

## **CONTINUING TO TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTIN**

As Mayor and City Council members, we have been listening to the people of Austin, our city staff, and the many stakeholders who work with people experiencing homelessness in our community. We're certain our colleagues join us in committing to a continued community conversation on homelessness leading to further Council action in September that would include, but not be limited to, the kinds of ideas described in this document. We post this onto the public Council Message Board because the entire Council joined in setting homelessness as our City's highest priority and all of us will continue working together on this issue. This document is intended to present ideas for action and we welcome discussion on these and other ideas.

### **OUTLINE:**

- Proposed principles and goals
- Proposed community agreement and direction
- Our community needs multiple housing types and services for individuals experiencing homelessness
- We know what works
- New programs, expansions, and increased housing capacity on the horizon
- Possible places from among which to increase restrictions on camping, sitting, and lying
- Ordinance standards, interpretations, and applications
- Rules regarding camping where it occurs as we build out more housing and services
- Rules for parks
- Non-policing tools to encourage people to go to better and safer places

Let's find a constructive way to move forward to end homelessness.

*Mayor Adler, Council Member Tovo, Council Member Kitchen*

### **PROPOSED PRINCIPLES AND GOALS**

- We are concerned with both **people** experiencing homelessness and public **places**.
- We don't want camping in public places.
- We want to help and treat well our neighbors experiencing homelessness.
- Providing housing is the only real way both to help people and to avoid camping.
- The more housing and beds we provide, the more places where we can limit camping.

### **PROPOSED COMMUNITY AGREEMENT AND DIRECTION**

To prevent camping, sitting, and lying in certain locations, we need to provide better and safer places for people experiencing homelessness to be. As we provide more housing (w/services), we can more effectively and ethically list more places for people to not camp, beyond the current restrictions. This is the agreement and promise we make with ourselves, the social compact we establish in our community. We should begin building that list now at the same time we are taking immediate steps to build housing capacity.

This past June, the City Council did three things: one, we removed some of the camping ban while leaving some restrictions in place; two, we asked the City Manager and the community to consider more carefully tailored restrictions than those that previously existed; and three, we took immediate steps to increase housing capacity.

By unanimously approving Resolution No. 184 last June, the City Council asked the City Manager to “propose reasonable time and place opportunities and limitations on camping, sitting and lying.”

Prohibiting camping, sitting, and lying, without providing people with a place to go, is a failed strategy. Moving people experiencing homelessness away from one public place only moves them to another public place. Ticketing or arresting people, or threatening to do so, merely for being homeless and having no good option for where else to go, is inhumane and counterproductive.

Nor is camping a solution to homelessness. We do not want any of our neighbors, especially our most vulnerable, to have to live with the public safety and health risks of life on the streets.

We can and must do better for those experiencing homelessness, for our public spaces, and for our community as a whole.

The “Action Plan to End Homelessness,” developed by housing providers with ECHO and endorsed by the City Council in 2018, identifies the models and programs that are working here locally that we must scale to city-wide levels if we want to end homelessness in our city. Over the last several years, the City Council has supported achieving effective zero veteran homelessness, the Homelessness Outreach Street Team, a redesign to a housing-focused model at the ARCH, and other initiatives, and has allocated more money to housing and social service providers working to end homelessness. The City’s new full-time Homeless Strategy Officer (an executive level position) will start the first week of September. It is intended that also in September, the City Council will vote on action items related to homelessness as well as a city budget that includes multiple investments in housing and services.

We want community input. Ending homelessness in Austin will require partnerships among local governments, non-profit housing and service providers, faith communities, philanthropists, neighborhoods, and others. Austin is fortunate to have so many in the community who are doing great work to address and prevent homelessness, and they need our support and the resources to sustain and expand their operations. None of us can do this alone; we must work together. We can do it and we must.

## **OUR COMMUNITY NEEDS MULTIPLE HOUSING TYPES FOR INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS**

The types of housing we need to provide include but are not limited to the following.

- **Rapid Re-Housing**, helping someone quickly secure housing often with a voucher or rent support, is sometimes the best answer for an individual or family who needs a home but not frequent or extensive mental or physical health or social services. Many people experiencing homelessness are the victims of the “perfect storm” and have suddenly lost their partner, their job, their family, and their home and find themselves on the streets. If they can quickly receive help to secure housing, many will be able to return to self-sufficiency within a few months to a year.
- **Permanent Supportive Housing**, long-term housing coupled with supportive services is often the ultimate answer to effectively end homelessness for many people. This requires significant capital expenditures as well as the cost for services.
- **Shelters** provide different types of immediate and emergency housing and provide a safer and healthier place for people to be while obtaining other support they might need (e.g., medical, mental health, substance use resources, job, etc.) to obtain permanent housing and to help stabilize their lives.

