

Opportunity Eugene: A Community Task Force on Homelessness Final Report and Recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Occupy Eugene catalyzed public concern regarding homelessness. Building on this momentum, on December 14, 2011, the City Council formed the Opportunity Eugene Community Task Force on Homeless Solutions to research this issue and develop recommendations that are “new and innovative” to present to the City Council for action.

The 58 members of the Task Force appointed by the Mayor included the Mayor, City Councilors, members of the Eugene Police Department, community members, representatives from Occupy Eugene, members of non-profit human services agencies, neighborhood associations, businesspeople, the health care community, the Human Rights Commission and a significant number of un-housed persons.

The Task Force met January 4th, January 24th, February 7th, February 23rd, March 6th, and March 30th of 2012. In addition, there were many subcommittee meetings. All meetings were open to the public. Many other interested community members attended meetings and spoke during the Public Forums held at each meeting, adding their experiences and insights to the process. The Task Force meetings were videotaped by volunteers.

Recommendations:

The Task Force recommends the following actions:

1. Identify & Establish Potential Sites

Direct city staff to work with community members to identify potential sites in order to establish a safe and secure place to be, opened by October 1, 2012, independently financed with oversight by a not-for-profit organization or agency.

There was no consensus among group members regarding a long term plan or vision for the site(s). However, one vision that emerged by some members of the Task Force is as follows:

“Certain Homeless Task Force members stressed that in addition to shelter, food and medical care, most homeless individuals had an intense need and the desire to have dignity through being self-sufficient. This matched nicely with the current lack of funding. They want to contribute to constructing these shelters. Materials needed. Labor and guidance are plentiful.

The shelter discussion also included establishing a community with adequate land on which food could be grown, artisan work accomplished and, as above, where residents help with the construction and maintenance of their homes. One of the most important concepts to arise from the Occupy camp, echoing what has been found in other successful homeless shelter models, is the idea of “family” or “community” and the importance of regulating the camp from within through strong “community agreements” signed and enforced by community members before they enter the community.

The Opportunity Eugene community shelter will serve as a national model of a self-sustaining, self-managed, low-capitalization, eco-friendly community. A 501c3 agency will have oversight of the community. Community members and the 501c3 agency will work together to produce food and other needs and to seek needed resources from the compassionate and generous larger Eugene community. The City’s only obligation would be to provide land; land use, zoning and code variances that allow the community to operate cost-effectively under reasonable safety standards; and offer the same level of safety and security services provided to other Eugene neighborhoods. The first year the city would contribute a fixed amount for start-up costs and operation expenses. The community will be self-sustaining in future years.”

2. Create and Support Day Use Community Centers

The Task Force has identified a critical need for more day centers and for the increased capacity of existing day centers. It was voiced repeatedly at Opportunity Eugene meetings that there needs to be “a place to be” that is legal and safe for people who are homeless. Eugene/Springfield/Lane County has five access centers in Lane County for people who are homeless: St. Vincent DePaul’s Service Station for single adults in west Eugene on Hwy. 99, First Place Family Center near Amazon Park, the Eugene Mission near 2nd & Chambers, Looking Glass’ New Roads and Hosea Youth Services (west of the downtown for homeless youth). These programs offer showers, restrooms, storage facilities, internet & computer access, and other services in a community atmosphere.

Additional day center capacity, through additional centers and/or working to increase the capacity of existing centers, will reduce downtown problems and create opportunities for those who are currently marginalized. Additional day center capacity will provide opportunities to develop a sense of community including both “housed” and the homeless and to work toward self-sufficiency and self-respect. The Task Force has identified a critical need for more day centers and for extended hours.

3. Improve Traditional and Non-Traditional Health Care Access

The combination of mental health issues, substance abuse, chronic homelessness, and physical illness affect a disproportionate number of homeless individuals. These factors all contribute to individual suffering and potentially result in costly interventions and treatments. Individuals in this category will often become increasingly high impact users

of Emergency Rooms, local social service providers, public safety services, and strain the already weakened social safety net. When left unmanaged the cost of caring for these individuals increases dramatically, along with an increase in pain and suffering for the individual. Addressing the crucial area of need is a first step in assisting those that are homeless. Regaining stability in their lives will result in the removal of significant barriers that keep individuals from finding and maintaining housing.

