

“What should we do about the homeless problem in the City of Columbia?”

That is the question that everyone is asking. And it seems like everyone also has an opinion on how to solve the problem. And we agree; it is a problem. Private downtown businesses say it is impacting their ability to conduct business. Local downtown neighborhoods say their quality of life is suffering because of the homeless traffic and destruction of property. Non-profit agencies are saying their numbers have increased. Downtown churches say their services and programs are being negatively affected, but at the same time they want a compassionate and Christian solution to the problem. Government agencies are asked to provide more with less available resources. So what should we do?

In October 2012, former City Manager Steve Gantt, with direction from Columbia City Council, asked David Parker, former staff member at USC School of Medicine, to bring together a group of people in Columbia to ask this very simple but complicated question. Dr. Parker asked a diverse group of people to include representatives from government, non-profits, religious congregations, police, and neighborhood representatives to come together to talk about the problems affecting the homeless. The group decided a three prong approach: 1. Determine the issues, 2. Research and discuss each issue, and 3. Develop recommendations in regards to the future direction for the community. **The goal was to reduce the impact of homelessness on all citizens in the City of Columbia and to objectively look at the money the City of Columbia was currently spending on homeless issues.**

At the first meeting of this experienced and involved group of people, there was a conclusion that all of the questions and problems at this particular time revolved around four major areas:

1. Winter Shelter
2. Calhoun Street Corridor
3. Meals and Feeding of the Homeless
4. Sanitation

A preliminary report was provided to City Council on February 15, 2013. Each of the committees met extensively and then brought their ideas and solutions back to the large group. What follows this introduction is the summary of what we have determined is Phase I of this Committee’s progress.

Last month in the State newspaper, the new retailer on Main Street, Mast General, said the homeless are a problem and an obstacle to doing business in Columbia. **THE TIME IS NOW TO TAKE ACTION** and Council must take the lead. We are giving you the beginning of the plan. We are not saying this will be a definitive solution and the homeless will go away. We are also not saying build more shelters and create more programs with a ten year goal. The eighteen of us are collectively saying let’s do these things. We want to keep working on this issue.

Thank you for the opportunity to present to City of Columbia Council. We will look to you for guidance.

The City of Columbia Homeless Committee

City of Columbia Homeless Committee

Neighborhood Representatives

Ellen Cooper – Cottontown Neighborhood Association

Elizabeth Mills – Historic Mills Neighborhood Association

Rick Rowe – Arsenal Hill Neighborhood Association

Non-Profit Organizations

Mary Trivisonno – Catholic Charities

Jeremy Laughhead – Oliver Gospel Mission

Major Roger Coulson – Salvation Army

Craig Currey - Transitions

Jennifer Moore – United Way of the Midlands

Downtown Business

Lee Mashburn – Mashburn Constructions

Matt Kennell – City Center Partnership

Religious Organizations

Rev. Mary Anderson – Midlands Interfaith Council

William Diekman – Columbia Metro Baptist Association

Government Subdivisions

Tom Bolton – USC School of Medicine, Housing First Program

Nancy Stoudenmire – Columbia Housing Authority

City of Columbia

Steve Gant – former City Manager

Deborah Livingston – Community Development

Jeff Rainwater – Community Development

Interim Chief Reuben Santiago – Police Department

Winter Shelter Subcommittee

ISSUE: This subcommittee was tasked with developing a plan to assist the City of Columbia in having an exit strategy in their yearly operation, subcontracting, and oversight of the winter shelter. Although the efficiency of its operations has constantly improved from its inception at the current location, the Winter Shelter has been and continues to be an expensive operation to fund. This subcommittee examined the winter shelter through an analysis of the past several years and utilized that information to develop a three year downsizing plan while responsibly addressing the needs of the homeless in our community. This subcommittee promotes the idea that a large emergency shelter should not be a component in the overall solution of homelessness in Columbia. The following proposal was derived with consideration to the homeless, surrounding neighborhoods and businesses, as well as the City itself. It sought to find a compromise that would benefit all of the aforementioned parties.