- Individuals living in shelters should have a housing-exit strategy or a plan to get into permanent supportive housing.
- People should be moved through, not moved to shelters.
- Shelters are designed and operated specifically to avoid neighborhood disruption as they are located throughout the city and use practices such as:
  - Limitation on number of beds
  - Prohibition on drop-in services
  - Prohibition on providing services for people not living at the location
  - Residents admitted by referral only
  - Prohibition on camping, sitting, and lying outside
  - Added public safety and public health attention
  - Regular Mayor and Council on-site visits with neighbors
- **Day Services Centers** offer drop-in services.
  - Individuals do not stay long at such a facility, only during the day.
  - Individuals are assessed, their needs identified, and they are then connected to financial aid; social, mental and physical health services; housing referrals; and other services such as showers, bathrooms, and storage.

## **WE KNOW WHAT WORKS**

Austin has organizations and programs achieving great results. All of these initiatives and organizations, and others, could reach more people and achieve greater results with more resources and support to reach more people, establish additional locations, and provide more homes. Among our successes:

- **Effectively Ended Veteran Homelessness.** Austin is one of a limited number of cities that has been able to achieve “effective zero” veteran homelessness (meaning we can provide permanent housing for vets within 60 days and services almost immediately).
  - Community partners like the Austin Apartment Association, the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), Salvation Army, Caritas, Community First, and others focused on finding and providing housing, and this was key.
  - Innovative solutions, such as the philanthropist and business created and funded “risk fund” to mitigate the perception of financial risk for participating landlords have proven very important.
  - Community partners and local governments funded rental vouchers and assistance to help increase the number of available homes.
- **Cut Youth Homelessness in Half.** We’ve cut in half the number of children and youth living on our streets in a LifeWorks initiative using targeted federal funding for homes and services. The goal is to house the other children and youth this next year.
- **Kept People Housed.** Caritas uses individualized interventions and reports that 97% of individuals enrolled in its permanent supportive housing program remained stable one year after placement.
- **Created Community.** Community First Village has been able to provide more than 200 people with housing and community.

## **THERE ARE NEW PROGRAMS, EXPANSIONS AND HOUSING CAPACITY ON THE HORIZON**

There is new capacity about to open and more in the planning stages. These efforts need additional support. The following are some of the initiatives creating new housing capacity.

- The Salvation Army’s new Rathgeber Family Center will provide more than 200 shelter beds and transitional housing for families with children and will create increased shelter capacity of more than 50 beds for individuals Downtown. The City and the Downtown Austin Alliance are contributing to this effort. The Salvation Army is continuing to fundraise and needs additional money to operate the Rathgeber Family Center at full capacity.
- Caritas, Salvation Army, Community First, Foundation Communities and others have announced plans to add hundreds of new beds, permanent homes and capacity, but need further community support.
- An innovative “Pay for Success” program is about to begin a 5-year effort to sustain housing for up to 250 individuals who are among the most frequent users of our emergency medical services, emergency rooms, jails, and who have the greatest interaction with law enforcement. (This is a collaboration between Travis County and the City of Austin, Central Health, Community Care Collaborative, Episcopal Health Foundation, Ascension-Seton, St. David’s Foundation and Seton Health Care).
- The City has begun moving toward establishing shelters and permanent supportive housing in all ten council districts in a manner that avoids neighborhood disruption.
- Terrace at Oak Springs, a 50-unit Housing First project, will open soon, serving individuals who have experienced chronic homelessness and who have one or more barriers to maintaining housing, such as a mental health diagnosis and/or chronic alcohol or substance use. This project is a collaboration of the City of Austin, Austin-Travis County Integral Care, and the Housing Authority of the City of Austin.
- The 2018 Affordable Housing Bond passed by the voters has begun to create many permanent supportive housing units throughout the city.
- The City Manager’s proposed budget for next year contains historic levels of financial support for housing for those experiencing homelessness.

We should continue to learn from successful models in other cities and to pursue additional opportunities to house and serve individuals experiencing homelessness through options such as the following:

- Purchase of hotels or apartment buildings to be converted to this use
- Apartment buildings willing to accept new tenants
- Boarding houses, tiny, and/or modular homes
- Places for respite and recuperative care for medically fragile patients
- Expanded housing options for those with mental health issues and substance use disorders
- Opportunities to ensure housing for individuals with disabilities
- Housing that accommodates pets, partners, and possessions

### **POSSIBLE PLACES FROM AMONG WHICH TO INCREASE RESTRICTIONS ON CAMPING, SITTING, AND LYING**

As we provide more housing, we should now begin creating a list of public spaces where camping, sitting, and lying may possibly not be allowed now and in the future. These spaces could include the areas listed below.

