SIMPSON, CRANLEY WAR OVER VIOLENCE PREVENTION MONEY

Cincinnati City Council was wrapping up the 2018 operating budget members agreed to spend an additional $150,000 to help the poor.

That brought the total human services funding to $4.3 million – the most in years.

Sounds great, right? Especially in an election year.

Only now, council members can’t agree on who they should give it to. And the mayor is weighing in too.

On one side, Councilwoman Yvette Simpson, who proposed the funding. She wants the money to go to anti-violence efforts, though when she pitched the idea she never specifically said the money would go toward anti-violence efforts. And she hasn’t said who would get the money. Doing so would bring total money for yet unnamed anti-violence programs to $650,000.

On the other side, Mayor John Cranley, who is frustrated because he said the money is flowing outside the traditional voting process, which Simpson disparages. He said council should decide where the money goes with recommendations from Human Services Advisory Committee.

A heated argument between the two exploded during the June 28 Council meeting.

And even then Council didn’t end up making a decision, meaning they’ll have to come back to work over summer break to figure it out.

Human Service funding is often the most contentious part of the budget. Groups line up for help and there’s never enough money to go around. This year, as the city faced a $28 million deficit, groups that help the poor fared outs just like city departments.

City Manager Harry Black recommended the groups take a 25 percent cut. But Cranley restored the money when he passed the budget to council. Still some members wanted more.

Councilmen Chris Seelbach found money and support to keep the city’s needle exchange program. Vice Mayor David Mann championed money for First Step Home, a women’s addiction center.

Then, two days before the budget was set for a vote Simpson proposed the additional money for human services in a budget swap that would take money out of a police technology fund, equipment that would then be paid for out the city’s capital budget.

Simpson’s idea garnered a 6-0 vote, but that’s when the problems started. The United Way wasn’t sure what to do with the money since they were already finished with the assessment process for the year.

And the city’s Human Services Advisory Group, which recommends which agencies get funding, was done meeting too. This group, selected by the mayor and appointed by council, has 11 members from the community.

Advisory group member Mary Armor wrote to Council, saying she was shocked about the new allocation.

“In the initial awarding of the funds, the HSAC did not have enough money to allocate to some of the agencies that have a need, e.g., (Center for Addiction Treatment) — the only agency like this in the city,” she wrote. “The process in all of this is very important and even though you might have the authority to vote and ignore the process.”

Anti-violence programs have long been a part of the city’s human service funding, but in 2014, with too few dollars for such programs and questions about the outcomes of the anti-violence programs, Council agreed human service money would go toward homelessness prevention and pet creation. They specified that when there was more money available, it should go to violence prevention in conjunction with the police department.

Last year, Council allocated $260,000 to fight violence.

The breakdown:

- $100,000 for Santa Maria Community Services Lower Price Hill Collaborative, which provided counseling/coaching to at-risk youth at risk of violence.
- $100,000 for school violence prevention, headed by YPFC, Housing Woodward, Riveraide, Withrow and Taft Technology high schools.
- $50,000 for the Urban League to create youth councils in Westwood and Rainbow.

During the council meeting, some members suggested next year’s money could go to the fight against heroin. Simpson said anti-violence money is Human Services funding, and it didn’t need to be specified. And she made that case that in Avondale, Winton Terrace, Bond Hill . . . the West End and any other community where shootings are rampant (residents) will say violence prevention is important.

“Everyone is parents of kids who are concerned that every single day their kids are bombardaded with violence,” Simpson said.

Councilman Kein Flynn expressed surprise, saying he thought the programs would be vetted by the United Way. As most programs the get city funding are.

Cranley made the case for heroin funding, as opposed to programs that more generally aim to reduce violence.

“In 2014 we didn’t have the heroin opioid epidemic that we have today,” said. “And it wasn’t as known although it was bubbling up . . . A lot has happened in the three years, including the expansion of the opioid crisis. I appreciate that was a good process in 2014. It seems reasonable to reassess based on changing circumstances.”

Next: Council’s Finance committee meeting to discuss the matter Monday.