4. Continue and Expand Existing Services to the Homeless

Understanding there is a strong social service network within the City of Eugene and Lane County, the task force is careful to suggest that any new initiatives do not result in diverting funding and support from existing homeless and low-income service providers. Rather, new initiatives should work to complement or augment existing services for the low-income and homeless residents of our community. A robust social service sector capable of better meeting the needs of its clientele requires both innovation and increased support of current, proven programs.

5. Improve Laws and Ordinances that Criminalize and Block Homeless Individuals

An on-going challenge faced by people with no permanent housing is the fact that many city ordinances, codes and policies have the unintended effect of criminalizing life-sustaining activities. In addition they may serve to make it more difficult for people to access more permanent housing and shelter. Examples include laws against "car camping", sleeping in public parks, limits on the number of unrelated people occupying the same residence, and prohibitions on property owners allowing individuals to camp on their property.

The Opportunity Eugene Task force proposes that the city council empower the city manager to conduct a review of city policies, ordinances, zoning requirements and codes, and propose revisions to those that have the consequence of criminalizing life-sustaining activities as well as those that create undue barriers to accessing permanent housing or shelter. This review should be conducted across city departments, particularly police, parks and open space, community development, and planning. In addition to city staff it should involve community members and stakeholders. It is understood that many of these ordinances and codes were created to serve a legitimate public purpose. The intent of this review is not to undermine those positive effects but to recognize and mitigate the negative effects on those unable to secure permanent housing.

6. Create a Commission to Continue to Explore Homelessness Solutions

Throughout the duration of the Opportunity Eugene Task Force, it has been acknowledged that continued efforts are needed to ensure that efforts to relieve the burdens of homelessness are continued beyond the ending of the task force.

To strengthen the voice of these recommendations and ensure continued innovation as needed, it is important for an ongoing voice to champion the topic and keep it in the forefront of policy issues. These efforts include the creation of a City of Eugene Commission on Youth and Homelessness as well as maintaining and fostering partnerships with existing bodies, such as Lane County's Continuum of Care, working to address the issues related to homelessness.

There is also a continuing need for community involvement and education to build understanding of the condition of the unhoused in our community. Unhoused residents face not only the material challenges of homelessness, but also prevailing attitudes of rejection, resentment, lack of understanding, and a tendency to ignore the homeless as "other" or "not my problem." These attitudes compound the depression and anxiety that the unhoused face on a daily basis and make it more difficult for them to live with dignity.

In addition to efforts being made by nonprofit service providers, there is a need for broader efforts to build bridges between the housed and unhoused in the community bridges of understanding, compassion and support to heal and unify the community across divisions. To build these bridges, it will be important to identify what sectors of the community to reach out to, what messages will work in our community, and the best ways of delivering those messages.

Prioritized Implementation Items

The Task Force identified key projects and actions to address the prioritized needs and to implement the recommendations of the task force. These actions are categorized on a time continuum dependent on the level of planning effort required for implementation: immediate, intermediate, and long term. These categories are not reflective of the level of urgency but rather the level of planning needed to bring these actions to full fruition.

The top priorities identified by the Task Force are the need to address the critical and basic need for various levels of housing options, and for day use resources including access to restrooms, showers and laundry facilities. In addition, the task force indicated strong support for a comprehensive review of the laws and ordinances that impact the homeless population and a need to task a commission with long term sustained attention and focus on addressing the needs of the unhoused in the community. This body may also serve as a venue for implementation of projects and recommendations brought forth from this task force.

The task force was aware of the limitations of resources presented by the current budget climate in the state. For this reason, the task force is recommending efforts that would: 1) require limited resources to implement 2) attract new resources or generate their own revenue and 3) maximize use of existing services and resources.

