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Dana Brown-Davis, C.M.C.

COUNTY COURTHOUSE
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Tyler Byrd
Todd Donovan
Carol Frazey
Satpal Sidhu

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

Homeless Strategies Workgroup

Friday, September 6, 2019 Meeting #11 Summary

Time: 8:30 – 10:00 a.m.

Location: Whatcom County Civic Center Annex,
322 N. Commercial, Garden Room

Attendance:

Members

Ann Beck, Whatcom County Health Department
Barry Buchanan (HSW Chair), Whatcom County Councilmember
Karen Burke, Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee/DVSAS
Hans Erchinger-Davis, Lighthouse Mission
Mike Hilley, Whatcom County EMS
Michael Lilliquist, City of Bellingham Council Member
Kelli Linville, City of Bellingham Mayor
Guy Occhiogrosso, Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce
Mike Parker, Opportunity Council
Michael Shepard, Port of Bellingham Commissioner
Deputy Chief Florence Simon, Bellingham Police
Markis D. Stidham, Homeless Advocate
Riley Sweeney, City of Ferndale
Emerson McCuin (for Emilio Vela, Jr.), Northwest Youth Services

Guests:

Lynette Allen, HomesNow
Steven Bass, Opportunity Council, Homeless Outreach Team
Liz Coogan, City of Bellingham, Executive Assistant to the Mayor
Helen Campbell, citizen
John Campbell, citizen
Chris Donaldson, Hand Crank Films
Tanya Framer, Northwest Youth Services
Mark Gardner, City of Bellingham, Legislative Analyst
Carmen Gilmore, Basics PNW
Hollie Huthman
Heather Katahdin, volunteer, citizen
Shari Lapof, HomesNow volunteer
Rick Qualls, Fountain Community Church
Sybil Sanchez, Bellingham Technical College
Ryan Simonis, Whatcom Community College
Tara Sundin, City of Bellingham, Community and Economic Development Manager

Meeting Summary Prepared By: Cathy B. Halka, AICP, Legislative Analyst, Whatcom County Council

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1. **Welcome and Introductions**, HSW Chair, Whatcom County Councilmember Barry Buchanan

Councilmember and Chair of the HSW, Barry Buchanan, welcomed the group and reviewed the purpose of the HSW as per Resolution 2019-034.

The group approved the August 23rd meeting minutes.

2. **Develop HSW Action Items**

Ann Beck provided an update on the Severe Weather Shelter outreach for partners. Reposted the call for partners to county website and others. Ann mentioned other efforts under way including a 50 person shelter and a 10-20-person family shelter. Both locations are in need of staff and volunteers to run the shelters. Ann is working with Mike at the Opportunity Council to identify potential volunteers. She is meeting this afternoon with WTA to discuss transportation opportunities to get people to shelters.

Ann provided further information on communications efforts underway. A communications team including County (Melissa) and the City of Bellingham (Vanessa) officials has met and is creating a plan for disseminating information about what shelters are open and have space. Markis asked about condensing the information into one app. Ann responded that it is not something there is capacity to address for this winter but could be something considered for the future. Mayor Linville asked that a regional approach is taken in that resources in small cities are included as part of the information available.

Rick Qualls, Fountain Community Church, stated he is prepared to shelter 60 people, with no restrictions on who is allowed. They are not asking for additional support and will run the shelter independently. Mayor Linville mentioned relief that 60 beds will be available in town through Fountain Community Church.

Councilmember Lilliquist asked what elements are needed for a severe weather shelter. Ann clarified that it only requires a warm place and a bathroom. A port-a-potty is also an option for bathroom services.

Karen Burke mentioned that a lot of people in the east County area are living without insulation, and when severe weather arrives there are challenges. Mayor Linville asked if the East Whatcom Regional Resource Center (EWRRC) provides resources. Ann Beck indicated that staff are able to open up the space. Karen Burke asked that the EWRRC be included in

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communications for shelter space available. Jeff Markowitz is a good contact with the EWRRC. Councilmember Lilliquist asked if the EWRRC would need additional support if they needed to be open to the community for a week, for example, during a severe weather event. Karen Burke indicated that EWRRC would likely need support from others to do that. Markis Stidham mentioned the Nooksack Casino is another location that could be an opportunity.

