnerable populations. We expect any such review will confirm Henning is committed to its mission and taking the appropriate steps to effectuate that mission. As recent years have seen the MOA only issue temporary contracts that vary by season, we have tackled the difficult work required under our contracts while facing an uncertain future. Despite this, Henning has risen to the challenge to create and maintain emergency shelter services.

These actions reflect the fact Henning is deeply committed to its mission and to providing quality services to our clients. Most days we are proud of the work we are performing to safely house and build our community. Of course, there are days when the work is challenging, frustrating, and thankless. Which is fine. We face the difficulties head-on and do not do this work in order to receive thanks or accolades. But on those days, members of our staff may have expressed their frustrations in what they believed was internal communication. Henning's work overall should not be judged or measured by messages sent out of jest or frustration. We would hope members of the Assembly would have empathy, as no one would appreciate private messages being publicly shared without consent or context.

And, while we do not require the Assembly to appreciate or thank us for the work we do, being publicly criticized, and questioned, without an opportunity to respond, only makes our work that much harder. It affects our relationship with the community and our ability to recruit and retain quality staff. Tarnishing Henning's reputation, based on misconstrued and out-of-context text messages, does not serve to improve homeless services in Anchorage.

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Regards,

Shawn C. Hays

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Founder/Executive Director
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