Immediate

1. Approve the zoning change to enable expansion of the Eugene Mission from occupancy of 400 to 643.
2. Direct city staff to identify potential sites for a safe and secure place to be, independently financed and managed by a not-for-profit organization or agency, with the ability to control access to the site
3. Build and manage lockers at various locations near the major unofficial camping sites around Eugene. Consider working with faith groups to do this.
4. Open bathrooms outside the Exclusion Zone and mark those in the Zone.
5. Obtain day center building and determine renovation needs; identify funding, materials, volunteer and other resources; identify oversight agency; oversight agency and intended participants begin to develop program strategies and space utilization plan, council temporarily waives such zoning, code and land use policies as necessary.
6. Create a commission on Homelessness that would be tasked with addressing issues of homelessness. This could be a City commission or metro area collaboration. The City or metro area partnership would authorize, empower and provide administrative support for this commission.
7. Initiate a series of community conversationsll between the housed and unhoused, perhaps based on some of the examples established to counter racism. These conversations would be centered around a meal. The City would provide support in the form of sponsorship, cost of meals for the conversations, staff support to coordinate, and arrangement of pro bono facilitation services or payment of the same. Possible partners could include FOOD for Lane County and faith communities.
8. Develop cooperatives as a strategy for wealth generation & self development.
 - a. Can-bottle collection, materials recycling.
 - b. Cooperative Artisan space
 - c. Work cooperatives to seek other contract opportunities (eg. neighborhood clean-up)
9. Focus on rapid re-housingll through establishment of a standing committee on of 5 -7 members either through an existing Commission (e.g., Human Rights) or via Council Direction including representatives of providers and Occupy Eugene. The commission should:
 - a. Identify service gaps in full continuum of rapid rehousing services
 - b. Create a clear plan of how gaps will be addressed

10. The city manager will conduct a review of city policies, ordinances, zoning requirements and codes to identify those which have the consequence of criminalizing those engaging in life sustaining activities or create greater barriers to those seeking permanent housing or shelter. This review will be conducted with input from all relevant departments and include community members and stakeholders. Once identified, those city policies, ordinances, zoning requirements and codes will be reviewed for potential revisions designed to mitigate the unintended effect they have on people seeking to engage in life sustaining activities. Examples of Immediate Changes (Quick Fixes) that could be addressed either by City Council Directly or by the City Manager's Direction:

- a. Provide public bathrooms and/or portable restrooms that are available 24 hours/day in the downtown core and surrounding neighborhoods; consider keeping public restrooms in parks open 24 hours/day
- b. Make the cleaning and maintenance of the required bathrooms part of community service and/or jail inmate work programs
- c. Change the number of legal car/tent camping spaces to reflect a range rather than an absolute limit, e.g. three to six spaces per site, depending on the characteristics of the site
- d. Drop the requirement for permitting of street vendors, as there is no mechanisms that actually allows such licensure to happen; alternately, re-instate a simple procedure for street vendors to obtain licenses to conduct sidewalk vending (council might want to conduct a study of other municipalities to determine whether sidewalk vending reduces shopping in downtown stores and venues such as Saturday Market, or whether it in fact creates a critical mass that brings more shoppers downtown)
- e. Review the offenses that trigger exclusion in the downtown core, and drop the ones that are essentially nuisance crimes; and/or direct the Chief of Police to direct his officers to cease and desist requesting exclusion for violations for such things as writing with side-walk chalk, resting on or against a planter or wall, sleeping on private property, or illegal camping
- f. Change zoning to allow the Mission to expand its capacity

11. City endorses and supports the new Street Outreach Program that is being formed as an outgrowth of the Occupy Eugene Medical Program.

12. City agrees to work with existing local healthcare organizations to identify ways to increase access to healthcare, including providing organizational or staff support as needed.

