The Way Home

Steering Committee Meeting
Thursday, Feb. 10, 2021, at 3:30pm
Agenda

1. Meeting Introduction
   - Call to order
   - Roll call & ice breaker

2. Discussion & Approval of:
   - December 2021 Minutes

3. Lead Agency Updates:
   - Ending Chronic Homelessness
   - Youth Homeless Demonstration Program (YHDP) update
   - Houston’s Recent Success
     - CCHP Phase 2
     - Navigation Center
     - Point-in-Time Count
     - The New York Times
   - Open call for officer seats – email Caybryn Southern of your interest
     - (Must be active members of The Way Home Steering Committee)
   - Strategy oversight meeting reminder

4. Meeting Wrap-Up:
   - Public Comment Guidelines Reminder & Public Comment
   - Meeting Adjourn
     - Next Meeting: Thursday, Mar. 10, 2022, from 1 – 5 p.m. – Strategy Oversight meeting

5. Additional Materials:
   - City, Harris County invest $100M in plan to cut homelessness in half - Houston Chronicle
   - Plans for homeless center meet unwelcoming host - Houston Chronicle

Attendance
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<td>Alan Watkins</td>
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Roll Call & Ice Breaker

• As your name is called, please let us know you’re here and turn on your camera (if you haven’t already done so).

• As well as answer one of the following festive ice breakers:
  • What activity or interest is a huge stress reliever for you?
  • What is one of your proudest achievements?
  • What is one thing you would like to do this year that you have never done?
  • What is your ultimate guilty pleasure song?
  • Do you like sweets (e.g., chocolate, cake, ice cream, etc.), if so, what is your favorite? If not, what do you prefer as a “craving”?
  • Do you have any funny Valentine’s day memories?
December Minutes

0. Meeting Materials
   - Click here to view the meeting packet
   - Click here to view the meeting recording.
   - Click here to visit The Way Home Portal.

1. Meeting Introduction
   - Call to order – 3:35pm
   - Update on Steering Committee seats
     - Pg. 4 of the meeting packet
     - Topic discussion begins at the start of the meeting recording.
     - Don Titcombe departing as the Local Non-Government Funder (At-Large seat)
     - Sara Rogers to replace Melissa Quijano on behalf of Pasadena Community Development Department (fixed representative seat)
   - Roll call & Ice Breaker
     - Pg. 3 of meeting minutes
     - Topic discussion begins at 2:20 of the meeting recording.
     - 13/16 members present (quorum)

2. Discussion & Approval of:
   - October Minutes
     - Pg. 6 – 8 of the meeting packet
     - Topic discussion begins at 17:08 of the meeting recording.
     - Moved by Mark T., seconded by Gregory Dread
     - All members in favor – motion passed, and minutes approved unanimously.

3. Business Agenda:
   - At-Large Representative(s) Recommendations & Votes
     - Pg. 9 – 11 of the meeting packet
     - Topic discussion begins at 17:47 of the meeting recording.
     - Motioned moved by Mark T. to approve the slate of candidates recommended for the four open At-Large representative seats, seconded by Gregory D. and Dr. Martin Negron – all members were in favor and the motion passed unanimously.
     - Motion moved by Mark T. to approve re-appointing the slate of members for their second two-year term, seconded by Gregory Dread – all members in favor and the motion passed unanimously.
   - Provider Representative Election Reminder
     - Pg. 12 of the meeting packet.
     - Topic discussion begins at 32:14 of the meeting recording.
4. Meeting Wrap-Up:
   - Public Comment Guidelines Reminder & Public Comment
     - Pg. 13 – 14 of the meeting packet.
     - Topic discussion begins at 54:53 of the meeting recording.
   - Closing Remarks from Mike Nichols, President & CEO, Coalition for the Homeless
     - Topic discussion begins at 35:10 of the meeting recording.
     - Materials reference can be found starting at pg. 16 of the meeting packet.
   - Meeting Adjourn
     - Next Meeting: Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022
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Ending Chronic Homelessness
What does it mean?

COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS
Coordinated Access – What is it?

• A centralized, standardized process designed to:
  • Coordinate program participant intake, assessment, & referrals
  • Cover the CoC geographic area
  • Be easily accessible by individuals/families seeking housing or services
  • Identify the most vulnerable in the CoC using a standardized assessment tool
Interventions through Coordinated Access

• Permanent Supportive Services (PSH)
  ➢ A housing intervention for singles or heads of households with disabilities that combines rental assistance paired with intensive supportive services.
  ➢ Is permanent and designed to serve the most vulnerable in a community.
  ➢ In order to be eligible for PSH an individual or family must be chronically homeless.