Mayor Linville and Tara Sundin provided an update on the City's winter shelter at Civic Field. There is a locker room built for Western's football team program before it closed. There are showers and restrooms, and it will house 35-40 women and be staffed by the Opportunity Council. The City is working to order materials such as cots. Markis Stidham asked about the budget and what is included. Tara Sundin responded that she will share a detailed budget when it is available. Costs are mostly staffing. There will be laundry and janitorial services. Check-in processes are underway. Mike Parker indicated Opportunity Council staff would be at the Lighthouse Mission drop in center (maintaining one central location for drop in) and then transport people to the Civic Field shelter. Markis Stidham mentioned some people may not want to go to the Lighthouse Mission, so a drop in location in a nearby building could be better. Karen Burke asked about additional locker rooms under the bleachers, and Tara Sundin mentioned they are too small to use them now without renovations. The hours of the shelter will be 7am-7pm. People will be brought back at mealtime to the mission. Mike Parker thanked organizations and partners for their willingness to share their knowledge and collaborate.

Markis Stidham discussed waiting for partners is inappropriate because it is the government's job to shelter people in need. He further discussed the importance of oversight and security as well as identifying locations for shelters that are outside of tsunami zones – lots of shelters are located in areas vulnerable to flooding. Overall everyone should feel welcomed to be sheltered and feel safe in that shelter. Sweeps are costly and it's much cheaper to address the issue. Music at Marine Heritage Park chases people away. We could have compassion and let the people's parks be a place where you can stand still for 8 hours.

Ann Beck indicated her team is working on this issue and trying to house as many people as possible. They are pumping funds into the community to house people in need. Emergency services are taking care of people who are experiencing homelessness. It is an incredible problem and many people are working to fix it.

Riley Sweeney identified a community laundry program, which will offer 1,000 vouchers for a new community laundromat located in Pioneer Marketplace in Ferndale.

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Communications:

Councilmember Lilliquist asked that a communications effort include details on who can be accommodated at what sites (e.g. partners, dogs, etc). He asked about facilities in Skagit, which might be just as easy to get to. Mike Parker clarified that there is Friendship House (not a low barrier shelter and requires participation), and Skagit County has been unable to identify other providers.

Markis Stidham asked that an app be available online to reserve a shelter bed, as well as a database for those willing to sign up (keep their info, make it easier to register)

Mike Parker – Spokane Housing allows for online applications

Karen Burke mentioned that we should be relieving suffering now and assisting people and bridging them to permanency. It would be good to have a group communications effort, ambassadors with a coordinated message.

Mayor Linville said the City supports the HOT team and they go out to encampments to try to get people connected to services.

Councilmember Buchanan indicated that the County also needs a communications strategy to the broader community so they know what is being done (not just communications to the homeless population about what services are available) Ann Beck added that we need to communicate to people who don't know homelessness is an issue, don't know what's being done to address it, and clarify the costs to the community.

The Lighthouse Mission communicated with 2,800 people last year. On average, they communicate to 400 homeless people a day. They can help communicate, get a message out.

Riley Sweeney said that conversations with the broader public are different with the small cities than it is in Bellingham. The North Whatcom Poverty Task Force is working on communications about what homelessness looks like in Ferndale. People aren't sleeping under bridges but there are homeless people out there. Mayor Linville said a lot of people would prefer to stay in their own cities but can't because there aren't services for them there. It's important to coordinate a messaging strategy for other areas of the county. Councilmember Buchanan agreed and offered to follow up to discuss the message.

Mike Hilley reported there will be 2 medics in Bellingham and 1 in Ferndale. Their priority is familiar faces, chronic medical issues. The GRACE team is on the street 10 hours a day engaging with people.

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Karen Burke mentioned that as housing prices rise in lower priced areas in the County, people move to Bellingham where services are available. Mike Parker indicated that the Point-In-Time count includes information on zip codes and there is data to support the idea of migration from other areas in the County to Bellingham. People are migrating from Sumas and Blaine. It's harder to be homeless in other cities than it is in Bellingham.

Safe Parking:

Councilmember Lilliquist asked about the status of safe parking. Mayor Linville clarified that Bellingham Police said that parking is allowed on-street anywhere during the night. Additionally, they considered using one of the City parking lots, such as Lottie Street. They need a partner or church or volunteers to help facilitate it, since the City is focusing their energy on camping and tiny homes. The City is looking for a space for safe parking. Safe parking for RVs was not part of the City's strategy because of concerns with monitoring what is happening inside an RV. Markis Stidham suggested Civic Field as an opportunity location for safe parking, in coordination with shelter operations. There is some confusion about parking hours. Councilmember Lilliquist clarified the 72-hour rule applies to parking a car, which is different than a car with someone in it.

