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WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

Homeless Strategies Workgroup

Friday, September 20, 2019 Meeting #12 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
Carol Frazey (for Rud Browne), Whatcom County Councilmember
Dan Hammill, City of Bellingham Council Member
Mike Hilley, Whatcom County EMS
Michael Lilliquist, City of Bellingham Council Member
Mike Parker, Opportunity Council
Markis D. Stidham, Homeless Advocate
Riley Sweeney, City of Ferndale
Emilio Vela, Jr., Northwest Youth Services

Guests:

Sara Airoldi, Northwest Youth Services
Helen Campbell, citizen
John Campbell, citizen
Liz Coogan, City of Bellingham, Executive Assistant to the Mayor
Mark Gardner, City of Bellingham, Legislative Analyst
Heather Katahdin, volunteer, citizen
Shari Lapof, HomesNow volunteer
Emerson McCuin, Northwest Youth Services
Rick Qualls, Fountain Community Church

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

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 members approved the September 6th meeting minutes.

2. The Ground Floor, Northwest Youth Services

Emilio Vela, Jr. gave a presentation (see Exhibit A) on the Ground Floor, a program run by Northwest Youth Services (NWYS). He thanked First Congregational Church for hosting the Ground Floor and remodeling the basement of their facility to host the program. Emerson McCuin manages the Ground Floor, which provides break out rooms, offices, laundry facilities, quiet rooms, ADA accessible showers, kitchen, computer access, mail service, food, snacks, clothing, hygiene supplies, sleeping bags, and tents. The Ground Floor is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm. The hours are a challenge, especially as the days get shorter and colder. Northwest Youth Services receives donations of food and supplies for the Ground Floor from food banks, gardens, and hotels. It is not a faith-based program. A housing case manager, vocational specialist, and benefits navigator are available to assist as well as mental health support. NWYS helps youth navigate the system. They have served 250 unduplicated youth, 600 showers, and 250 loads of laundry. They serve a hot breakfast every morning they are open, Monday through Friday. Approximately 15 people come through every day.

It takes 80% of their time to develop a trust relationship with clients. The investment on the front end is critical, and the Ground Floor is a great asset to do this. There are connections made at the Ground Floor between people who might be good roommates to afford an apartment together. They are only open for 4 hours, and that is a challenge. The vision and hope is to be open 8-10 hours per day 7 days a week

The City of Bellingham provides around 70% of the funding. The City of Ferndale also provides some funding. Emerson McCuin added that there are private funders, such as Chuckanut Health Foundation. Clients are typically 17-25 years old, and younger people are referred to a more robust program elsewhere. People go to the Ground Floor because they are without a home and looking for services. It's a healthy community, which is hard to find when you are homeless. Most people hear about the Ground Floor through word of mouth. Many are referred from the Lighthouse Mission. It is staffed with paid employees plus some volunteers.

When people arrive at the ground floor they are asked their name and birthday. The Ground Floor has a great case manager who asks about basic needs and then tries to match them with housing programs. There are several targets for housing:

- Short term housing:
 - HUSLY Program: 4 youth beds (28 served in the last year)
 - Transitional housing program: 20/year
- Long term housing
 - Rapid rehousing: (youth signs their own lease and it's subsidized): 14 by the end of the year
 - Section 8: 11 by the end of the year
 - Shelter plus care and permanent supportive housing (includes 22 North): 26

currently served

Councilmember Hammill requested trying to track impacts to families from incarcerated parents. He suggested tracking data in an intake situation, e.g. have your parents been incarcerated, and there may be additional funding opportunities.

Mike Parker indicated that Rapid Rehousing funding comes from the County and goes to the Opportunity Council. There has been great growth in the program. If there were more funding it would be used, and the program could be expanded. People need help to pay rent. The program is effective.

Sara Airoidi indicated that case management funding goes hand in hand with rapid rehousing funding because you cannot rehouse someone without a case manager to do it.

Emilio Vela, Jr. indicated that they saw 30 people come in the door and could only rehouse 10 because there wasn't capacity to get them affordable housing. For five days a week, NWYS needs \$244,000 per year, and they lack \$154,000. Councilmember Lilliquist said he doesn't understand where bottlenecks are in capacity, and asked that funding packages presented to Council be detailed to show the need and request for it. The City could look into the general funds, levy funds, and other opportunities.