• Rapid Rehousing (RRH)
  ➢ A housing intervention designed to provide rental assistance & case management to help singles and families that don’t need intensive and ongoing supports to quickly exit homelessness & return to permanent housing.
  ➢ Is a temporary intervention.
  ➢ In order to be eligible for RRH an individual or family must be literally homeless, even if it’s just one day.

• Diversion
  ➢ Short-term intervention focused on identifying immediate safe housing arrangements, often using conflict resolution & mediation skills to reconnect individuals to their support system.
What happens after the CA Assessment?

**Waitlist**
- Amount of time depends on resources & vulnerability score

**Housing Referral**
- When a housing slot is available, the person is referred to one of many housing providers

**Navigation**
- Navigation/Outreach staff help the person gather everything necessary & secure a unit

**Move-In**
- A date is scheduled to sign a lease & move-in.
- Furniture & household items are provided
### Housing Prioritization Tool

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a  Chronic?</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b  Where did you sleep last night? (only show if chronic = no)</td>
<td>Streets/Logic</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c  Shelter/Logic</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1d  Have you been homeless before? (only show if chronic = no)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1e  How many times have you been homeless in the past 3 years? (only show if chronic = no)</td>
<td>&gt;4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2   Frequent yes/no from dashboard (don’t ask)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3   Do you or anyone in your household have a disabling condition? (only show if chronic = no)</td>
<td>Yes/Logic</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4   How many times in the past 6 months have you accessed medical services in the ER?</td>
<td>1/Logic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a  Do you have a serious physical health condition that requires frequent medical care? (Examples: symptomatic AIDS, cancer, tracheostomy, colostomy, open wounds with instructions to keep clean, end-stage renal disease, end-stage liver disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) or Lou Gehrig’s disease) terminal illness, or in hospice)</td>
<td>Yes/No/Logic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b  Observation: Assessor, do you observe signs or symptoms of a serious physical health condition?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a  Has a doctor or professional ever recommended mental health services?</td>
<td>Yes/No/Logic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6b  Observation: Assessor, do you observe signs or symptoms of a mental health condition?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a  In the past year, have your drugs or alcohol usage had a negative impact on your life?</td>
<td>Yes/No/Logic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b  Observation: Assessor, do you observe signs or symptoms of drugs or alcohol use?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8   How many times in the past year have you been arrested or been in jail/prison/ juvenile detention?</td>
<td>1/Logic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9   Have you experienced domestic violence in the past 60 days?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10a Has someone asked (or forced) you to have sex or sell anything in exchange for something?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10b Is someone threatening to harm you or your family if you don’t do what they ask?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11  Do you have income?</td>
<td>No/Logic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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**PSH: 28+**  
**Non C: 27-18**  
**RRH: 17-10**  
**Income: 9 & below**
Chronic Homelessness Definition

• Individual with a disability who is experiencing literal homelessness and:
  1. Has a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation, a save haven, or an emergency shelter; **AND**
  2. Has been literally homeless (as defined above) continuously for at least 12 months; **OR**
  3. Has had a least 4 separate occasions of the above in the past 3 years where the combined length of the occasions total at least 12 months

• This information must be documented.
### Documentation of Homelessness

- **PSH** requires chronic homeless verification for 12 consecutive months or 4 occasions in 3 years.
- **RRH** only requires verification of where the client stayed “last night”.
- **Diversion** depends on the need.
  - Individuals at imminent risk will have to show eviction notice and lack of support
  - Individuals experiencing homelessness will have to have the same as RRH

### Verification of Disability (VOD)

- **PSH** requires proof that an individual have a disability that prevents them from living independently.
  - This can be having SS Disability Benefits or a CoC VOD form
- **RRH** & Diversion do not require that the individual have a disability.
• Just because we “ended” Veteran homelessness, it doesn’t mean that there are no homeless Veterans anywhere in our CoC.
• It means that our CoC has enough resources to house all of them.
• Veterans do not sit on our waitlist; they are referred immediately.
• Functional Zero happens when a CoC’s homeless response system is able to prevent homelessness whenever possible to ensure.
  ▪ When homelessness does occur, it is rare, brief, and one-time.
Ending Chronic Homelessness

- Like with Veterans, ending chronic homelessness does not mean there will never be anyone who experiences chronic homelessness in our CoC.
- It means we can identify and house the person within 30 days which is the HUD benchmark.
- We reach "functional zero" when we have met all of the HUD benchmarks & can sustain them for 90 days.
But why is this a good thing?

