REPORT: GRESHAM TASK FORCE On Homelessness

October 18, 2016

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CITY COUNCIL

The City of Gresham has recognized homelessness as a significant issue impacting all citizens of Gresham – both the housed and unhoused. A citizen-led task force has been called to action to investigate the causes and impacts of homelessness and to draft recommendations for further city action.

The essential services that would benefit our homeless neighbors, centers on laying the fertile ground for them to transition out of homelessness. These services will greatly aid the City of Gresham's vision in tackling the root causes of homelessness and helping these individuals in becoming self sufficient in a sustainable manner.

This vision, through the collaborative efforts of the government, neighborhood associations, nonprofits, faith based communities and businesses, will strive to provide critical services to the homeless: housing, resources and safety off the streets.

Realities

The City of Gresham has formally partnered and informally engaged with the following activities:

Regional Forums

- The City has a seat on the executive committee of A Home for Everyone, a city-county initiative that brings together the cities of Portland and Gresham, Multnomah County and nonprofits to seek ways to end homelessness. Councilor Karylinn Echols represents Gresham on the Executive Committee and Joe Walsh is an active member of the Coordinating Board.
- Councilor David Widmark and one additional Gresham resident serve on the board of directors for Home Forward, which advocates for affordable housing.

Funding for Gresham

- The City has allocated a significant portion of its federal Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) to projects focused on preventing homelessness and providing transitional housing and service to those who are homeless.
    - One of the many projects funded by CDBG is JOIN, which assists the homeless in Gresham to gain stability and return to housing.
    - Another project funds Human Solutions to provide tenant based rental assistance to keep up to 85 very low income Gresham families in their apartments.

- The City of Gresham has secured temporary funding from Multnomah County to staff a full time in-house homeless services specialist who is working daily with the homeless and coordinating with service providers to provide individuals the support they need to take the first steps out of homelessness.

- The City has also secured funding for the Clean Team to keep Gresham's trails and open spaces clean while employing individuals seeking to establish a work history and move out of homelessness.

Consistent, Proactive Law Enforcement

- The City of Gresham has established the Neighborhood Enhancement Action Team to work with citizens to creatively solve neighborhood issues before they require full police action. The NET officers, in particular, represent a consistent presence with the homeless and set clear expectations for acceptable behavior and respect for the community and the environment. This team fosters compliance at the ground level by building a rapport with homeless individuals.
- The NEAT team sponsors Landlord Bootcamps, Landlord Forums and Landlord - Tenant Mediation to promote better landlord / tenant / police communication and encourage renter success.

Faith Based Outreach

- While not formally sponsored by the City, there are open lines of communication between the active faith based community serving the homeless and the City. Many local churches sponsor rotating day shelters and soup kitchens to provide the homeless safe shelter and nourishment.
- When conditions warrant, the City authorizes temporary overnight shelters in participating churches. The City works with these facilities to meet requirements for life-saving emergency sheltering.
- Organizations such as Frontline Ministries, No One Left Behind and Knowing Me Ministries actively engage with the homeless to build relationships and work with individuals to achieve their full potential.

Environmental Protection

- The 60-acre parcel along the Springwater Trail and Johnson Creek known as Gresham Woods, was closed to all human activity to allow the area to recover from significant environmental damage.
- Regular clean-ups of homeless camps occur with support from Metro RID, the Clean team and private contractors as necessary.

Housing

- A Home for Everyone recently presented a progress report to the Multnomah County Commission on its strategy approach, which places emergency shelter last behind homeless prevention and permanent housing. A Home for Everyone is allocating its budget so that 46 percent goes to prevention, 32 percent to shelter placement and 22 percent to housing placement.

- The report showed that through partnerships with other nonprofits, homelessness was reduced by providing emergency shelter for 6,644 people, 4,603 homeless went into permanent housing, and 562 shelter beds were being added (details below). Even so, the number of shelter beds are still not enough as existing facilities reach capacity and keep people on the street.
    - Additional homeless beds are becoming available in the Gresham/Rockwood area.
        - 200 beds at the Hansen Building at NE 122nd and Glisan for men and women over 18 years of age (residents of this shelter have been moved from two recently closed shelters in SW Portland)
        - 90 beds at the Gresham Women's Shelter at 162nd and Burnside
        - 130 beds at the Human Solutions Family Center at 160th and Stark

Data

- Based on Comparative Housing Data from May, 2016 which compared the 12 largest Portland-Metro cities (sources ACS, Home Forward), Gresham is:
    - 11th in median value of owner-occupied housing units ($210,000)
    - 12th (last) in median contract rent ($771)
    - 4th in number of assisted housing units/per capita (2,207/0.020)
    - 4th in Section 8 housing vouchers (~958)
    - 3rd in public housing units (226)

Challenges

As a growing number of homeless persons in Gresham are unhoused and living out-of-doors or subsisting in unsustainable scenarios of doubling/tripling up or couch surfing, it is essential that Gresham develop and maintain a clear focus around identification and removal of barriers that are preventing its citizens from searching for and securing housing. The Task Force has identified some of these barriers, but no doubt, more exist.