NWYS is in conversations with First Congregational Church about establishing a winter shelter, run by NWYS.

Riley Sweeney asked what small cities can do to help with youth traveling from rural areas. NWYS said that they could use help with transportation and advertising as well as funding. It's important mostly to increase communication with the small cities and to get funding support from them to allow NWYS to expand their hours.

3. Develop HSW Action items

Case Management:

Council Member Hammill indicated that it is important that case managers are consistent so people can build trust and they don't have to start all over with new staff. He indicated that 1406 should include case management as a priority for funding.

Markis Stidham talked about the importance of support for higher barrier individuals. He further discussed that a good place to start by helping people who are at the top and easy to house, but don't let others fall further behind.

Karen Burke identified that housing is only one piece of homelessness. Trauma recovery is a huge barrier. There is a need for trauma recovery and stabilization work to be done before you can give people keys. Keep in mind you need all the programs together.

Mike Parker indicated that approach includes case management, rental assistance, and a willing landlord. Landlords are stepping up to accept tenants with rental assistance.

The HSW discussed case managers and the need to increase salaries and ensure case managers stay. Most caseworkers are making \$15/hr. Hans Erchinger-Davis indicated that the Downtown Emergency Service Center in Seattle has a 40% turnover rate – its hard traumatic work. Karen Burke indicated the tough part of case management is navigating the systems– jumping through all the hoops to get someone help. Mike Hilley indicated that in support teams, every 2 months case workers see a counselor, we need to support case workers with peer support and counseling.

Emilio Vela, Jr said the first thing he noticed when he started was the low pay for people on the front line. He asked how we can keep the good people we train, so they can afford rent.

Funding

The HSW members discussed HB 1406. The estimated funding to be provided will be \$650,000. This is not an additional tax, it is revenue already captured that is not being allocated for affordable housing and rental assistance. There are a lot of ideas about how to spend the money. The Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee (WCHAC) will be making recommendations on how the funding will be spent. The document recording revenues are lower than estimated and they are looking at cuts. Funding can be used for rental assistance but not for personnel. Funding will not be available until January 2020. The next WCHAC meeting is Thursday October 10, 2019 at 8:30 am at the Health Department building in the upstairs conference room. Housing Trust Funds (2163) and 1406 funds will be included in the discussion.

Whatcom County Council will hear the item with the local plan for 1406 funds on October 8th. Ann Beck identified several scenarios of population growth and housing growth. If there is no rental growth and no increase in population, there will be a predicted change of 24 fewer homeless people in 2024 – or an annual offset of \$111,000 to make that happen. If there is a 3% rental growth, there will be 5 fewer homeless people. In 2024, there will be 129 more people homeless in a scenario with 1.5% population growth and 8% rental growth, or we can offset it with \$758,000.

Mike Parker discussed that Opportunity Council monitors rental assistance funds and can help quantify what amount of rental assistance would be helpful, and quantify how much case management could be needed.

Council Member Lilliquist said he is waiting for 'the ask' for the right thing and the right dollars.

Council Member Hammill discussed that Bellingham voters passed \$4M/year for the Home Fund, and he asked how the HSW could make a recommendation for how the funds should be spent. Rental assistance component is in the high 20s now. How can the HSW make recommendations on funding for rental assistance, capital assistance, and case management?

Ann Beck indicated that the HSW could make recommendations to the Community Development Advisory Board (CDAB) board. CDAB advises on how to use the funding. Ultimately it is up to the Mayor and Council to make a decision on funding.

Council Member Lilliquist clarified that there are notifications of funding that go out. Notice of Funding Availability (NOFAs). He requested that Ann and Samya present funding opportunities and allocations and how challenges are communicated among agencies.

Shelters:

The members discussed the trigger for severe weather shelter opening. If shelters are at capacity and the weather temperature meets the requirement, severe weather shelters will open. If the weather requirement is not met (even if shelters are at capacity), the severe weather shelters will not open.

Mike Parker provided an update on the winter shelter. City Planning hosted a listening session, and concerns were addressed. Opportunity Council is starting to post jobs and moving forward with targeted opening date of November 25th.

