



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Rodney Gonzales, Assistant City Manager

DATE: October 14, 2019

SUBJECT: Update on Homelessness Initiatives

This memorandum is a continuation of updates on cross-departmental initiatives to address issues surrounding homelessness.

Priority Area Framework

There are many City departments providing a variety of programs and services. As previously described, the Homeless Strategy Office (HSO) will serve as a hub for cross-departmental efforts underway. As part of the coordination of these efforts, there will be a delineation of priority area functions under which programs and services will fall. For each priority area function, a lead department will be assigned as the responsible party for convening programs and services within the function. The Homeless Strategy Office will serve as the overall Convening Lead for City programs and services. Although Lori Pampilo Harris, will be transitioning to a consulting role, she will continue to guide us in matters surrounding homelessness. Lori's expertise in designing high-functioning outreach systems and diversion services programs will contribute to our collective efforts to assist people experiencing homelessness.



Homelessness Services Delivery and Outreach

- Encampment Response Strategy: The Homeless Strategy Office continues to explore short and long-term approaches for an encampment response strategy. In order to make significant progress on this issue, staff will focus on the most critical component, which is connecting people experiencing homelessness to the housing solution that is appropriate for their situation, from transitional housing, rent assistance, through safe, stable permanent supportive housing. Staff is currently identifying key agencies to participate within a created action plan. This will allow for collaborative efforts to better align available resources and more quickly connect people with housing, health care, and services.
- Pop-Up Resource Navigation Center: The Navigation Center, which was a four-week temporary pilot project, pointed people towards housing or employment services with the help of peer support specialists and social workers. Staff offered walk-in case management to help people understand their options, identify resources, and navigate services. On-demand services that were provided include social security applications, voter registrations, identification printing, verified assistance letters, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) applications, resume building, identification renewals, warrant affidavits, and establishing email addresses.

In total, 355 people have been assisted, and staff made referrals to 35 different organizations and resources. The pilot has helped with gathering information on what resources are most critical to people experiencing homelessness, which parts of Austin have the largest gap, and how resources can be offered in a meaningful way. The project, which operated out of the old Faulk Library in Downtown Austin, was led by Austin Public Health, Downtown Austin Community Court, and the City's Office of Design and Delivery. The Navigation Center also worked with a rotation of specialized providers including Integral Care, Community Care Collaborative, Kind Clinic, and Austin Public Health to offer mental health screenings, HIV testing, and healthcare referrals.

The pilot coincides with the ARCH's transition to a housing-focused, 24-hour reservation-based shelter that will eventually cease drop-in day resources. The lessons and experiences learned from the Navigation Center will be translated into future initiatives such as the encampment response strategy.

Encampment Clean Up and Storage

- Violet Bag Program: The first phase of the program, which began in July and lasted seven weeks, was tested in five areas. Over 2,000 bags were distributed during the first phase of the program, ranging in size from 12 to 16 gallons. The second phase will continue through October 31st and will help project participants understand trash collection requirements at a wider variety of sites. The second phase of the project is testing larger trash bags and working to modify trash collection methods to allow Austin Resource Recovery to use semi-automated trucks for collection, as opposed to collecting trash bags by hand. Following the conclusion of the second phase, staff will provide recommendations as to how to expand the program across the City.

- Trash Receptacles at Certain Underpasses: City staff is working with the Texas Department of Transportation on an agreement to allow the placement of trash receptacles at certain underpass locations. The agreement will require City Council approval, and a Request for Council Action will be placed on the October 31st City Council agenda. While not yet final, the likely locations will be as follows:
 - Highway 183 and Ohlen Road
 - Highway 290 and Cameron Road
 - Interstate 35 and 6th Street
 - Highway 290/71 and Packsaddle Pass area
- Doubling Clean Ups at Certain Underpasses: City staff is currently realigning resources so that locations with more significant debris can be serviced twice monthly rather than one. The increase in service will occur by November 8th for the following locations:
 - Highway 183 and Ohlen Road
 - Highway 290/71 and Packsaddle Pass area

