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Homeward Comments and Feedback on the “City of Richmond Strategic Plan to End Homelessness 2020 – 2030”

Feb. 6, 2020 (Amended after public meeting, 2/5/2020)

Summary: Most of the strategies and action steps proposed in this plan would facilitate a reduction in the number of City of Richmond residents experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The emphasis on partnering with community-based providers in the region for collaborative planning and service coordination is likely to lead to better outcomes for the most vulnerable households in our community.

The focus on increasing permanent supportive housing to address this critical gap would be transformational to our community’s efforts to serve those with the longest histories of homelessness and those with disabilities.

Homeward has supported a significant expansion of emergency shelter as proposed in this plan through our advocacy of the relocation and expansion of the Salvation Army’s housing-focused shelter and the development of the CARITAS Center which would stabilize and expand resources for women experiencing homelessness and those with a substance use disorder. Housing-focused emergency shelter programs make up the central, necessary, life-saving component of our services network and we remain staunch and vocal advocates for the critical resource our shelter partners provide. We support the proposals to increase the support provided to our year-round, housing-focused emergency shelter providers. We also support the City’s proposal to eliminate the City-sponsored Cold Weather Overflow Shelter as currently designed and implemented.

To strengthen the proposals regarding the increase in emergency shelter, we would like to see strategies calling for increased funding for Eviction Prevention and Diversion, Homelessness Diversion, Self-resolution funding including for the Coordinated Outreach team, Housing-focused case management throughout the network of homeless service providers, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing. At Homeward, we calculate the number of people staying in emergency shelter, their length of stay in that shelter program, and the rate at which they exit to permanent housing. We estimate that for each housing-focused shelter bed that is added, an additional 7 single adults can be served in a year. We also have an opportunity to support our year-round housing-focused shelters to expand their capacity to reduce lengths of stay in existing beds thereby increasing the capacity of our existing housing-focused (and low barrier) shelter system.

To tackle the systemic drivers of the homelessness crisis, we will need to increase our efforts and resources in helping households avoid homelessness (through homelessness diversion and related coordinated entry resources) and to even more quickly help households exit homelessness. In fact, the plan could do more to acknowledge the role that housing unaffordability, the disconnect between wages and housing costs, and the growing crisis of older adults and persons with disabilities falling into homelessness play in the current crisis of homelessness in the City of Richmond.

Finally, some of the data referenced in the Executive Summary is inaccurate and based on misinformation (see below.) At Homeward, we are committed to using person-first language (i.e. “people experiencing homelessness”) as we know that homelessness is a complex crisis driven by housing unaffordability and personal experiences of trauma. We share the City of Richmond’s commitment to dignity and respect for all persons that is articulated in the plan.

Comments and Feedback: Executive Summary

Housing affordability is a main driver of homelessness. The introduction does not reference the role that the rising costs of housing and the lack of housing that is affordable to households with extremely low incomes although this has been emphasized in public presentations of the plan. Across our community and the country as a whole, the lack of affordable housing for people of very low incomes (including families with minor children, working adults, older adults, and people with disabilities) is the primary driver of homelessness.

Data can guide collaborative programming and investments. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires communities to conduct periodic counts of people experiencing homelessness. This data is compiled both locally and nationally to inform programs, planning, and funding. Homeward has coordinated Greater Richmond's Point-in-Time (PIT) count since 1999, and since 2007, has conducted both a summer and a winter count to better understand the changing nature of homelessness over time. PIT counts include single adults with pets, families, and children (although children are not surveyed.) While no survey methodology is perfect, the strengths and limitations of the PIT count are known and we have quality comparable data to measure changes over time. The PIT count and the approved methodology are also required to access and leverage federal and state funding for homeless services.

Among the 389 homeless clients surveyed during Homeward’s July 2018 point-in-time count (a 79.2% response rate), 59 people (15.2%) indicated that they had a pet, service animal, or emotional support animal before staying in their current location. 21 out of 59 (35.6%) were unsheltered on the night of the point-in-time count.

PIT data and other data systems collect single day, cross-sectional information on the housing and service needs of households with minor children staying in year-round, housing-focused emergency shelters or staying in cars. The Department of Education conducts an annual count of school children who lack a fixed, regular, or adequate nighttime residence. The story told in this data set also represents a housing crisis and some of the proposed strategies in this Plan can help to alleviate this. As this plan is being published, Richmond Public School’s McKinney-Vento office is collaborating with a homeless service partner to develop innovative ways to meet the needs of families with minor children identified under the Department of Education definition.

Conflating these disparate data sets does not seem to further the strategies outlined in the City’s plan.

Who are the homeless? And Panhandlers. Personalizing the issue of homelessness is an important part of any strategic planning process. The emphasis on defining normal and alternative lifestyles does not seem to be in line with the intent of the plan.

Panhandling is Constitutionally protected free speech. Homeward has conducted limited surveys of people while panhandling. Some are experiencing homelessness; some are not. A public education

campaign (referenced in Strategy 7 on page 25) would be a possible way to address any concerns about this issue.