- This is the agreement and promise we make with ourselves, the social compact we establish in our community.
  - We should not tell people they can’t be in certain public places if we’re not able to tell them where, alternatively, there’s a viable place for them to be.
  - Restricting camping, sitting, and lying in certain public places will merely serve to move those individuals to other public places if there are not better places for them to be.
- We should immediately consider placing restrictions from among areas such as those set out below because they are not the most safe, humane, or best places for people to be, or because they pose

public safety risks or public health hazards. Over time, as more housing is provided for more people, the restricted areas within such categories would be able to grow in number and size.

- Vehicular traffic
  - Adjacent to roadways or medians
  - Adjacent to or on transit, bus or rail facilities
- Sidewalks, paths, and trails
  - Allowing safe, unobstructed passage for people and wheelchairs, bikes, strollers, etc.
- Schools/child care facilities
- Creeks, rivers, floodplain, flood ways, high fire risk areas
- Areas with high pedestrian activity
  - Specifically naming some streets (e.g. Congress Avenue, Second Street, Sixth Street, South Congress, or the Drag, etc.)
  - Entrances to buildings, residences, or businesses
- Shelters, bridge homes, navigation centers
- ARCH

- Camping is currently prohibited in the following areas. As we know, enforcement is difficult. Arresting and ticketing doesn't work and is counterproductive. In significant part, however, enforcement is hampered by our failure to provide alternate better and safer places for people to be. The best and most direct way to provide for effective enforcement of ordinances concerning the following areas is for us to provide more housing.

- Public parks
- Private property
- City libraries
- City recreation centers
- Ceremonial Buildings (Governor Mansion, City Hall, Capitol)
- Other city facilities with a curfew
- Bus stops
- Camping in ways that present a public safety risk
- Camping in ways that present a public health hazard
- Camping in a place that does not allow for reasonable use of public property

- Areas restricted from camping in such categories should be based on appropriate, objective standards.
  - Such standards could relate to criteria like proximity, traffic volume, vehicular speed, a safety or health standard, appropriate passageway width, pedestrian count, or other standards.
  - The standard can adjust over time as more housing is provided.

- Neighborhood Efforts
  - In addition to the continuing efforts of all the partners to address homelessness citywide, including areas with the highest concentration of individuals experiencing homelessness, like Downtown, we should consider adopting a practice that allows a neighborhood or an organization to ask the City to restrict camping in a certain place if the neighborhood or organization assists the City or service provider to provide those camping there with a better, safer, and more desirable place somewhere else in that area.

## **ORDINANCE STANDARDS, INTERPRETATIONS, APPLICATIONS**

Better enforcement and clarification of the existing and future ordinances may be necessary to achieve appropriate enforcement. The Council should consider better defining:

- safety risk, health hazard, and blocking/impeding of public property
- indicia of terms such as “aggressive confrontation” and “threatening”
- the proof necessary to establish a violation

## **RULES REGARDING CAMPING WHERE IT OCCURS AS WE BUILD OUT MORE HOUSING AND SERVICES.**

As we increase housing and services, we should consider rules for camping that could include limitations on size of tents/structures and the volume of belongings; providing tools (such as purple bags) for and required participation in ensuring cleanliness of grounds and avoidance of litter; appropriate places to provide showers and water, personal storage lockers; and processes to ensure people can keep their belongings secure.

## **RULES FOR PARKS**

- Reaffirm parks rules that prohibit camping and post clear information for the public
- Expand works program for people experiencing homelessness to work on parks clean-ups
- Increase parks maintenance funding with targeted focus on areas with high concentrations of people experiencing homelessness
- Increase the number of park waste receptacles and the availability of purple bags for individuals experiencing homelessness

## **NON-POLICING TOOLS TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO GO TO BETTER AND SAFER PLACES**

- Incentives for individuals to choose better and safer places
  - Facilities (bathrooms, showers, laundry, storage lockers)
  - Safe, clean, well maintained
  - Provide basic needs
  - Some allowing anyone in need to access (low barrier, pursuing housing first policies)
  - Provide spaces for pets, couples, small aligned groups from the streets or camps
  - Economic support and a pathway to housing
- Facilitators
  - Non-Public Safety Officers, in some situations and with some people, may be seen as less official and less threatening facilitators helping individuals move to better, safer places
    - Lay workers triaging and facilitating the movement of people
    - HOST team members (other than APD), DAA Ambassadors, Community Health Paramedics (EMS), Community First Ambassadors (people who have previously experienced homelessness)
    - Social workers, Mental Health workers riding with public safety officers
  - Helping people needing assistance to get to:
    - Sobering Center
    - Mental Health assistance
    - Shelter/bridge home/navigation center
    - Community Court