13. Encourage peer-support mental health services specific to the needs of the homeless.

14. The city of Eugene/the Task Force agrees that housing is a basic human right, as recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948 with the U.S. government's leadership. This right to housing is to be progressively implemented as resources allow. Because basic adequate shelter for all who need it is a core minimum requirement of this right, the City should constantly strive to address this need. Other rights, such as freedom from cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment should be immediately implemented, including immediately ceasing punishing homeless persons for basic life activities like sleeping or eating in public, when they have nowhere else to go.

Intermediate

1. Continue talks with local agencies to establish a wet bed facility.
 - a. A pilot program should begin within 6 months.
 - b. Location of the program may be a temporary structure if no other suitable structure is found and should not be in the vicinity of item # 2 below.
2. Make available one or more sites by Oct 1, 2012 for people who currently do not have housing that will provide:
 - a. A safe and secure place to be, independently financed and managed by a not-for-profit organization or agency, with the ability to control access to the site
 - b. An alternative, transitional community that demonstrates inexpensive, innovative shelter and enables those who are currently homeless to find temporary shelter, food, basic health care, community and an opportunity to become self-sufficient and to participate in self-governance
 - c. Access to public transportation and services
 - d. Temporary exemption from applicable laws/ordinances for the first six months, to be reviewed annually thereafter for renewal
3. Secure donated materials; volunteer/participant construction supervisor oversees renovations to be done by participants; participants and volunteers develop income generating activities; volunteer fundraisers seek funding; center policies and community agreements finalized; facility set upll done by participants/volunteers and open.
4. The City Manager and/or the City Council, with the assistance of the city's Human Rights Commission's Committee on Homelessness, and/or any newly-formed Commission on Homelessness (and Youth) might hold public forums to further identify policies, codes,

ordinances, etc., that unduly affect marginalized populations and which create *de facto* status crimes.

5. City provides assistance to the Street Outreach Program^{ll} and expanded access to healthcare by encouraging or incentivizing participation from healthcare and social service providers and facilities, as well as community volunteers.

Long Term

1. Track the impact of the above efforts on the Egan Warming Center and the car camping program. (This may be done by the new Homelessness Commission.)

2. Open additional coffee house/day centers around the city

3. The City undertake a broad public awareness campaign to develop understanding, empathy and respect between those who are currently housed and those who are currently homeless, and between those who are homeless and the Eugene Police Department. The campaign would be planned by professionals, preferably on a pro bono basis. Through the Commission on Homelessness, the City or metro area partnership would provide sponsorship through endorsement, administrative support, securing of expert resources and financial support of materials creation and distribution.

4. Working to modify existing laws to increase the amount of low-income housing. State law currently prohibits the use of Inclusionary Zones for a percentage of low-income housing to be provided along with any development project. There are at least two possible fixes to this:

- a. City Council forward recommendation to State Legislature to allow Inclusionary Zones
- b. City Council to provide incentives to developers for building certain proportion of low-income housing

5. City helps find and promotes other funding or fundraising to maintain the Street Outreach Services^{ll} and expanded healthcare access, including encouraging community support for soliciting donations.

6. End involuntary homelessness.

Appendix A.

Task Force Overview

The Occupy Eugene movement galvanized public attention and concern surrounding homelessness in the community. Building on the momentum around this issue, Eugene City Council formed the Opportunity Eugene Task Force on December 14, 2011, to develop recommendations within 90 days to present to the Council for addressing the needs and impacts for the unhoused in the community. This report provides background about the process of the task force and their recommendations for the City Council to consider.

Membership:

Members of the Task Force were appointed by the Mayor and included City Councilors, community members, representatives from Occupy Eugene, non-profit human services agencies, neighborhood leaderships, business, the health care community, the religious community, local school districts and the Human Rights Commission. All Task Force meetings and committee meetings were open to the public.

