

Homeless Strategies Workgroup Meeting – September 6, 2019

Comments & recommendations for the workgroup from Carmen Gilmore, Bellingham resident and volunteer with BasicsPNW's Safe Storage Lockers program:

- Existing Shelters:
 - 1) Lighthouse Mission Ministries (LMM) – a religious shelter for single men & single women. Currently the only year-round homeless shelter in Bellingham.
 - 2) Proposed Temporary Winter Shelter @ Civic Stadium – a secular shelter for single women and/or women with children, capacity 35-40, run by the Opportunity Council. Scheduled to be open Nov-Feb, 7 days/week, overnight (7pm-7am), shelter guests screened offsite.

- Comments (about shelters):
 - Regardless of LMM's capacity, there needs to be one or more year-round, secular Severe Weather Shelter(s) when life threatening weather conditions exist (freezing temps, poor air quality, etc). There are literally hundreds of people who would rather chance dying on the street than go to LMM. Last winter, when I was driving around Bellingham late at night in snowy, freezing conditions, offering assistance to people out on the streets, only about 1 of every 15 people I came across were interested in going to LMM. Please don't get me wrong, LMM is a valued and vital part of Bellingham's homeless services. We need LMM and all of the other homeless services that currently exist. It's just that there are a large number of people who will not, or cannot, go to LMM for a number of reasons, including having experienced religious trauma. There are also groups of people who are not allowed into LMM: couples, families, youth, people with pets, and people who have been banned from LMM.
 - During severe weather, our community needs to be able to provide an overnight indoor space, safe from the elements, to everyone who needs it, regardless of past/current behavior or circumstances. There are no expendable people. We cannot allow people to be turned away, out into life threatening environmental conditions, just because they have previously committed a crime, were banned at some point in time, are in no condition to be around others, or are being disruptive. If someone shows up to a Severe Weather Shelter and may not go inside for whatever reason, there needs to be an alternate space where this person can go. Perhaps a higher security facility or even a space at the jail building, where they can be safe inside out of the elements.
 - Also, our Severe Weather Shelter(s) or Temporary Winter Shelter(s) would ideally be able to comfortably accommodate: 1) single women, 2) single men, 3) LGBTQ+, 4) youth, 5) couples, 6) families, 7) medically fragile, 8) ADA needs, and 9) pets.
 - Since we are running out of time to get Temporary Winter Shelters up and running, it may be quicker and easier to find a building big enough to shelter around 200 people, instead of getting multiple smaller shelters up and running. Maybe the Proposed Temporary Shelter @ Civic Stadium could be expanded to shelter 200 people, inclusive of all or most of the 9 groups mentioned in the bullet right above.

- Proposed Action Items:
 - 1) Engage in a true partnership with Lummi Stepping Stones, led by Nick Lewis and at his discretion.
 - 2) Additional Temporary Winter Shelter
 - Find a warehouse or other type building that could shelter 200 people, or expand the sheltering capacity at Civic Stadium...
 - have separate rooms, large tents, or areas that could be cordoned off into separate sections to accommodate the different groups of people needing shelter (e.g., single women, single men, couples, families, etc);
 - open Nov-Mar when temp threshold of 32F is forecasted as overnight low, 7 days/week, overnight 7pm-9am (9am so that people don't have to leave until other buildings/businesses are open, and so that the outside temp is a bit warmer);
 - if parking space allows, offer safe parking for cars/RVs as well;
 - partner with a higher security facility, where people can be brought if they're being disruptive at the winter shelter.
 - 3) Additional Opportunities to Address the Needs of the County's Homeless Population:
 - 1. Safe Parking (Car/RV parking) – set up a parking lot where cars/RV's can safely park, with access to restrooms and facilities.
 - 2. Tiny Homes – partner with HomesNOW to assist with their goal of getting 3 more tiny homes villages up by November 2020, they need:
 - Three ¼-acre sites (1 city, 1 county, 1 port – either on city/county/port property, or city/county/port facilitates finding the property. Can the city, county or port offer tax incentives, or other incentives, to property owners for leasing their property to HomesNOW?);
 - Water, electric and port-a-pots;
 - 20 tiny homes per village;
 - 2-yr land leases preferred.
 - 3. Restrooms – if port-a-pots are removed from outside the Drop-In Center, replace with access to a 24-hr restroom. Also need more 24-hr restrooms throughout the city.
 - 4. Rest Stops – set up 24-hr urban rest stops in 4 locations (north, south, central [near the library], and maritime). These rest stops could encompass a number of the other items listed on the 10-page Strategies Chart:
 - Laundry
 - Restrooms
 - Showers
 - Lockers
 - Car/RV parking
 - Garbage collection
 - Space to rest or lie down – with dim lights and a person monitoring the room. Until full-fledged rest stops get set up, could start with a super basic urban overnight rest stop where people can just come in out of the weather, have access to restrooms, and can get a little rest/sleep (possible locations: Maritime Heritage Park building, downtown bus station, library).
 - 5. Mental Health & Detox Services – more mental health and detox (drug & alcohol) treatment services, some available 24 hrs.