1. It means we are housing the most vulnerable & getting them into housing quickly.

2. It’s costing less because those experiencing chronic homelessness use a lot of costly system resources like hospitals, jails, & emergency response.

3. Most importantly, it frees up PSH slots to those that score high enough for PSH but don’t meet the HUD definition of chronic homelessness.
PSH Flexibility

• Let’s look back at the score ranges from the HPT
• 28+
  • Someone who scores in this range is eligible for PSH
  • However, PSH is currently for those that are experiencing chronic homelessness
  • This means that individuals that fall into this range and are not experiencing chronic homelessness do not have a housing intervention available to them.
    • It also means they may stay homeless long enough to “time” into chronicity which is something we do not want.
    • We have tried RRH for these individuals, but our data has shown that they do not do well & fall into homelessness again.
CoC Prioritization

• HUD requires that all CoCs maintain a prioritization policy that lists the order of priority for how individuals should be housed.
Priority 1

- Chronically homeless individuals and families with a disability with the longest history of homelessness and the most severe service needs.
  - The chronically homeless individual, head of household of a family, or youth, when assessed through Coordinated Access, will be assigned a vulnerability score between 28-51, with 51 being the most severe service needs.
Priority 2

- Literally homeless individuals and families with a disability and the most severe service needs.

  - The literally homeless individual, head of household of a family, or youth, when assessed through Coordinated Access, will be assigned a vulnerability score between 18-27, with 27 being the most severe service needs; and
  
  - The CoC has not identified any chronically homeless individuals, families, or youth who meets all of the criteria for housing under the first priority.
Priority 3

- Literally homeless individuals and families with the most severe service needs.
  - The literally homeless individual, head of household of a family, or youth, when assessed through Coordinated Access, will be assigned a vulnerability score between 18-27, with 27 being the most severe service needs; and
    - The CoC has not identified any chronically homeless individuals, families, or youth who meets all of the criteria for housing under the first priority.
Literally homeless individuals and families.
- The literally homeless individual, head of household of a family, or youth, when assessed through Coordinated Access, will be assigned a vulnerability score between 10-17, with 17 being the most vulnerable.
Common Misconceptions

• We’ve ended chronic homelessness so anyone that’s not chronic can be referred to PSH any time there is an opening.
  ➢ False: We still have to adhere to our prioritization policy.
  ➢ When a slot becomes available, we check the waitlist to see if there are any individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.
    ✓ If so, then the one with the highest score will be referred first.
    ✓ From there we follow the rest of the prioritization policy.
• How can we have ended chronic homelessness when I see so many people living on the streets?
  ➢”Chronic” is a word that conjures up someone with a lot of needs.
  ➢The vast majority of the individuals currently living unsheltered are not chronically homeless.
  ➢However, many do require PSH which they cannot get right now.
Common Misconceptions

• The Coalition is not fully disclosing the right number of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.
  ➢ Ending chronic homelessness means we can house more people not less.
  ➢ Our numbers get reported to and vetted by HUD.
  ➢ There will be a long verification process before the CoC can effectively declare an end.
Ana Rausch, MA
arausch@homlesshouston.org

Coalition for the Homeless
2000 Crawford St., Suite 700
Houston, TX 77022

(713) 739-7514
info@homelesshouston.org
Youth Homeless Demonstration Program (YHDP)

Program Update
YHDP Updates

YHDP Planning Grant was submitted on 12/16/2021

Awaiting final HUD planning contract (notified that award has increased slightly but awaiting new total award amount)

Submitted and received approval for Coordinated Community Plan (CCP) extension. Plan is now due to HUD on 4/1/2022. Steering Committee Letter of Support will be required

Data requests to partners has been sent and is being analyzed. Data will inform how the funding will be allocated to meet our community need.

