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WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

Homeless Strategies Workgroup

Monday, March 30, 2020 Meeting #23 Summary

Time: 1:00 p.m.

Location: Remote Online Meeting*

Members in attendance:

Barry Buchanan, Chair, Whatcom County Councilmember
Carol Frazey, Whatcom County Councilmember
Michael Lilliquist, City of Bellingham Councilmember
Dan Hammill, Bellingham City Council Member
Seth Fleetwood, City of Bellingham, Mayor
Michael Shepard, Port of Bellingham, Commissioner
Mike Parker, Opportunity Council Representative
Anne Deacon for Anne Beck, Whatcom County Health
Jen Daly for Dean Wight, Northwest Youth Services Representative
Florence Simon, Bellingham Police, Deputy Chief
Mike Hilley, Whatcom County EMS
Markis D. Stidham, Homeless Advocate (County Council-appointed)

Staff facilitator: Cathy Halka, AICP, Legislative Analyst, Whatcom County Council

1. Welcome and Introductions

Councilmember Buchanan welcomed the group and discussed the purpose of the Homeless Strategies Workgroup meeting to get information on people experiencing homelessness during the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) emergency from Unified Command, funding opportunities, and a brainstorming session for ideas moving forward.

2. Updates and strategies to help people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 Emergency

Anne Deacon, Whatcom County Health Department, presented an update on strategies to help people experiencing homelessness during the Covid-19 emergency:

- They received a grant from State Dept. of Commerce, in the amount of approximately \$900,000 for homeless people in need of social distancing and quarantine. It is a short-term contract through September 30, 2020. Program activities with this funding include:
 - Relocation of the homeless drop-in center from Lighthouse Mission to Bellingham High

*This meeting was held remotely as allowed by Proclamation 20-28 from the Washington State Office of the Governor, temporarily suspending certain requirements for public meetings in the Open Public Meetings Act and prohibiting in-person attendance at meetings. It was broadcast live to the public via www.YouTube.com.

School, to promote social distancing. They have a contract with the Bellingham School District for a variety of support services. They also have a contract with Lighthouse Mission for personnel to oversee the space. Last, they have a contract with a laundry service program. The total cost is almost \$525,000.

- Identifying facilities for isolation and quarantine. Isolation is for those actively experiencing symptoms but don't need hospitalization. Quarantine is for those exposed to Covid-19, but not showing symptoms.
- Strategies they're looking at now, and that may be finalized by Friday, include:
 - Working with motels to secure rooms for people in isolation, including cooking capability if possible, and they will include food, hygiene supplies, medical supplies, etc.
 - May also consider modular units or tents to keep people separated.

They need to find the appropriate personnel to oversee and monitor the services and medical oversight and also for behavioral health services, if needed.

They are also looking into providing a variety of supplies, sanitation, and hygiene products for people living unsheltered and for the case managers working with those people. There is a national tier system for recipients of personal protection equipment (PPE). Case managers working with the homeless population are currently at tier four. They are talking to the Governor about the possibility of getting them moved to a higher position on the tier.

The Health Department's Human Services Division staff is providing consultation and support to providers.

The \$900,000 grant will likely be all used up from the Bellingham High School drop-in facility and contracting with hotels for isolation rooms. They hope to find other funding that may become available. The Department of Commerce asked for feedback on unmet needs, but also indicated there is no more money.

Questions

Frazey asked if the grant could be used to help find/purchase a new (permanent) Drop-in-Center location/building? Deacon stated capital construction and acquisition are eligible costs, but they don't have the funds to do that.

Shepherd asked what is the high school's capacity compared to original Lighthouse Mission building. Deacon stated they can house 50 more, with the appropriate 6-foot distancing.

Hammill asked what can policy makers do to reclassify caseworkers to higher tier to receive PPE. Deacon stated they could send a note to the Governor's office, but it is likely a national standard.

Stidham stated he is concerned that the 6-foot spacing at the high school cafeteria and gym is not actually happening. He asked if they can expand beyond the area provided, such as into a classroom. Deacon stated the Health Department is working with the Lighthouse Mission and School District to ensure best practices are implemented. They had a discussion about the possibility of using other rooms. Now, they're looking at isolation facilities for people who need it.

Parker asked if the County and/or state could pursue Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds for emergency sheltering. He also asked if medical respite could be used for isolation, quarantine, and moving people out of the hospital. Deacon stated providing isolation rooms will help people being discharged from hospital. Unified Command is working with FEMA. There may be different categories of FEMA funding. They're looking at all options.