Comments and Feedback: Today's Challenges

The Plan lays out many challenging issues that face our community's efforts to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness. The Plan provides information on the important role that year-round, housing-focused emergency shelters play. The discussion on page 19 highlights the work of these providers to reduce barriers for people in need of assistance. These housing-focused shelters have, in fact, lowered barriers to entry while increasing exits to permanent housing. (number 3, page 3) Zoning requirements do pose a burden for homeless services and the locations on pages 17 and 18 do show a dispersed but coordinated services network. (numbers 4 and 5, page 3.) Homeward has provided feedback during the Richmond 300 planning process on this issue.

The community's commitment to Housing First and the high quality of services providers would help to address the challenges identified in number 5.

Numbers 6 and 7 do not seem to be based on accurate data. The PIT data was addressed above. All homeless service providers in the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care serve and house people experiencing behavioral health issues.

Number 8 In order to avoid confusion with other forms of housing, we use the term "permanent supportive housing."

Comments and Feedback: How We Can Help/ Strategies to Address Homelessness

Strategies 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 are in line with feedback from households experiencing homelessness in the City of Richmond, are aligned with best practices, and would make a significant difference for City of Richmond residents. Homeward supports these strategies and will partner with the City of Richmond to implement these important action steps.

Homeward proposes changes to the second strategy, the first action step under Strategy 4, and the assessment on page 6 as currently written. Adding 150 emergency shelter beds beyond the current expansions being planned without proportionally increasing resources for eviction prevention and diversion, homelessness diversion, housing-focused case management, operational support for existing year-round housing-focused shelters, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing would lead to more people being stuck in shelters for long periods of time without the resources they need to exit to stable housing. Funding and resources dedicated to increasing emergency shelter (beyond the recent much needed relocation and expansion of the existing Salvation Army program and the new CARITAS Center) could be used to maximize existing resources and to expand the innovative approaches identified elsewhere in the plan.

Strategy 1 is very promising and builds on the innovative work of the City of Richmond's collaborative Eviction Diversion program.

Specifically, in Strategy 2 on page 22, Homeward does support the elimination of the current City-sponsored Cold Weather Shelter at the conclusion of this winter season. Redeploying City resources used to support this program in partnership with existing and new community-based providers could help to meet the City's goals and the needs of Richmond residents in crisis. Consider revising this

strategy to read *“Partner with existing non-profit and faith-based organizations providing short-term, housing-focused emergency shelter and eliminate the City-sponsored, seasonal CWOS.”*

The first and second action steps under strategy 2 would make an impact. Consider revising the fourth strategy slightly to *“Expand partnerships serving people experiencing homelessness to support small, year-round shelters for all populations to include supportive services, food, and shelter.”*

Strategy 3 is critical and the City can play a leading role in addressing the urgent need for permanent supportive housing. The third action step on page 23 seems to fit better under the first strategy.

Strategies 4, 5, 6, and 7 provide strong recommendations to leverage the current efforts and partnerships of the City of Richmond. These strategies would maximize scarce resources and facilitate the greatest numbers of households existing homelessness to stable housing.

The first action step under Strategy 4 is referenced above. The year-round, housing-focused emergency shelters certainly deserve continued public support but we do not advocate for increasing the number of shelter beds serving families with minor children (beyond the recent much needed relocation and expansion of the existing Salvation Army program and the new CARITAS Center.) In fact, the partnerships with Richmond Public Schools and continuing partnerships with the Richmond Department of Social Services and the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority as well as the Eviction Diversion and Prevention efforts would better address this need.

Comment and Feedback: Data

Starting with the early work of the City of Richmond in the mid to late 1990’s, our community has made progress on homelessness by gathering and analyzing information directly from people experiencing homelessness. The Plan’s integration of client, program, and system data strengthens the strategies and action steps proposed.

In addition to corrections on the inaccurate description of the Point-in-time Count described above, here are a few comments on data in the draft Plan:

Page(s)	Comment
2	Description of point-in-time count is inaccurate. The PIT count includes data on single adults with pets and households with minor children.
2; 8	The PIT count differs from the McKinney-Vento school data collected. The chart of Department of Education data provided on page 8 references annual data and should not be compared to PIT data which represents our community’s system on a single day per federal regulations.
8 - 11	The detailed demographic data provided in Homeward’s snapshots represent people experiencing homelessness in the Greater Richmond region; not the City of Richmond. Some labels of subpopulation data appear to be missing.
13	The Virginia Beach Continuum of Care provided their 2019 PIT data after an initial draft was submitted in September. The number should be 260 for 2019.

Comments and Feedback: Other

Again, overall, this plan is strong and the proposed strategies and action steps would leverage City of Richmond resources and maximize community partnerships and collaborations. Below are a few comments and suggested edits:

Page(s)	Comment
13	For clarity, it might be worth naming Homeward as the regional planning body and entity under Section 3.
15	The program component described here is “Homelessness Diversion” which differs slightly from the City’s Eviction Diversion program which is not specifically targeted to address homelessness. Perhaps the description of Eviction Diversion from page 21 should be added here as well?
17	CARITAS has a men’s shelter at 700 Dinwiddie. In July 2020, the women’s shelter will move from a mobile shelter to the new CARITAS Center in the 8 th District. Some other lines in this chart may have shifted when compiled.
21	HOPWA covers the entire MSA so its placement on this chart is a little confusing.