

Appeal for the Continuation of the Lometa and Hico HCCA Programs
by Hico City Administrator Michael Leamons, 8-7-12

Thank you for the opportunity to address this Board concerning a very important matter, namely, whether or not Hill Country Community Action Association will continue to have active programs in Lometa and Hico. I would like to begin by recognizing the valuable service this Board renders the greater Hill Country Community. None of you receive any compensation for sitting on this Board, yet here you are, faithfully looking after the interests of some of our community's most vulnerable citizens. I'm sure all those present agree, we owe you a heart-felt "thank you" for that service.

I understand you are not accustomed to having visitors at your Board Meetings. I and the many other visitors here this afternoon have come because we recently discovered the programs this agency administers on behalf of the senior citizens in Lometa and Hico are in jeopardy.

Not quite three weeks ago, Executive Director Shaw paid a visit to Lometa and Hico and advised the two Senior Citizen Center Directors that the programs in their respective cities would be eliminated effective September 30th. This announcement was both unexpected and quite disturbing. Yes, a year ago representatives of our community attended a meeting where they were told money was tight and as a result, the program might experience some changes. Mayor Lavern Tooley of Hico, who is present this afternoon, attended that meeting. Until she received word of Director Shaw's recent pronouncement, however, she had no idea the Hico program might be eliminated.

A few days after receiving the above-mentioned news, the Hico City Council addressed HCCA's plans at a Special Called Meeting. The Council voted to donate the approximately \$2,500 that would have been paid its members as compensation for services to the Hico Senior Citizen Program and approved a motion expressing the Council's desire that a concerted effort be made to save the program. Subsequently, a meeting was held at the Senior Citizen Center and 50 citizens showed up to express support for the program and to find out what could be done to keep it from being lost. That's why so many of us are in attendance here today.

When first confronted with the HCCA's plans, both of Hico's elected state representatives were contacted. Officials from both offices looked into the matter and determined plans to terminate the Hico program were simply a matter of budget cuts. Copies of various budgets forwarded to me indicated HCCA is projecting a system-wide shortfall for the current year in its nutrition program of about 5%, or \$86,000. By eliminating the programs in Lometa and Hico it appears about \$96,000 could be saved, less whatever it will cost to administer a meals-on-wheels program for the two communities out of the neighboring cities of Lampasas and Hamilton.

We are certainly sympathetic to the economic challenges facing HCCA. The City of Hico has had to implement numerous budget cuts. During the past 2 ½ years, we have gone from 11 full time employees to 8. We are, however, very concerned by the proposed strategy for remedying HCCA's budget deficit. Lometa and Hico, with populations of 856 and 1,379, respectively are the two smallest program participants in HCCA's service area. Additionally, with a per capita income of \$10,428, Lometa is the most economically challenged community in the service area. With a per capita income of \$14,122, Hico comes in 4th from the bottom. The State average is \$19,617. We propose, rather than causing the full brunt of the shortfall to fall upon the service area's two smallest and most economically challenged communities, the deficit be made up by a

5% across the board reduction in the program. Regarding the proposed closure strategy, I've got a question for those of you representing the Goldthwaite and Mason Senior Citizen Programs, with populations of 1,878 and 2,114, respectively, will your programs be eliminated the next time there's a shortfall?

Quite honestly, on paper I can see where the plan to eliminate the Lometa and Hico programs might seem reasonable. Participation in both of those programs is low; consequently, the costs per meal are high. But what about the "Promise" made on your website that "We care about the entire community..." Today Lometa and Hico don't feel that care. And what about HCCA's purpose statement: "The purpose of the Agency is to promote the reduction of poverty, the revitalization of low-income communities, and the empowerment of families and individuals in the service area to achieve economic self-sufficiency and maintain personal independence." Is the elimination of the programs in Hico and Lometa consistent with that purpose?

Last week, when speaking with a member of the Silver Haired Legislature, I mentioned how I was looking for a senior citizens advocate. That individual said, "HCCA used to be that advocate, but over time its focus has shifted from advocacy to program administration." With the decision now facing this Board, I'm asking you to restore this agency to its historic role as advocate for the region's senior citizens.

Yes, from an administrative perspective, it might make sense on paper to eliminate the programs in Lometa and Hico, but from the perspective of a social services advocate, the human costs associated with such a course of action should be carefully weighed. In Hico (and I'm sure the same is true in Lometa), HCCA's program and director serve as a nucleus for a host of senior citizen social activities. The seniors socialize over the congregant meal; they have a game of dominoes every afternoon; they have monthly jam sessions, domino tournaments and covered dish luncheons; and, occasionally they have special music groups. (Quite a few of the most active participants in our programs are in their 80's and 90's, I'm sure many didn't feel up to the journey, or we would have had even more present for this meeting.) The Center also serves as a distribution point for United Care food packages and houses the HOP public transportation program. On a daily basis, your Hico program Director, Peggy Forrest, does an excellent job of watching over and interacting with the community's senior citizens. We simply can't afford to lose this valuable social resource.

I must confess, the City of Hico is at fault in not having been more involved in the local Senior Citizen Program. Peggy does such a good job, the program seemed to be self-sustaining, and we as a City have been complacent. We've realized, however, we need to take more ownership; hence, the added \$2,500 contribution. We also need to help improve the program to increase participation. When the meals were prepared locally, we did have more participation. Some time ago, due to cost considerations, the Center transitioned to frozen meals. Our local Senior Citizen Center Foundation, representatives of which are present, also wants to help save the Hico program. I'm hopeful they might be able to make up the difference between the cost of locally prepared meals and frozen ones, so we can work to build up program participation.

In closing, I appeal to you, the Hill Country Community Action Association Board of Directors, to don the mantle of senior citizen advocacy and reject the proposal to eliminate the Senior Citizen Programs in Lometa and Hico. Let's work together to come up with a better solution.