Lilliquist asked if the Health Department is aware of any individual currently experiencing homelessness with Covid-19 symptom, and what are the procedures used to identify someone who is homeless and who might develop Covid-19 symptoms. Deacon stated they have worked with homeless providers and

Lighthouse Mission staff on identifying the signs and symptoms. She doesn't know of anyone who has tested positive and is living without a home. It's safe to assume there are people who are homeless in the community who have Covid-19. The plan is to have a place for those people in the community.

Stidham stated he's seen placement at the high school drop-in center less than six feet. He is advising people now to stay where they are and let him know if they need anything. Deacon stated she will ask the Health Department staff at the high school to take another look. People in encampments are best to stay there if they can keep their distance.

Stidham stated he hopes the Police Department will let them stay there. He is also concerned about the behavior just outside the high school drop in center. It sounds like they are mixing a lot. Deacon stated they have to address it on a regular basis. It's difficult to control.

Reports and Ideas for Increasing Capacity

Stidham stated provide an emergency tent encampment that provides real separation, if they can find someone to run it. Also, consider the old St. Luke's building, which has suites that can provide necessary separation.

Lilliquist stated Bellingham Technical College and Whatcom Community College may have large auditorium space. An open floor plan may be easiest, rather than individual rooms. Deacon stated Unified Command has a long list of facilities they've spoken with. A number have agreed if there is a potential need for overflow. They are reaching out for surge capacity.

Jen Daly, Northwest Youth Services, reported that the Ground Floor service is open, with safety measures. Young people are camping, and some are staying at high school. They had to close the housing, but will reopen on April 6 with new safety measures. They have begun instituting new policies and procedures. There is some capacity for isolated beds, but it's limited. They are talking with Health Department staff about what that may look like.

Mike Parker, Opportunity Council, reported they continue to work with the Health Department on obtaining PPE for the homeless outreach team (HOT). They are currently using donated equipment. There are varied degrees of understanding about how dangerous things are. The Health Department provided a flyer to emphasize using proper information sources. They are going to some of the encampments to provide hand sanitizer. With parks and other facilities are closed, hygiene opportunities are limited. They will monitor how long they can keep the HOT in the field. Also, the Opportunity Council is still doing intakes, coordinated entry, and housing people remotely. It's important that people get hooked up with phones to link to healthcare and housing.

Frazey asked if there has been an increase in the number of youth coming into the Northwest Youth Services ground floor program. Daly stated use usually spikes on Mondays. Attendance is generally lower on the weekdays. Housed youth need to be educated on what isolation means. The staff are purchasing phones and groceries, encouraging youth to stay put, and encouraging people to not house surf, which is contrary to what they usually advise.

Mike Hilley, Emergency Management Services, reported that their priority this week is to find an isolation facility for the homeless. A "cabulance" service is starting this week to move people who are suspected to be Covid-19 positive without engaging an ambulance. The emergency management system is doing ok. Call volume is steady right now.

Hammill stated St. Joe's south campus is not available for overflow. They looked at it this weekend and determined very little of the facility is safe for use.

Flo Simon, Bellingham Police Department, reported that police are letting people stay in their camps.

Seth Fleetwood, Bellingham Mayor, reported that Unified Command is briefing him daily on their effort to create isolation and quarantine facilities, or any needs coming out of the high school drop in center.

Stidham stated people using the drop in center at the high school are still tightly bunched together. Open

up that facility so there is wider space between people.

Parker reported on the services to families with children. He is concerned that fewer people may sign up. One of their primary emergency shelters is the use of hotels, which may become less available if used for other things.

Lilliquist asked what is the School District's expectations for the rest of the school year. Deacon stated no one knows. They've discussed it. If the school remains closed, the district would need the building by August 10 to clean and repair. The contract includes a clause that they will have to vacate the facility if they reopen before the end of the year. Hopefully schools will reopen concurrent with the reduced need for distancing.

Stidham stated he supports the idea of a tent encampment instead of an enclosed facility. They could develop an encampment on Bellingham High School grounds, and resources are already on site.

Frazey stated the Covid-19 neighborhood helpers put out a call to Airbnb owners for nurses and first responders who may be infected. It may be another option for those homeless families who need to be housed.

Hammill stated a local hotelier offered up two hotels for medical workers at cost. It may be an option for families as well.

The meeting adjourned at 1:40 p.m.

Meeting Summary Prepared By: Jill Nixon, Legislative Coordinator, Whatcom County Council Office

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