The Task Force reviewed The State of Homelessness in East County: A Summary of Findings and East County Point in Time(PIT) Count Appendix presented by the Gresham and East County Interests. The following trends and data points, as they relate to accessing housing, were highly concerning:

- The homeless in East County are on the streets much longer than the national average. 86% of all the homeless in East County reported being homeless for more than a year. This may indicate that our homeless are receiving less help, and facing more barriers than the majority of places in the country.

- It is clear from the PIT count and the Oregon Department of Education homeless students and youth counts, that homeless families and individuals with children are a significant but often

invisible part of the homeless population in East County. 93% of the homeless with children were sheltered, subsisting in unsustainable scenarios of doubling/tripling up or couch surfing due to lack of shelter and affordable housing.

- In the 2014-15 school year, the combined homeless count for Centennial, Gresham-Barlow and Reynolds School Districts accounted for over 2000 individual students. Only 11% of those families were in a shelter. The rest were either doubled up (88%), in a hotel/motel (2%) or unsheltered/living in a place not suitable for residence (4%).

- There is a lack of affordable housing in Gresham. There appears to be barriers to developing land - whether they be additional permit fees and taxes and processes related to the Urban Growth Boundary, or lack of funds available for accompanying supportive services related to developing affordable housing, or something else that's preventative. But a crisis in housing shortage, limits options for all residents (homeless or seeking new housing) to move into the Gresham community.

- Human Solutions and other agencies that provide housing assistance are often drawing clients exclusively from the 211 queue. Yet the average wait time for someone who uses 211 to get help with housing is around 2 years. Often by this time, the person is no longer living in the original location, and likely does not have the same phone / contact information. Additionally, more time has passed where they have not established a positive rental history.

- Even after someone gets their opportunity through the queue, there are often significant barriers in their history. People are being rejected due to criminal background, poor credit history or lack of rental history. At the listening session at Anawim Christian Community on August 10, 2016, members of the homeless community also reported being treated as "less than" once they were able to start looking for housing.

- It is a landlord's market. There is such a crisis in available housing that there are many applications for each unit. Landlords may not want to take a chance on a homeless individual, or one with a background that isn't clean. And even though (based on the Comparative Housing Data from May 2016), Gresham is 4th in Section 8 housing vouchers (~958) and 3rd in public housing units (226), homeless citizens are reporting being denied the ability to use their vouchers or rent assistance when landlords have the ability to rent to someone whose finances are more stable.

- Additionally, comparable to income, rents are high and some landlords take advantage of deposits and are re-victimizing vulnerable people with unfair charges. This not only affects renters but also has a huge fiscal impact on organizations that subsidize housing.

- The homeless are often being asked to access essential and housing services in a way that doesn't work for them and it can be overwhelming. Not everyone has access to the internet or consistent phone access. Public transportation is limited north-south in Gresham, and many services require they ride Max or TriMet, but funds for a ticket may be a barrier. If a homeless individual is disabled or has children, finding the time to follow-up on services may be a challenge. And without somewhere to leave their belongings, a person is opening themselves up to theft of their items that are essential for their health and safety.

- And the number of homeless individuals is increasing due to lack of focus and attention to preventative measures. Oregon has the highest population of residents who spend 50% or more of their income on housing. Gresham is 12th (last) in median family income ($54,506) and 10th in the ratio of homeownership to rental units (52.3%/47.7%). Due to increased rents, more people are requiring rent assistance. Some housed people can't afford food after they pay for their housing so they come to the shelters to eat. This also results in not having sufficient funds available for utilities, so families or individuals are often getting utilities shut-off for non-payment. One emergency can quickly result in the complete loss of housing.

- There is a need for expanded collaborative efforts of the government, neighborhood associations, nonprofits, faith based communities and businesses to provide essential services for the homeless: housing and/or shelter, education, medical care, substance abuse treatment, identification application or recovery, meals, hygiene, legal aid and employment opportunities.

- While it is impossible to address a solution to every challenge impacting Gresham's homeless, the recommendations of the Gresham Task Force on Homelessness are based on their research and understanding of best practices. These recommendations can provide the City Council options in the areas of action, further research and advocacy to continue addressing the homelessness of individuals and families in Gresham.