Mayor Linville recalled consolidated parking at Cornwall Park – there weren't services, just a dumpster and a place where you wouldn't get moved in the middle of the night. There were some problems with what happened around and inside campers and with vehicles not moving. Simon mentioned that police doesn't have an issue with parked vehicle and typically just responds to complaints when there's an issue.

Lilliquist identified two levels of safe parking: parking on a street and parking in a designated safe area with standards for behavior and some potential services such as a trash, bathrooms. He identified a preference for identifying parking lots and hosts for those – including an operator.

Markis Stidham hopes that safe parking is something that the HSW could handle. There's plenty of money being spent on homelessness; we need to reallocate funds to make safe parking happen.

Karen Burke identified First Baptist Church downtown, which is working on homelessness issues. They have a parking lot downtown, and they could be a partner. She offered to reach out to bring them into the conversation and learn about what they are working on.

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Hans Erichinger-Davis said car camping and safe parking is good, especially if there is a social worker involved. Otherwise it's creating a band aide of sorts, but having a social worker present gets people engaged in services and moving forward.

Rest Stop:

Councilmember Lilliquist asked for an update on the UnityCare Rest Stop and what we can do if they don't receive their grant. Councilmember Buchanan offered to research the status.

Mayor Linville discussed the rest stop in Ballard, which was not full service. There was a covered area, bathrooms, showers, laundry. It was really functional for immediate needs, but did not include other services.

Markis Stidham said that UnityCare has a good plan; it's a good thing to shoot for. Mayor Kelli said we need a solution, and to be willing to do something that isn't perfect to get something out there now. Markis further clarified a desire to aim high for these efforts.

Markis previously asked WTA for a bus to serve as a warming station or if they could open the lobby. There weren't available buses and there wasn't staff available to open the bus station. Ann Beck offered to bring this up at an upcoming meeting with WTA. Michael Lilliquist also offered to follow up with WTA.

Reunification:

Karen Burke discussed a strategy to offer services to transport people home and reunify them with family or friends. Some people are on their way to Alaska – to good paying jobs – and get stuck here. Mike Hilley indicated their team worked on 5-6 cases to reunify people with their families or transport them to other locations where they have family/friend support systems. It includes work on healing relationships. It is extremely time consuming.

Michael Shepard said the Port struggles when an issue isn't in the mission and maybe WTA has the same issue. Both organizations can provide space, but don't have it in our charter to do other things. We can think about employment gap solutions. It's a challenge for people to build up their resumes after gaps in employment. He is interested in solutions surrounding economic development and job training, getting people back to productive engagement in the community.

Markis Stidham supports reunification and thinks it is worth the investment.

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White Board Notes:

Action Items

- Communications
 - Near term needs
 - Long term services (towards permanency)
 - Broader community
 - Education
 - Engagement
 - Coordinated messaging
 - Bellingham
 - Small Cities
- Safe Parking
- Rest Stop
- Reunification

3. Public Comment

John Campbell thanked the group, and said there are a lot of reasons people don't or will not go to a shelter. He suggested sheltering in place as an option – warm clothing, food. People may have issue with schizophrenia and have had problems in shelters before.

Lynette Allen, a HomesNow volunteer, said there are so many that donate skills and equipment to HomesNow. It's a community that has developed. There are experienced volunteers, and I wish there was a way for people to have a title or a job. She mentioned she goes to the Washington Low Income Advocate meetings, and she would like more information about HB1406, which she will be writing about and asking for interviews.

Tara Sundin clarified that the cities have agreed to pool the HB1406 funds with the County. The City will have a resolution to that end at the City Council meeting on Monday. On Tuesday, Whatcom County will have a resolution, and in October will bring forward an Ordinance. Ann Beck said the resolution of intent will be done first, there will be discussions on how to use the money before bringing forward the ordinance. Once the ordinance is passed, the Department of Revenue needs 30 days to figure out how much money will go to the community, and then they start it at the first of the month. Even if the money starts coming in Dec 1st they account for the prior months so there is not any loss of funds. Ann further described they are moving quickly and all partners are working really well together to make it happen. She is awaiting clarification

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on when the 30 day clock begins: at the resolution or with the ordinance. Funds are for affordable housing in the community (e.g. build new, renovate, or rental assistance) – for 60% area median income (AMI).