After CCP is approved by HUD, CFTH will host a procurement process and select new projects by July 2022.
The Steering Committee: oversees all decision-making for the CoC and makes all final decisions and approvals on the CCP and Project Applications. Decisions are made by majority vote. The Steering Com has designated spots for representatives with lived experience of homelessness. A recommendation will be made to add a youth with lived experience seat to the Steering Committee.

Lead Agency: Leads in the development, implementation, & evaluation of a coordinated community approach to end youth homelessness.

Youth Action Board (YAB): Guides development of aspects of the plan, provide input and oversight on design and implementation of projects, makes recommendations for course correction, reviews all recommendations that come from working groups. YAB co-chairs report on all Writing Team activities. YAB co-chairs are invited to attend Steering Com meetings so that they can provide input on all CoC decisions - including final approval of the CCP and Project Applications.

Youth Leadership Writing Team: Meets weekly. CCP is drafted and developed by input from the Community Stakeholder Workgroup.

*3 YAB members to participate

Community Stakeholder Workgroup: Meets monthly. Key mainstream system partners that assist with community needs assessment, goals and outcomes, determines local practice standards and shares recommendations. Recommends projects to the YAB and CoC Lead Agency for the CoC Steering Committee.

*Minimum 50% YAB members to participate

The diagram outlines the relationships and decision-making processes within the YHDP Governance Structure.
Youth Advisory Board

Youth Advisory Board (YAB) has been formed

YAB is made up of 10 members with lived expertise

YAB decision making structure has been developed

3 YAB members are participating on the Core Writing Team

YAB will work with lead agency to make YHDP recommendations up to the Steering Committee
YHDP Community Stakeholders Represented

Education

Justice (adult and juvenile justice)

Homeless Service Providers

Developers

Child welfare

DFPS

Local Mental Health Authority

FQHCs

Domestic Violence

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act Providers

LGBTQ+ Service Providers

Public Workforce System
Houston’s Recent Success
Harris County Commissioners Court affirmed their commitment of $35 million for phase 2 of the Community COVID Housing Program (CCHP), on top of the $35 million the City of Houston plans to allocate. The County’s vote followed months and months of conversations and negotiations with City and County officials. Phase one has been a huge success: we have far surpassed our goal of housing 5,000 people and have already housed more than 7,000! (This includes people permanently housed in Permanent Supportive Housing and in Rapid Re-Housing as well as those prevented from falling into homelessness via Diversion.) In phase 2, with the funding from the County, City and State, we will house another 7,000 and continue to be a model for the rest of the country – officially, now that we are part of the national House America Initiative.

- Read more [here](#).
- Watch a video featuring CCHP phase 1 clients [here](#).
- See cover story from the Houston Chronicle [attached](#).

Photo: City of Houston
Navigation Center update

**Houston City Council approved the construction of the Housing Navigation Center.** The navigation center will be an essential piece of the homeless response system — a place where unsheltered people can stay for a short time as we finalize their permanent housing arrangements. It will allow us to decommission many more encampments and do so more quickly. The item passed in part due to the vocal support of many partners of The Way Home who signed up to comment.

See cover story from the Houston Chronicle attached.
Where will it be located?
- The navigation center will be in a 27,000-square-foot building at 2903 Jensen Drive.

How does it benefit our system?
- Services will be offered and made available while people wait for their housing placement (i.e., employment and medical assistance), further preparing them to remain successfully housed.
- The navigation center is a safe place for our clients and staff members to meet and work on gathering the required documents/information for housing.

What we need our community to know:
- The navigation center is the “missing link” in making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring in our community.
- It is critical that people have a safe place to go when exiting homelessness so they can prepare for housing and receive the supportive services they need.
- Community members themselves can access medical services from the center (free of charge).
- Moving people into this center while waiting for housing prevents crime (It’s important to know that people experiencing homelessness are more often the victims of crime than the perpetrator.).
The Coalition led the annual Point-in-Time ("PIT") Count the week of Jan. 24, 2022. Even though many other places canceled their counts, we persevered and coordinated 480 staff and volunteers across the more than 3,740 square miles of Harris, Fort Bend and Montgomery counties to survey people experiencing homelessness. The count is so important to gauge the success of our programs, to know where more help is needed — and to demonstrate to our community members experiencing homelessness that we care about them. We expect to publicly release the results of the 2022 Count in March.

