

D.C. Hunger Solutions

fighting hunger in the nation's capital



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Acting Head of Agency Lauded as a 'Breath of Fresh Air'

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Last summer, Deborah Gist agreed -- with little enthusiasm -- to a request from her boss, D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams, to take over an important city agency that had become the target of so much criticism that its director had been forced to quit.



Three months after Gist, 38, became interim director of the D.C. State Education Office, several key problems are being fixed.

Staff members praise her for improving morale; vacancies are being filled; and federal money that was unclaimed is being recouped. Community activists who had little good to say about the previous director, C. Vanessa Spinner, say their relations with the agency are thriving -- to the benefit of residents.

"I would categorize the change as breathtaking," said Reuben Gist, advocacy director of the nonprofit Capital Area Food Bank, who had been among Spinner's most vocal critics. (He is not related to Deborah Gist.)

"It is an entire change in terms of the spirit of cooperation and openness [with activists] and an entire change with what she has done to change the morale of the staff," he said.

The State Education Office was established in 2000 to perform four functions: implement eight federally funded nutrition programs in the District; verify fall enrollment counts for all public schools; oversee the process to document D.C. residency for public school students; and make recommendations on the school system's per-student funding formula.

The office, which last year had an approved budget of \$81 million, has been assigned other programs since then, including the D.C. Tuition Assistance Grant Program, which provides college tuition assistance for thousands of qualified seniors.

One of Gist's first moves was to combine the office with one that provides college tuition for students based on need. The goal was to streamline administrative operations and make it easier for students to fill out claims for assistance.

Gist and others in the office said that she has:

- ò Begun fixing accounting procedures at the agency, which in the past had been criticized for making charges and paying salaries out of the wrong accounts.

- ò Ordered an audit of claims that go back to 2000 from a key federally funded nutrition program -- and discovered that the city is due an

undetermined but probably significant amount of money.

ò Opened lines of communication with staff so directors of programs know how much money is in their budgets -- information that had not been available under Spinner.

Gist, who had worked for several years in the mayor's office as an official in charge of service and volunteer programs, said she has come to appreciate the importance of the education office and is pleased with the progress. She credits her 55-member staff.

"There is an amazing pool of talent here," she said. "We want to continue to find ways to be much more effective, create new partnerships with the community and be creative with our funding."

Kim Perry, head of D.C. Hunger Solutions, a project of the nonprofit Food and Research Action Committee, called Gist "a breath of fresh air."

"The biggest change is that this interim State Education Office is open to public-private partnerships and open to the true meaning of collaboration," she said.

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