Chris Donaldson asked what are the next steps since he doesn't hear a lot about who is doing what. Councilmember Buchanan suggested that the HSW establish 4 subcommittees (communications, operations – short term, operations – long term, and funding). Councilmember Lilliquist indicated that many members are policy makers, but staff are the ones that do the implementation. Chris said he is making a documentary about how to solve the homeless crisis. He interviewed the Exec. Director of Housing Connector run by the Seattle Metro Chamber of Commerce. The purpose of the organization is to facilitate the conversation between landlords and the homeless. Mike Parker asked that he reach out the landlord liaison at the Opportunity Council who does just that.

Markis Stidham read a comment submitted from Dena Jensen, Birch Bay. She cheered on the efforts of the HSW. She said it will take everyone supporting each other to create sheltering options to meet the needs of all of the homeless. She said that with clients checking in at the Lighthouse Mission. It's vital that there are secular shelters. [Please see full comments attached]

Shari Lapof, a volunteer with HomesNow, discussed the ribbon cutting at HomesNow Unity Village on Sept. 14th at 12:30pm and invited all to attend.

Carmen Gilmore, BasicsPNW, provided a written statement to the HSW [see attached]. She would like to see 200 secular shelter spaces as well as places for high security people to go if they are not allowed in available shelters (e.g. the jail building). Consider opening shelters November – March. Consider extended hours at Civic Field expanding the number of people served there. [Please see full comments attached]

Markis Stidham asked about a new drop in center, which Hans Erchinger-Davis discussed on KGMI. Hans Erchinger-Davis said the Mission is not commenting on that yet.

4. Discussion of Next Steps

The next meeting is September 20, 2019.

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.

To the Homeless Strategies Workgroup:

First, I am cheering all of you on in taking quick action to effectively supply more and better options that community members without shelter had last winter. In reading over meeting summaries I can see how the County and its cities are behind in terms of having lost some resources they had last year. I know it will take everyone facilitating each other's efforts - all the local government agencies and all the organizations capable of providing sheltering resources, and all the volunteers who can be brought in to participate - to create sheltering options that will meet the needs of all of our community members.

I have a couple of concerns I wanted to address:

I read the announcement made by the City of Bellingham on their website regarding their proposal of the Civic Stadium building for a temporary women's overnight winter shelter. I found that in the July 26, 2019 meeting summary for the Homeless Strategies Workgroup that it was outlined that "The City of Bellingham has identified a 3-month shelter location, but the location will not be announced until August. The site will accommodate 35-40 women. Opportunity Council will serve as the primary manager in support of the mission." The summary went on to report that clients would check in at the Mission.

I do not know if this is part of the arrangement that will be used regarding the Civic Stadium shelter, but many aspects from the description in that July meeting summary sound similar to the what was said in the City's announcement of a temporary shelter location for women, and it is stated that the Opportunity Council (which is a secular organization) would be operating the shelter. What was not mentioned at all in the City's announcement, however, was any involvement of the Lighthouse Mission (which is a religious organization). If individuals are going to have to first go to the Lighthouse Mission to check in before they would be taken to the temporary women's shelter, members of the community should be told about that up front. Also not mentioned in the City's announcement is that Fountain Community Church would be in charge of transporting people to the women's shelter at Civic Field. If this is part of the protocol, community members should be made aware that these religious organizations are involved and that individuals seeking shelter at Civic Field would have to interact with them.

Further, I would like to know if people wanting to stay at the Civic Field shelter would be ensured of staying at that location, or would they potentially be directed by the Lighthouse Mission to stay at their facility instead?

Meanwhile, if the Lighthouse Mission and Fountain Community Church are, in fact, involved in this shelter location, then it is still vitally important that other secular sheltering locations be made available for those who cannot go to ones run by a religious organization. It is also vital that the City of Bellingham not put the responsibility for determining availability of secular sheltering options based disproportionately on data or decisions offered by religious organizations.

Another thing I was wondering about is that I heard Hans Erchinger-Davis speaking on the August 31, 2019 Saturday Morning Live radio show. He had said that the Lighthouse Mission is going to be installing additional restroom facilities at their location. He also said that the porta-potties would be removed from their location from outside the building. Mr. Erchinger-Davis had also mentioned during the show that often people who do not wish to go inside the Lighthouse Mission will hang around in places near the Mission building for the sense of security it provides them.

I am concerned then, about how these people will be able to access restrooms when they need them if the porta-potties are removed and if they will not go inside the Mission building. I was wondering if there would be direct access from outdoors to the restroom, at least without people having to check in, and how the people outside would be made aware that they could do so. It would seem to be a concern that without an arrangement that people are actually comfortable with that they may resort to using other areas to relieve themselves that could present a health or environmental risk.

Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Dena Jensen
Birch Bay, WA
