



SAN RAFAEL CITY COUNCIL AGENDA REPORT

Department: CITY MANAGER

Prepared by: Andrew Hening

City Manager Approval: _____ 

TOPIC: HOMELESSNESS

SUBJECT: INFORMATIONAL REPORT ON STATUS OF HOMELESSNESS IN SAN RAFAEL

RECOMMENDATION:

Accept Informational Report and Provide Direction to Staff.

BACKGROUND:

In January 2017, according to a [report](#) from the Bay Area Economic Institute and McKinsey Consulting, Marin County had the seventh highest per capita rate of homelessness in the entire country. By January 2019, however, overall homelessness in Marin had fallen by 7%, long-term chronic homelessness had declined by 28%, and unsheltered homelessness in San Rafael had dropped by 30%. Over this same two-year period, approximately 80% of California counties saw [increases](#) in homelessness, including a 20% increase in San Mateo County, a 31% increase in Santa Clara County, and a 43% increase in both Alameda County and Contra Costa County. These numbers were not an accident. Beginning in the spring of 2016, the City of San Rafael, alongside the County of Marin and local nonprofit partners, began implementing a series of pilot programs that ultimately became county-wide strategies for transforming Marin’s homeless service system.

The initial drive for change was spurred by community concerns about the impacts of homelessness in Downtown San Rafael, specifically issues like flagrant public intoxication and untreated mental illness. As the City, County, and local providers began to focus on this population, we realized this was actually a relatively small group of people (the chronically homeless are approximately 20% of the total homeless population), yet they were generating significant public complaints, as well as substantial systemic costs. One [study](#) at that time, which focused specifically on chronic inebriates, found that these high-needs individuals were costing the community \$60,000+ per year in public services. At the same time, these were also some of the most vulnerable people in the community, on average dying 20+ years earlier than their housed peers from treatable chronic illnesses.

To address this hard-to-serve population, a team of local leaders, which was co-led by the City, began visiting other Bay Area communities to learn more about how this group could be helped. During those field trips, we discovered an outreach program in San Mateo which had essentially ended chronic homelessness in their downtown. The San Mateo Police Department led the effort by convening every

FOR CITY CLERK ONLY

Council Meeting: _____

Disposition: _____

local service provider, creating a by-name-list of the most challenging individuals in their community, and then meeting every two weeks to develop and implement customized housing strategies for each person. This effort seemed promising, so the City, the County, and local partners launched the Marin Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) in early 2016 with an initial focus on Downtown. In its first 18 months, HOT housed 23 of the most high-impact, long-term chronically homeless individuals in San Rafael. Because of the success, the [League of California Cities](#) named HOT a state-wide best practice for addressing homelessness.

Based on HOT's early success, our team started looking at ways to scale our impact. The tipping point was when we discovered [Community Solution's Built for Zero campaign \(BfZ\)](#). BfZ is a national movement of over 80+ communities who are working to end chronic and veteran homelessness by using a shared methodology and data standards. To-date, with the help of the BfZ model:

- 1 California community (Riverside City & County) has ended veteran homelessness
- 3 communities nationally have ended chronic homelessness
- 11 communities nationally have ended veteran homelessness
- 44 communities nationally have driven a community-wide reduction in homelessness

The BfZ methodology is predicated on:

- **Integrating the Local Team:** Traditionally, homelessness response systems are deeply siloed. BfZ communities build integrated, multi-agency teams which take responsibility for getting to zero.
- **Real-Time Measurement:** BfZ communities build privacy-protected, continuously updated, by-name lists of all those experiencing homelessness to track and respond to the problem in real time.
- **Rapid Cycle Testing:** Homeless is too dynamic for ten-year plans. BfZ communities use the same iterative problem-solving skills that have revolutionized global health efforts like the fight against polio to test, evaluate and scale the highest impact strategies quickly.
- **Targeted Housing Investments:** Many cities have ramped up affordable housing with no effect on homelessness. BfZ communities use real-time data to make targeted investments that yield reductions.