Recommendations

Housing

- Identify and remove barriers to developers to establish additional affordable housing (permanent as well as market-rate).
    - ACTION: Incentivize a percentage of newly constructed multi-family development units be rented to voucher-holders or low-income families (permanent supportive housing units).
    - FURTHER RESEARCH: Convene a Task Force to research and gather facts and report back to the Gresham City Council.

- Create Office of Housing to serve as a point of contact for housing-related issues at the City of Gresham.
    - ACTION: Budget and hire.
    - ACTION: This office would be tasked to create and expand varied housing options to support the best practices model of Housing First.

- Rent Control.
    - ADVOCACY: Advocate at the state level for rent control.

- Limit no-cause evictions.
    - ACTION: Survey recent actions of city governments related to no-cause evictions and adopt our own local ordinances/similar language.

- Subsidize the costs of re-housing families.
    - ACTION: Continue current focus on CDBG/HOME projects to this end.
    - ADVOCACY: Encourage Home Forward to increase funding and expand collaboration with nonprofits to assist low-income families with move-in costs.

Resources

- Expand funding and resources to prevent loss of residence: Utilities, short-term rental assistance.
    - ACTION: Continue current focus on CDBG/HOME projects for prevention.
    - ACTION: Education resources for renters and landlords.
    - ACTION: Require landlords to provide a resource list to accompany a late payment or eviction notice.
    - ACTION: Require landlords to provide information on free legal advice and a HUD Oregon tenant Rights flier to accompany new and renewed leases.
    - ADVOCACY: Encourage Home Forward to increase funding and expand collaboration with nonprofits to assist low income families with prevention services.

- Ensure homeless citizens are represented in all discussions related to them.
    - ACTION: Create a standing body that addresses homeless rights where homeless community members have representation and voice.

- Create Public Relations (PR) campaigns that help to de-stigmatize homelessness and educate the community.
    - ACTION: Develop community PR to tell the story of the homeless with a focused effort to tell success stories.
    - ACTION: Engage local media.
    - ACTION: Engage the City's communication and media resources.

- Create a community court to deal with misdemeanor crimes related to homelessness.
    - FURTHER RESEARCH: Research other county models.
    - ADVOCACY: Advocate to Multnomah County to establish a community court in East County.

- Expand mobile medical and mental health services.
    - ACTION: Request service providers deliver healthcare services where homeless persons are already receiving other essential services.
    - FURTHER RESEARCH: Identify the capacity and interest of existing providers with mobile health outreach to expand services to East Multnomah County.
    - ADVOCACY: Advocate for Multnomah County to fund the expansion of mobile medical and mental health services to Gresham.

- Expand essential services.
    - ADVOCACY: Advocate Multnomah County fund the expansion of essential services to Gresham.
- Expand community engagement.
    - ACTION: Encourage innovative approaches for supporting homeless persons in the City of Gresham through volunteer efforts (i.e. conducting volunteer clinics, assisting with winter warming shelters).

- Increase the presence of single point of contact Homeless Services Specialists.
    - ACTION: Increase the number of homeless services specialists and provide training in how to engage the homeless.
    - ADVOCACY: Request additional and long-term funding from Multnomah County to provide for homeless services specialists.

Safety Off the Streets

- Explore organized homeless community models.
    - FURTHER RESEARCH: Explore best practices models for organized homeless communities.
    - ACTION: Identify barriers to allowing organized homeless communities in the current City codes.
    - ACTION: Facilitate a forum/dialogue with nonprofit organizations about their interest and capacity to operate the communities.

- Explore the use of Wapato as a transitional homeless shelter.
    - ADVOCACY: Support the study to utilize Wapato as a transitional homeless shelter.

- Increase the number of NET officers.
    - ADVOCACY: Request additional funding from Multnomah County and other sources to provide additional officers.
    - ACTION: Hire and train additional NET officers.

- Provide specific training to all City employees
    - ACTION: Direct the City to facilitate specific training for all City employees in positive homeless engagement.

- Create a continuum of transitional housing options.
    - FURTHER RESEARCH: Explore best practices models for transitional housing
    - ACTION: Identify barriers to allow transitional housing options.
    - ACTION: Identify available properties, including city-owned properties.
    - ACTION: Create a viable pathway to transitional housing.
    - ACTION: Facilitate a forum/dialogue with nonprofit organizations about their interest and capacity to operate transitional housing.

This report was adopted by the Gresham Task Force on Homelessness on September 29, 2016

Respectfully submitted by,

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