Read more here.
Annual Point-in-Time Count

Where:
- All of Houston, Harris, Fort Bend, & Montgomery Counties

When:
- Official sheltered count (night of the count) for HUD January 24, 2022
- Unsheltered Count – 3 days, 7 am to 4 pm each day
- Day 1, Inner 610 Loop – Tuesday, January 25th
- Day 2, East of I-45 & 288 – Wednesday, January 26th (regions that start with 3)
- Day 3, West of I-45 & 288 – Thursday, January 27th (regions that start with 2)

How:
- Drive around regions selected during registration
- Walk areas with likelihood of finding homeless persons
- Survey with mobile app, Counting Us
A reporter from The New York Times spent the week with us to learn about Houston’s success in ending homelessness. He was in town for the second time to look at The Way Home’s approach to homelessness as part of a project focused on big challenges and paths toward progress. We won’t see a story in the NYT right away; this is a deep dive and long-term project. We look forward to the day that an article is published, and our story is told far and wide!
Call for Officer Seats
Upcoming Strategy Oversight Meeting

• Strategy oversight meetings will occur three (3) times a year and take a deeper dive into the data and work done at the client and programmatic level.
• Thursday, Mar. 10, 2022, from 1 - 5 p.m.
Public Comment Guidelines

• **Duration of comment: 3 minutes.** This time limit will be identified with a visible timer shared on the screen, followed by the speaker being muted when the 3 minutes is complete.

• **Timing of comments:**
  • A speaker whose subject matter relates to an identifiable action item of business (i.e., action item and/or resolution) on the agenda will have the opportunity to speak during the course of the meeting, when it is time for the steering committee to deliberate on that item.
  • A speaker whose subject matter does not relate to an identifiable action item of business will have an opportunity to speak during the Open Public Comment portion at the end of the meeting.

• **Signing up to make a public comment:**
  • Speakers may request to make a public comment prior to the meeting. All requests must be submitted to the lead agency at SCquestions@homelesshouston.org by 12:00 PM (Noon), the day of the meeting.
  • Speakers may also request to make a public comment during the meeting by using the Q&A feature or chat function in the virtual meeting software.
  • In either case, in their request, the speaker must inform the lead agency of which action item they wish to speak about by citing the resolution number, if applicable. **If a specific resolution number is not cited, comments will be saved for the Open Public Comment portion of the meeting.**

• **Authority of the Chair (or Vice Chair):** The Chair will call upon the lead agency to assist with public comments. The Chair has the authority to open and close the public speaking portion of each action item on the agenda to ensure the meeting continues to move along at a reasonable pace.
Public Comment

- Speakers will be called upon in the order in which they signed up. Others will be offered an opportunity to speak following.

- Please use the “Raise Hand” function and wait to be called upon if you did not sign up to speak prior to the meeting.

- When called upon please introduce yourself and your organization (if applicable).

- **Duration of comment: 3 minutes.** This time limit will be identified with a visible timer shared on the screen, followed by the speaker being muted when the 3 minutes is complete.
Thank you!

Thursday, Mar. 10, 2022, at 1pm (strategy oversight meeting)!
City, Harris County invest $100M in plan to cut homelessness in half

By R.A. Schuetz STAFF WRITER

Houston and Harris County announced Wednesday afternoon a $100 million increase in funds they are funneling into efforts to reduce homelessness in the area. They had previously committed $65 million in federal COVID-related funding to the initiative.

“In Houston, we either go big or we go home,” said Mayor Sylvester Turner in a press conference announcing the funds. “And today, we are going big so … Houstonians can go home.” He said he hoped the funds would help cut the region’s homeless population in half by helping people secure housing.

“Housing is a human right,” said Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo. “And in Harris County, housing is something we fight for together.”

The announcement came hours after city council voted, 13 to 4, to fund the transformation of a city-owned building in Fifth Ward into a place where people moved out of an encampment can live, along with pets and loved ones, while they await their permanent housing. The facility, known as a navigation center, is key to a plan by the city, Harris County, and their partners to reduce the number of people living in the streets.

But the location had caused an outcry from those in Fifth Ward who felt that they were again becoming the powerless recipient of a facility with benefits for the greater community, but risks for local residents — like the Union Pacific rail yard and industrial sites that polluted the area.

The newly announced funding would expand what the mayor is calling the Community COVID Housing Program, which uses COVID-related funds to help Houston, Harris County and their partners to tackle homelessness.

