On Friday, June 10, administrators of the CORE grant process for City and County of Santa Cruz social services funding, released information about Scores and Comments about the CORE applications for the agencies that were not funded, including FSA-CC. According to information published in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on June 16, there were 128 applications and only 36 were recommended for funding. Of the applications submitted this year, 47% were from new organizations yet the amount of money available was actually less than the amount used previously to fund many existing services. The stability of long-term funding, until now, has allowed Santa Cruz County to have many successful and well-established programs that meet a wide range of community needs and provide funds for new services through additional investment.

The nonprofits have been advocating for years that the County and City allocate new funding for new organizations rather that force longtime agencies to reduce or eliminate services in order to support new groups. It was disappointing to read (in the Sentinel) a comment a county spokesperson, regarding the performance of longtime nonprofits in our community that “there were no provisions to see how well that money was being used or what the community benefits were.” Actually, all agencies receiving funding have always submitted rigorous reports with specific data and descriptions of services provided.

For this 3-year funding cycle, FSA-CC submitted two applications. One reflects recent FSA-CC efforts to consolidate an array of counseling and support services into one application for a Mental Health Program that includes five components (Counseling Services, Senior Outreach, WomenCARE, Survivors Healing Center and I-You Venture) with distinct populations served. The other application is for the Suicide Prevention Service with its unique call center and community education and outreach. In reading the Scores and Comments, we are concerned that the application readers had trouble understanding the Mental Health Program with its multiple components. Several are quite small and all function as integral to the whole package of mental health and support services governed by a common set of evaluation tools. We kept Suicide Prevention Services separate because of its unique function in the county and region.

In reviewing the Comments about “Areas Where Application Could be Improved” in both applications, we found four main areas of concern. Equity concerns were mentioned numerous times. The agency has evolved over the years to prioritize access for people of diverse backgrounds, including LGBTO, people of color and Spanish language speakers. Access includes bilingual staff, website and program materials available in Spanish, interpreter services for the call center, and efforts to hire and maintain bilingual counselors and staff. All of our programs serve residents throughout the county including from offices in north, mid and south county. Our client numbers reflect this progress.
There were a number of comments about what kind of data is used, how data is collected, what outcomes are measured and how data might reflect and address inequities. As a small agency, the capacity for data collection at a granular level with anonymous client feedback forms does not exist. FSA-CC developed outcome measures as part of an earlier RFP process, based on evidence-based practices and approved in the prior cycle. Clients respond to a set of questions about the effectiveness of services. It is not possible to cross reference individual responses to specific demographics. Respecting client confidentiality is a high priority for Mental Health services and in compliance with federal HIPAA requirements. Client responses are evaluated as a whole and provide data about the quality and outcomes of services.

The comments asked for more information about community strengths and assets. Our application focused on the contributions of our many volunteers who come from the community and reflect community engagement on a deep and personal level. We also highlighted our numerous collaborations with other nonprofit and local agencies to meet community needs. We also receive funding from three counties and virtually all foundations as well as individual donors. There were space limitations in the application that we had to edit our material to fit. We have a sixty-five-year record of service to the community supported staff, volunteers, donors and local government.

The last concerns raised were from the Budget section, asking for more information about staff roles and responsibilities. It would be difficult to single out one or two roles/responsibilities in the budget narrative because the budget reflects an aggregate of people in different jobs in different programs. CORE funding only supported a portion of the work done by the agency and the components of this application. The personnel and non-personnel costs listed in the Budget reflect only the portion of total expenses that are actually funded by the grant. For example, the .53 FTE Staff Therapist budgeted reflects the percentage of total FTE Therapists that is funded by the grant. Many additional personnel and volunteers are actively engaged to provide the full range services offered.

In conclusion, we are extremely disappointed that the grant reviewers did not take into consideration the many measures of success that were provided in the small space allowed in each application. We feel the comments are overly analytical and critical by people unfamiliar with our work. We have counted on our successful partnerships with the city and county for decades and have grave concern that, in this time of social and economic instability, so many in our community risk losing the long-time support we have been able to provide.