Encouraged by the example of BfZ communities who were farther along in the process than we were (e.g. Montgomery County, Maryland, a suburban community outside of Washington, D.C. had reduced chronic homelessness by 50%; Bergen County, New Jersey, a suburban community outside of New York City had ended chronic homelessness), in October 2017 we officially launched our new countywide "Coordinated Entry System". Coordinated Entry took the by-name-list concept we piloted in San Rafael with HOT and made it a countywide system. We shifted from subjectively determining who the most high-needs individuals were and instead moved to more objective measurements of vulnerability to determine housing prioritization.

Of course, the by-name-list was just the first step – it was the organizing principle. To be successful, we needed more housing and services. Prior to the launch of Coordinated Entry, we had been reliant on one-off openings in existing supportive housing programs, as well as an occasional housing voucher from Marin Housing Authority (MHA). Impressed by our results, however, in the summer of 2017, MHA pledged 70 annual slots on the Section 8 Waitlist for referrals from Coordinated Entry. This commitment, in turn, was contingent on the County of Marin providing sufficient supportive services to ensure these high-needs individuals were receiving sufficient assistance. Fortunately, at that same time, the State of California released new funding through "Whole Person Care", which was designed to provide counties the resources they needed to serve individuals who are high utilizers of the healthcare

system. Because of the new vouchers and service dollars, our community was able to launch “Housing First” at scale, and since October of 2017, we have housed over 200 of the most visible and vulnerable homeless individuals in Marin, and even during the pandemic, we continue to house 6+ people per month.

[Housing First](#) is an evidence-based best practice for housing people experiencing chronic homelessness. Historically, communities often make housing contingent on a person first getting sober, getting medicated, getting employed, and thriving in emergency housing. The result is that the most high-needs people are unable to meet these requirements, precisely because they are high-needs, and, thus, they never get housed. Housing First flips that notion on its head. It treats the lack of permanent housing as *the* paramount, foundational challenge. Once someone is back inside, then they can begin to work on their sobriety, employment, etc. Interestingly, the long-term retention rates in Housing First programs are in some cases 200% higher than the status quo of “treatment first”. Since October 2017, of the 200+ chronically homeless people we’ve housed, over 90% are still housed. For individuals who were homeless in San Rafael, based on data from the Police Department and Fire Department, we have observed a 54% reduction in EMS transports after people are housed and an 86% reduction in police interactions. Of note, thanks to the flexibility of the housing vouchers, the people who are being housed are finding units throughout the county, not simply in San Rafael, including Mill Valley, Corte Madera, San Anselmo, and Novato.

In addition to our strategic efforts around chronic homelessness, there have been a number of tactical changes that have also gone into effect in San Rafael

- In 2017, based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the City of San Rafael and the Ritter Center, the Ritter Center stopped providing homeless mail services. The City now funds Ritter (\$10,000 per year) to administer PO Boxes at the San Rafael Post Office on Bellam Blvd. Previously Ritter had been serving 500+ clients with this service.
- In 2018, based on the same Memorandum of Understanding, Ritter stopped providing shower services Downtown, which had previously received approximately 300 visits per week. The closure coincided with the launch of the Marin Mobile Care mobile showers, which are now operated by Downtown Streets Team in East San Rafael, Novato, Fairfax, and Sausalito. They are also approved to operate in Corte Madera and Larkspur.
- Through continued leadership from the City, every city and town in Marin is contributing to the Community Homeless Fund. Since 2018, the fund has been used to support the mobile shower program as an outreach platform for Coordinated Entry. With total annual funding of \$180,000, San Rafael contributes \$36,000 a year. The current three-year funding commitment ends after FY20-21; however, Marin Community Foundation has provided \$180,000 to cover FY21-22.
- The City continues to support the Downtown Streets Team (\$75,000 for FY20-21), which is a work experience program designed to beautify the community while helping people experiencing homelessness regain the skills and confidence they need to reenter the workforce. After starting as a pilot in Downtown San Rafael in July 2013, the program is now operating city and countywide.
- The City continues to provide proactive outreach to the homeless community through the Police Department’s Special Operations Unit, which is led by Sgt. Carl Huber and includes San Rafael’s Mental Health Outreach Liaison Lynn Murphy (and comfort dog Blue).