Phase 2 of the program will include $35 million of Harris County’s American Rescue Plan and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, which have already been approved by commissioners court, as well as $35 million from Houston, which includes both the $6.2 million committed for the navigation center and additional
items Turner said he will be bringing to city council over the coming months. The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs will contribute $26 million and the Coalition for the Homeless plans to raise private dollars as well.

The Community COVID Housing Program will not only help people in encampments move into housing, but will also help others who have been chronically homeless to secure permanent housing coupled with case managers and services, and those who are recently homeless to receive housing with case management and financial support that tapers off over a period of time.

In addition, a diversion program will work to prevent people on the verge of becoming homeless from losing their housing by providing financial assistance, family mediation and other help.

“We’re facing an unprecedented challenge to simultaneously juggle three priorities,” said Marc Eichenbaum, special assistant to the mayor for homeless initiatives, “protecting the health of vulnerable individuals currently experiencing homelessness; responding to a historic increase of new individuals and families becoming homeless due to the impacts of COVID-19; and continuing to reduce the overall population experiencing homelessness.”

He said the funding would not only allow the city, county and partners to address the housing risks tied to the pandemic and recession but also to have a long-term impact on reducing homelessness overall.

The Coalition for the Homeless said that between Oct. 1, 2020, and Jan. 11, 2021, the first phase of the Community COVID Housing Program had housed 7,000 people. Phase two aims to house another 7,000 individuals experiencing homelessness over the coming three years, Turner said.

As of November, the program had moved roughly 140 people out of encampments into a navigation center, and 50 of them had moved out of the center into their permanent housing. It is coupled with supportive services.

Including chronically homeless people who were not living in decommissioned encampments, about 1,100 had received permanent supportive housing since October; 3,200 recently homeless people had received short-term rental assistance and light case management services, and 2,800 had been helped by the homelessness diversion program. rebecca.schuetz@chron.com; twitter.com/raschuetz
Plans for homeless center meet unwelcoming host

Critics in Fifth Ward want funds invested in community, not city project

By R.A. Schuetz STAFF WRITER

Shatina Mcmillian, right, a Harmony House social worker, works with a resident at the city’s first Housing Navigation Center, a revamped hotel in northwest Houston that temporarily houses people displaced from decommissioned homeless camps.

During the pandemic, Houston, Harris County and partnering organizations have launched an ambitious goal — picking up the pace at which they move Houston’s homeless out of the streets and into housing.

Homeless camps, both in the city’s core and in its outlying areas, are being “decommissioned” — the group’s term for offering the residents of a camp permanent housing, then clearing the site, usually with fencing, to prevent the camp from reforming.
Navigation center resident Holly Menges walks her 5-month-old puppy Mexikana in a field adjacent to the center, which provides meals and other social services.

This city-owned building on Jensen Drive is proposed to become a navigation center – places where people moved out of an encampment can live while they await their permanent housing.

The group, which includes the Coalition for the Homeless, has been able to ramp up its...
decommissioning process by renting from landlords in search of secure streams of income. The more than $65 million in COVID-related funding that poured into the city and county’s coffers during the pandemic has supported the effort.

But a step that Houston, Harris County and their partners have found necessary for decommissioning homeless camps has encountered an outcry from some in Fifth Ward.

Part of the city’s strategy for decommissioning homeless camps are buildings they’re calling navigation centers – places where people moved out of an encampment can live, along with pets and loved ones, while they await their permanent housing.

While the city has contracted with a hotel to turn it into a temporary navigation center, plans are underway for a long-term center in Fifth Ward west of U.S. 59. As City Council prepares to vote Wednesday on approving funding and a lease to turn a city-owned building into a Navigation Center, some in Fifth Ward question why the Navigation Center is being put in their backyard – pushback that such centers have often received in other cities that use them, such as San Francisco.

“People don’t want this in our community — we’re up against enough,” said Sandra Edwards, who lives in Fifth Ward. She said the neighborhood was already suffering from a lack of investment, and that it felt unfair to spend money to bring a Navigation Center to the area when residents were still struggling with home damage from Hurricane Harvey and last year’s winter freeze.

“Y’all have not fixed first things first,” she said in Tuesday’s city council meeting, warning that people living in damaged houses, in a neighborhood where property values are quickly rising, were in danger of losing their homes themselves. “You’re doing it backwards.”

Marc Eichenbaum, special assistant to the mayor for homeless initiatives, said that “the urgency of this facility cannot be overstated,” and that the building in Fifth Ward was the only city-owned property where a Navigation Center made sense.