Desired Outcomes:

The work of addressing the needs of the unhoused is immense yet vital to the health of a community. The Task Force identified the following as the desired outcome of their work together:

- To continue to build community and a spirit of cooperation and collaboration that breaks down barriers in addressing the issues and needs of the unhoused
- To raise awareness about the culture of homelessness and about the diverse composition and needs of Eugene's unhoused
- To identify actionable steps for immediate and long-term solutions to improve the lives of the unhoused
- To identify gaps and limitations to service, as well as barriers to access

Task Force Meeting Structure and Schedule

Following an initial Kick off Meeting on January 4th to announce and convene the Task Force, the full group met a total of five times during the 90 day work session. Dates for all Task Force meetings are included below. A Planning Committee made up of Task Force members met six times to support the Task Force's work through agenda development, organization, and synthesizing. In addition, several subcommittees were formed to work on targeted subject areas, including: Day use, wealth generation, shelter options, community engagement and education, laws and ordinances, and health. Facilitation of all Task Force meetings and planning committee meetings was provided by Oregon Consensus of Portland State University with process support from Eugene's Community Mediation Services.

Meetings occurred at the following dates/ times:

- Wednesday January 4th, 12 – 2 p.m. Organizational Meeting: Mayor’s Welcome. Planning committee developed
- Tuesday January 24th, 9-11 a.m. Organizational Meeting: Working agreements, education, establishing priorities, and organizing to accomplish goals
- Tuesday February 7th, 8:30-11:30 a.m. Initial ideas and recommendations
- Thursday February 23rd, 8:30-11:30 a.m. Formulated ideas and recommendations
- Tuesday March 6th, 8:30-11:30 a.m. Review Recommendations and Report to the Board
- Friday, March 26th 9:30 – 12 p.m. Final Report to be submitted to the Council

Appendix B: THROUGH THE EYES OF THOSE WHO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS

The poor and often unhoused in Lane county struggle to survive; oppressed and criminalized by an overwhelmed and often times unresponsive system. While there are many organizations, individuals, and government entities working hard to highlight and deal with this problem, Occupy Eugene brought into a sharper focus the gaps between those in need of help and services available to them.

It's not just those living under bridges who are struggling to survive. Our economy is severely depressed and this is affecting all of us. Foreclosures are at record levels and living wage jobs are very hard to find. This gloomy economic picture may extend well into the future and impact severely the younger generation.

They're not seeing the American dream being handed down to them but instead see a life full of challenges-having to fight for work, civil liberties and even a place to sleep. They picture entering into a dying economy, drinking polluted water, eating genetically modified food, inhaling chemicals sprayed into the air, and facing cleaning up all the problems the older generation has left behind.

Thankfully, Opportunity Eugene and its dedicated 58 member team has worked diligently to address the consequences of these issues and recognize that our current system and mindset as a community seems to be lacking very clear and necessary elements, like: the need for communities to support and feed each other regardless of economic standing; the need for people to have a safe space to function in whatever manner they deem appropriate for themselves and their families; and the radical notion that people are more important than profits.

When we hear questions like, "How urgent is the issue?" and "What can we change now?" Our answer is: the time is now for everybody to be treated with dignity, to have enough food to eat, to have a good job and a safe place to sleep, to be respected as a human being without fear of reprisal.

For families who walk the streets during the day and are afraid to sleep at night, and who are cold, starving and wet with no source of heat, Occupy Eugene's camp eviction brought into focus the inevitable; eventual death due to exposure, assault, overdose, or prolonged illness. These deaths tally up, and they are not nameless, faceless vagrants, but the deaths of our fellow human beings.

In one night alone, roughly 2,410 people were counted homeless in Lane County, including 190 families with children. In that one night, 254 of our veterans, who served their country, in dangerous conditions, are among those individuals on the streets, under bridges, in parks, at food pantries, day access centers, churches, emergency shelters, and transitional housing. This is a critical moment and lives are at stake. The weight of this situation and the responsibility to change it falls on every single member of our society, but especially those with the "power" to affect the change necessary to ensure our collective future.

Stand with us and use your power to make decisions that allow us to look our children in the face and tell them we challenged the status quo and gave them the best future we possibly could. We urge the Eugene City Council to adopt and act upon the following recommendations and intended actions.