ANALYSIS:

Despite recent momentum, 2020 has ushered in a variety of new challenges for San Rafael’s response to homelessness. First and foremost is the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the inherent health vulnerability of people experiencing homelessness, there has been considerable concern about a possible outbreak

within the homeless community. To help mitigate this concern, there have been a variety of new initiatives, primarily led by the County of Marin's Emergency Operation Center, to mitigate this threat. Those efforts have included:

- Expanding shelter capacity by as much as 60% by working with local hotels and motels
- The County has been extending a countywide eviction moratorium to prevent an inflow of new people experiencing homelessness
- Providing emergency rental assistance to over 1,000 households
- Leveraging County of Marin disaster service workers to continue outreach to encampments throughout the county
- Conducting mass testing at various homeless service providers to assess whether or not an outbreak has occurred (it has not to-date)
- The City, County, and a group called Opening Doors Marin are pursuing housing acquisition opportunities through the State's "Project Homekey" initiative
- The City is installing outlet adapters Downtown to prevent loitering while people charge devices; St. Vincent's has generously agreed to provide 30 portable solar charging units, again to deter people from loitering and congregating in Downtown to charge devices

Despite all of these efforts and the fact that, to-date, we have not seen any significant COVID-19 transmission within the homeless community, there is still considerable concern about a potential wave of new people becoming homeless. The Canal neighborhood, for example, which has seen one of the highest concentrations of COVID-19 in Marin and people more generally are in a very precarious economic situation.

Through both the emergency rental assistance cited above, as well as previous rental housing regulations, such as just cause for eviction and mandatory mediation, the City has taken steps to try to prevent homelessness. There are additional policies that some communities are considering, for example emergency rent control, and there is also significant pressure at the State-level to enact more protections.

COVID-19, sadly, is not the only disaster response involving the homeless community. In the past month alone, the County's Emergency Operation Center has also needed to respond to air quality conditions from local wildfires, as well as the need for cooling stations during recent heatwaves. These are becoming increasingly frequent events, and the City will need to be prepared to work in partnership with the County and other providers as these issues arise.

On the issue of wildfires, historically San Rafael has relied on the assistance of part-time open space rangers, who are responsible for finding, noticing, and coordinating the cleanup of encampments located in open space and park areas. Thanks to funding from the new Marin Wildfire Prevention Authority, the City now has capacity to support a full-time position. This increased enforcement capacity is leading to fewer encampments in the open space, but it is also resulting in more encampment activity in Downtown and in residential areas. This is a complex challenge requiring a coordinated assessment of public safety concerns.

Further complicating any enforcement efforts, the September 2018 *Martin v. Boise* court decision continues to prohibit local communities from citing or arresting people for simply sleeping outside on public property when the community has insufficient alternatives for shelter. Additionally, because of COVID-19, the criminal justice system is also operating at modified capacity, which means the Police Department cannot address certain misbehavior the way we have in the past. Again though, we find that the overwhelming majority of the "negative manifestations" of homelessness are coming from a small minority. In the open space specifically, there are approximately one to two dozen service-

resistant individuals who tend to move from site to site. Beginning in July of this year, the County began hosting a countywide encampment triage meeting, bringing together law enforcement and service providers from throughout the county to try to mitigate hot spots and get people connected with services. It can often feel like San Rafael is facing this issue alone, but there is significant encampment activity throughout the county, the Bay Area, and beyond.

While the City must ultimately develop strategies and responses for all of the different manifestations of homelessness in San Rafael, it is critical to not let an emergency response jeopardize our core strategy around housing first and ending chronic homelessness. It is the chronically homeless who are the most vulnerable to COVID-19 and other public health events, and it is also the chronically homeless who continue to cause the most frustration for the community. We know that housing and services work; the past four and a half years prove it.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with this report.

RECOMMENDATION:

Accept Informational Report and Provide Direction to Staff.