“It’s a city-owned facility that is vacant. That’s the right size. And that’s located in the urban core, where the majority of the homeless population resides. This is the only property that meets those specifications,” he said.

Some in the community support the center. “There is a tremendous need in our community to help those who could greatly benefit for your help,” wrote Alvin Byrd on Friday in a letter of support for the Navigation Center.

Byrd, a former candidate for city council and the president of the recently formed Prince Square Civic Association, knew firsthand that people without homes can benefit from a second chance. He was homeless and suffering from addiction more two decades ago, he said, and believed the community could benefit from a navigation center.

But a petition expressing “strong opposition to the proposed center” has gathered over 200 signatures, with many asking if such a center indeed could not be sited elsewhere.

“It could be anywhere,” said Kendra London, who grew up in Fifth Ward. “It should be in a community that does not need as much revitalization… Why wouldn’t they put a homeless navigation center in the Galleria area? In River Oaks?”

While many of Houston’s neighborhoods, including River Oaks, restrict developments to single-family homes through subdivision-wide agreements known as deed restrictions, many of its historically minority neighborhoods lack such restrictions. That’s because nearly all communities protected by deed restrictions in
the early 20th century excluded minorities, pushing Black and Hispanic residents into neighborhoods without restrictions. Fifth Ward, which did not have such restrictions, allowed minorities, but also factories to open up shop next door to homes.

“I’m just waiting for someone to bring up that acronym, NIMBY,” said Joetta Stevenson, president of the Greater Fifth Ward Super Neighborhood, referring to the acronym for “not in my backyard,” a phrase used to describe people’s opposition to developments in the area where they live.

“We never had that luxury…. They put cement batch plants, they put metal recycling plants, every kind of polluter under the sun — their pollution is still here. We have a nationally known cancer cluster from Union Pacific’s rail yard. We’ve never had the luxury of saying not in our backyard. Ever. It’s always been in our backyard.”

In the hotel in northwest Houston currently being used as a navigation center, more than 140 people have been moved out of homeless camps into rooms where residents are provided resources as they await permanent housing, according to the Coalition for the Homeless; as of November, 50 had moved into their permanent housing, which is coupled with supportive services.

If the measures are approved, the city would transition from its high-cost lease with the hotel to using a property it already owns — a move that would lower the monthly costs but incur a hefty upfront investment to renovate the space. In September, City Council authorized up to $700,000 in Coronavirus Relief Funds to lease the hotel being used as a Navigation Center. If the measures are approved, the city would instead lease 2903 Jensen Drive — a space formerly used for a charter school that shuttered partway through the 2017/2018 academic year — to the Coalition for the Homeless for a nominal fee.

The larger cost associated with the center is the renovation needed to turn a former school into a space where people can live and receive training, medical care and other services.

In order to repurpose the 27,200-square-foot building, City Council is voting on an ordinance that would direct $4.2 million in federal grant money meant to serve the homeless and City of Houston insurance claim proceeds from damage to the building allegedly caused by vandals in 2019 toward the project. Roughly $2 million from the United Arab Emirates, —which had granted $6.5 million to help with Houston-area Hurricane Harvey recovery efforts through homelessness relief, community revitalization — would also go toward the project.

The proposed center could accommodate up to 100 people and provide them with transportation, three meals a day, one-on-one case management, job training, laundry, health care and more. Residents could only be referred by the homeless agencies and first responders working with the city and county’s homelessness reduction plan, and the center would not serve walkups.

The center, which would have around-the-clock security, would also offer resources to the community. Plans include giving neighbors access to services from the healthcare system Harris Health, the mental health provider Harris Center and the addiction recovery nonprofit Houston Recovery Center. In the future, City Council also plans to vote on developing a new community park next to the center.

“Those services are being made available at no cost to (people in the community) at this navigation center,” said Mayor Sylvester Turner during Tuesday’s council meeting in response to a speaker asking why the building could not be turned into a health center for the community instead of a navigation center.

In San Francisco, which pioneered the strategy of navigation centers in 2015, an analysis conducted by a master of public policy candidate at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, found that navigation centers have no negative effect on neighborhood crime or property values.
Plans for homeless center meet unwelcoming host - Houston Chronicle, ... https://digital.olivesoftware.com/olive/odn/houstonchronicle/printarticle....

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