Members discussed loneliness as an issue. People want the support they find at a shelter or a tiny home village. When clients get into an independent place, they often end up back [at the mission] because they are lonely. The Ground Floor provides a hub to integrate and get housing. They continue to come back and connect with a community there. It's key to provide the supports.

Markis Stidham mentioned that WTA needs to be involved, and he would like to see them staff their main building all night or provide a warming bus. Last year he asked for a bus for warming at night and they said no. He further suggested that the HSW work with Nick Lewis and the Lummi Nation to explore options.

Update on Unity Care Rest Stop:

Members discussed the Unity Care Rest Stop – they are still waiting on grant notification. Unity Care is committed to creating a Rest Stop. The location has not been determined.

Communications Subcommittees:

Councilmember Buchanan mentioned that the HSW had discussed creating Subcommittees. The first subcommittee of interest was a Communications Subcommittee: both to service recipients and to the general public.

The following members volunteered: Karen Burke, Riley Sweeney, Mike Parker, and Sara Airoidi NWYS. They discussed coordinating with County and city staff: Ann Beck, Mellissa Morin (County), Vanessa (COB), Riley Sweeney (COF). Markis Stidham offered to assist with language and presentation and outreach. Karen Burke will set up the first meeting and coordinate with Cathy (Council Office).

A motion was made by Councilmember Buchanan and the HSW members voted to approve the motion unanimously.

Funding Subcommittee:

How does HSW decide priorities for funding? And would there be interest in creating a Funding Subcommittee? HSW members included funding information as part of the Communications Subcommittee work.

HSW members discussed what a funding subcommittee might do. What does the entire picture of funding look like? Highlight the information in a graph or table where funding is going and identify needs. Create the visual data and then update it regularly

Mike Parker indicated that organizations have unrestricted donations, federal grants, and other sources. DVSAS has a \$2M budget and gets \$26,000 from the County. There are lots of different funding sources.

Ann Beck mentioned that the Whatcom County Local Plan to end homelessness is due to Commerce on Dec 2nd and will go to the Council on October 8th for review and feedback. It's a good starting point for looking at where funding is going in our community. There are 1,277 Emergency shelter beds in Whatcom County (not including private orgs and religious orgs)

- 98 total emergency shelter beds
 - 49 beds for adult or solo youth
 - 49 beds for families
- 72 total transitional housing
 - 31 beds for adult or solo youth
 - 41 beds for families
- 529 Rapid Rehousing beds
 - 404 devoted to families
- 213 permanent rental support beds
 - 201 beds families
 - 12 beds for adult or solo youth
- 365 permanent supported housing beds
 - 331 beds for adult or solo youth
 - 34 beds for families

Karen Burke discussed two important programs are struggling with capacity: Sunhouse and YWCA. There are 36 beds at YWCA for vulnerable women. Difficult for a nonprofit to grow to additional houses. Need support. Specialized shelters are a great resource for people with trauma issues. YWCA has one case manager for 36 clients and no facility dollars. She further discussed how it is up to directors of organization to handle budget deficits in programming funds by limiting programming and not taking from salaries.

Mike Hilley clarified that Social workers and EMTs are engaged with the primary goal to tackle the frequent users of the 911 systems and get them to services rather than them relying on 911 for primary care. There are 3 paramedics (2 BH and 1 Ferndale) ready for winter. Paramedics and case manager working with police; there is a big variation in salaries

Safe Parking:

Council Member Lilliquist discussed Safe Parking and said to establish a location now would require staff and programming. It's not just providing a parking lot. He clarified that you are allowed by state law to sleep in your car, but that's not safe parking, that's just parking. If you have a parking lot, you can invite people to park there as a right. Once you start treating it as a residence, then it can be an issue. He doesn't want to lean too heavily on safe parking because it's a stopgap band aide, but right now it might be needed.

Markis Stidham relayed information he received from Sergeant Lanham. 72 hours is limit on residential parking. Can't move your vehicle three spaces, you have to move off the block. It's not happening here in Bellingham unless there is a complaint. Safe parking with services is a transitional model but needed.

Markis Stidham added that safe parking is a great way to transition from safe parking to tiny homes. It's a successful model. He mentioned he often reads 'partners required' but thinks the government needs to get started before we have partners. He suggested reallocating money from sweeps to pull people out of the woods and shelter them. He added that Homes Now is an excellent program.

