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HEALTHCARE

Canton City Council declares racism a public health crisis

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CANTON City Council has declared racism a public health crisis and committed to improving the lives of minority residents.

Members approved a resolution Monday that said as much. Councilman Frank Morris, D-9, was the only member absent.

The resolution recognizes health disparities brought to the forefront by the pandemic and ongoing discussions about police reform, among other quality-of-life issues.

“Canton is committed to honestly and directly addressing minority health inequalities, including a systematic, data-driven focus on poverty, economic mobility, and other factors that impact the social determinants of health,” the resolution states.

Councilwoman Chris Smith, D-4, said she proposed the resolution with the support of council as a whole “to identify racism and declare it is a crisis — because it is.”

The city has sought to make the Edward “Peel” Coleman Community Center a hub for community services and works with Canton City Public Health on programs such as THRIVE, which seeks to reduce infant deaths.

Smith said she’d like the city to pursue additional health programs in the future.

Other local governments, including Franklin and Summit counties, recently passed similar resolutions. Black lawmakers also have introduced bills in the state House and Senate to declare racism a public health crisis.

Police settlement

City Council authorized a settlement of \$125,000 — with approximately \$43,395 for Medicaid and \$81,605 for Pike Township resident Adam Balzer.

Council approval is required for any payment greater than \$50,000. Assistant Law Director Vivianne Duffrin said the case was previously discussed in executive session when summarizing the payment for council.

According to a lawsuit filed with the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, Balzer stated that Canton police used “excessive and reckless” force by using a K9 to arrest him when he was having a mental breakdown in 2017.

The complaint from Balzer, who is white, stated that this leg was “chewed to the bone” and permanently injured. He was arrested on charges of resisting arrest and disorderly conduct and later found not guilty by reason of insanity.

The city, in its response to the original complaint, stated that the “detention, arrest, and prosecution were based on probable cause and defendants acted in good faith at all times.”

Other action

Accepted a \$243,751 federal grant from the Office of Justice Programs for the Canton Police Department. It will fund a 60-day worth of pandemic supplies, the salary and benefits of two new hires, Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy for four officers, and cloud storage for body cameras.

Gave the mayor, or safety director in his absence, the authority to declare a state of emergency in Canton. As a statutory city, Canton officials did not have that option. “Most cities have that authority in their charter,” Mayor Thomas Bernabei said.

Approved measures to accept additional COVID-19 relief funds. Canton anticipates receiving about \$3.74 million in the third round of federal relief.

Approved two-year collective bargaining agreements with the Canton Professional Firefighters Association and Fraternal Order of Police. The firefighter’s contract added random drug screening and was typical of other city bargaining agreements, said Duffrin. The police supervisor contract included health insurance changes and a 2% pay raise.

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