Public Safety

- Updated Training Bulletins: In June, the Austin Police Department (APD) issued training bulletins to inform officers how they should handle cases in which people are unsafely camping in public or obstructing sidewalks. On October 3rd, APD issued updates to both bulletins to provide officers more clarity and latitude in how they approach obstruction of public areas and their ability to interact with people violating the city laws. The bulletins provided officers information on what to look for when determining if a person is in violation of obstruction or if they are camping in places that are considered dangerous. Some violations of obstruction and camping for which officers will be looking for include the following:
 - Blocking the sidewalk to a point where people must step off the sidewalk or walk over a person's belongings to get around.
 - Preventing wheelchairs from getting around.
 - Blocking paths in areas closed off for special events.
 - Camping close to a road or in areas prone to flooding.
- Indoor Mattresses and Upholstered Furniture Not Designed for Outside Use: The updated training bulletins identify circumstances that might justify enforcement action under the “endangering” prong of the City Camping Ordinance. The bulletin defines “endangering” as also involving the use of an indoor mattress(es) or other upholstered furniture that is not designed or appropriate for outdoor use.

Housing

- Waller Creek Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ): City Council adopted Resolution No. 20180614-066 which directed an analysis of the feasibility and recommendation of an amendment to the Waller Creek TIRZ project and financing plan for projects that address the causes and symptoms of homelessness and housing insecurity. A consultant has been hired to provide a study as to how investment in projects outside of the TIRZ boundary can be of benefit to property values within the TIRZ boundary. The study is needed in order to amend the project and financing plan and will be completed by November 8th. Following the study completion, the TIRZ project and financing plan amendment will be brought forward for Council consideration at the December 5th City Council meeting. The TIRZ amendment would be used toward bridge housing projects that support a long-term encampment response strategy.

Communications

- Cross-Departmental Communications: Beginning in October, the Communications and Public Information Office (CPIO) initiated regular joint communication team meetings with 12 other department public information staff to coordinate communications efforts across the organization. This joint communications team is focused on educating the public about the City of Austin's response to homelessness, connecting the public to resources and actionable steps they can take to help address homelessness, and sharing human centered stories about those experiencing homelessness. The team will establish an editorial calendar to continually share information about programmatic gains as well as new and continuing initiatives to address homelessness in the community. Participating departments include:
 - Austin 3-1-1
 - Austin Code
 - Austin Police Department
 - Austin Public Health
 - Austin Public Library
 - Austin Resource Recovery
 - Animal Services
 - Austin Transportation Department
 - Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services
 - Communications and Public Information Office
 - Downtown Austin Community Court
 - Parks and Recreation
 - Public Works
 - Watershed Protection
- Interagency Communication Coordination: Staff from HSO and CPIO are also meeting with the communications staff of partner agencies with the goal of:
 - Coordinating communications efforts across agencies;
 - Ensuring communications is originating from the appropriate agency; and
 - Sharing processes and information.
- Future Website Improvements: CPIO is building a more robust web presence in the short-term and will be expanded to include the following sections:
 - Austin's Homelessness Strategy
 - How is the City Helping?
 - Housing and Shelter
 - Outreach
 - Public Safety
 - Protecting the Environment
 - How can I help?
 - Help in emergencies
 - Learn and volunteer
 - Connect people to services
 - Homelessness Resources
 - Glossary

The long-term goal is to partner with external agencies and co-locate information and resources on a shared site. Anticipated sections planned for the next iteration include elements such as opportunities to volunteer and/or donate. Once completed, the new website information will be provided to Council and the community.

- Media: CPIO has and will continue to create and promote content regarding the City's efforts to address homelessness. The following are examples of content:
 - Press
 - Rathgeber press conference: *Held on 9/6/19*
 - Media availability with Lori Pampilo Harris: *Held on 9/26/19*
 - Navigation Center: *Press release issued on 9/27/19*
 - Violet Bag Project: *Press release issued on 10/8/19*
 - ATXN and Social Media
 - Navigation Center CityView: *Running 10/7/19 – 10/13/19*
 - Violet Bag Project: *Production in progress*
 - Homeless Outreach Street Team (HOST) Team Highlights: *Production in progress*
 - Underpass clean-ups: *Production in progress*

- Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) Team Training: *Production in progress*
 - ARCH Updates: *In development*
 - Downtown Austin Community Court 20th Anniversary: *In development*
 - Encampment Response Strategy: *In development*
 - Faces of our Neighbors: *In development*
- Hotline: Currently, the City's 311 service takes all community calls for issues surrounding homelessness. A new hotline number has been developed (512-972-HOME) for taking all calls. The hotline will be routed to 311 ambassadors.

In conclusion, City staff continue to emphasize homelessness as the City's highest priority. City departments are committed to scaling City services to provide a higher level of service.

CC: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
CMO Executive Team
City Department Directors and Assistant Directors