Additional items

Riley Sweeney mentioned that the City of Ferndale is working with Ferndale Food Bank to start first needle exchange program.

4. Public Comment

No members of the public provided comments.

5. Discussion of Next Steps

The next meeting is October 4, 2019.

EXHIBIT A

The Ground Floor, Presentation by Emilio Vela, Jr. at the Homeless Strategies Workgroup Meeting, September 20, 2019



The Ground Floor is a safe and comfortable space for youth where they can meet basic needs, build a healthy social network, and access community resources.

Open Monday - Friday 10am-2pm

Located at 2500 E. St.,
In the First Congregational Church of Bellingham

Basic Needs/Services

- Showers
- Quiet Rooms
- Laundry
- Kitchen
- Computer Access
- Mail Service
- Free Clothing
- Food/Snacks
- Hygiene Supplies
- Critical Supplies (Tents, Sleeping Bags, Tarps, etc.)

On-Site Support Services

- Housing Case Manager
- Vocational Specialist
- Benefits Navigator
- Mental Health Support
- Community Partners:
 - Unity Care NW
 - WorkSource
 - LifeLong
 - Catholic Community Services

Facts

Since Opening on January 28th, 2019 the Ground Floor has:

- Served 250 unduplicated youth
- Provided over 600 showers and nearly 250 loads of laundry
- Served a hot breakfast every day of the week to homeless youth

Contact

For more information about the Ground Floor or NWYS, contact:

Emilio Vela
NWYS Executive Director
emiliov@nwys.org

or

Emerson McCuin
Ground Floor Program Manager
emersonm@nwys.org

September 20, 2019

Homeless Strategies Workgroup:

I regret that I can not be at our next meeting, please see comments below...

First of all, I am grateful that such a large group, spanning so many agencies, has come together to initiate some action on behalf of the homeless population in Bellingham/Whatcom County. I appreciate the mammoth task in just scheduling this group to be together.

As you all know, our church has helped to bring a group of about 200 volunteers together over the past four years to provide food and shelter for approximately 35-40 women per night for the three coldest months of our Winter. It has been a great privilege to work with these ladies to provide a safe and nurturing place for them. Additionally, during this last Winter we housed families, some in our facility and many in hotels, averaging at least four families per night; and on a few nights we housed 20 men. Unfortunately, after this last year we felt that we could no longer provide the same level and scope of care in our facility, a decision that was very difficult to make.

I appreciate the meetings convened to discuss and plan the means to care for the broad scope of homeless populations, I have attempted to be at all of them. I have listened to the concerns brought to the table from all aspects of our community. There have been some strong feelings shared regarding the involvement of the faith community in this work and the degree of discomfort that this causes for some of the people that we hoping to reach and care for. The number of homeless that would not come to a church for help has varied from 23 to “hundreds”. I am not sure how that number is arrived at, but it is an unfortunate reality that there have been deep hurts caused in people’s lives through their encounter with churches, etc.

When our group first formed our commitment was to do the best we could to fill one facet of a huge problem. Our task and pleasure was to provide a safe place for 40 or so women and as many families as possible for three months out of the year. Each year as we trained new volunteers, we reminded them of our focus as a team. We couldn’t hope to meet all the needs nor understand all the problems, but we could work hard to do our best to show these people how much we valued their lives.

Over the four years we had a few people tell us that they didn’t like coming to the church, or being around a pastor. While we felt sad because of this reality, we couldn’t change their past, but we could work at changing their present. We had people come with all kinds of unique stories and unique challenges; we endeavored to meet them where they were and give them some sense of hope.

So many of the stories that we heard came after days of just being together, being a steady influence in a world that was out of control for many. We worked with ladies of assorted ages and backgrounds. Certainly we weren't successful in every case, but we were in some and that made it worth while.

Now we are facing another Winter, plans are being made and partnerships are being formed. Our part this year will look different than the past years. We will be opening our building should the weather make it necessary; which will be somewhat of a new opportunity.

The task remains huge, and resources are challenging. My hope is that we are able to do much more than just providing shelter. Our influence on these lives can be life changing for them, and certainly for us.

Thank you for the work that is being done, and yet to be done,

Rick Qualls, lead pastor
Fountain Community Church