DISCUSSION: Initially, this subcommittee examined problems associated with the winter shelter so it could make informed recommendations as to its future. The committee identified reoccurring issues such as increased foot traffic from the evening meal location to the van pickup site, trash accumulation while shelter guests wait on transportation, and increased personal items stored in parks, businesses, and neighborhoods. The subcommittee met multiple times, each one developing a more refined and educated vision for the winter shelter's future. In one such meeting held at the winter shelter, during a staff guided tour, subcommittee members learned that the shelter averaged 60 people less than its 240 person capacity. Knowing that the number of homeless individuals, at least that were staying at the winter shelter, was considerably down from previous years since the arrival of Transitions, the subcommittee decided to propose a plan for a gradual downsizing of the winter shelter that would provide a three - five year plan in which the City of Columbia would be left with a smaller, far less expensive, bare bones emergency winter shelter.

This subcommittee advocates for money saved to be "reinvested" back into homeless services to fund aftercare case managers. These case managers would monitor guests that leave the winter shelter for housing opportunities and ensure that barriers to maintaining housing are addressed, results are efficiently tracked, and recidivism is reduced. Two winter shelter case managers are already charged with taking people out of homelessness. Post placement case management can work together with the existing case managers to ensure that these people that are successfully transitioned to housing do not return to homelessness.

RECOMMENDATIONS :

Year One

1. Work with the fire marshal to incorporate an overflow shelter within the existing facility. Mats could accommodate the overflow guests, just as they do at MLK Park, but the change would eliminate the need for an offsite overflow shelter.
2. Serve a meal on site at the shelter. The Salvation Army would provide this service. This will eliminate the need for an evening meal at an outside location. The meal will be served for shelter guests only.
3. Allow guests to leave one bag at shelter. This would cut down on items stored in the community.
4. Change the transportation time to 5-7 p.m. Meal service starts at 7:30 p.m.. This approach is more considerate to the homeless who have to wait outside during cold weather.
5. Reduce the time that the shelter is open and save one month of operational cost. Instead of opening from Nov.1st-Mar. 31st, open from Nov. 15th to March 15th. *Potential for significant savings right away by cutting shelter operations by one month and a possible immediate funding source for aftercare case management*
5. Communicate next year's plan to the homeless staying at the shelter throughout the season.

Year Two

1. Analyze last year's changes during the off season and make minor adjustments as needed. Continue the previous year's changes that prove to be effective.
2. Remove 60 Men's Beds in Building A for regular use. Remove beds and convert to mats in that area. This area will only open when the temperature is at or below 36 degrees and when the shelter is at capacity. This will essentially become the new overflow shelter and prevent overflow at MLK Park if that change cannot be made in year one. The total number of regular use beds will change from 240 to 180 - (40 women and 140 men). The fire marshal should be contacted to adjust the fire code. The average number of guests, according to Winter Shelter Meetings and director report was been 180 people for the 2012-2013 season.
3. Communicate next year's plan to the homeless staying at the shelter throughout the season.

Year Three

1. Analyze last year's changes during the off season and make minor adjustments as needed. Continue the previous year's changes that prove to be effective.
2. Close Entire Building B for regular use. If overflow is needed, Building B can be used with mats on the floor. The new adjusted bed count utilizes 40 beds for women and 60 for men – all with beds. This step will reduce the need for staff and security and in turn save money. An entire building can be shut down except during an overflow situation. The additional space can also be used for onsite case management with privacy if necessary or additional storage for guest items.
3. Shorten the hours of pick up and drop off to one hour only. This will reduce total cost. Transporting less people in a shorter amount of time will reduce the time that people gather at the transit station.
4. Cut existing laundry service contracts. With a reduced need for laundry services, high volume vendors will no longer be needed. Examine the possibility of the Catholic Charities contracting with the winter shelter through Clean of Heart to provide a cheaper alternative for reduced volume laundry services on Tuesdays and Thursdays when their facility is normally not in operation.
5. Communicate next year's plan to the homeless staying at the shelter throughout the season.

Year Four

1. Remove all beds. Use mats on floor. Only Building A in regular use. Overflow as needed in building B.
2. Reduce total number of beds from 100 to 80. (30 women and 50 men).
3. Continue to service a low demand, bare bones, and true emergency shelter. At this time the City should determine need for continued use and if a fifth year plan if needed.

Additional Considerations

For this plan to work, the number of people staying at the shelter has to decrease. As the recent 2013 Point-In-Time Count indicated, achieving that end is not easy but it is this subcommittees' contention that with a virtual centralized intake system (MACH 2014 and 2-1-1 phone system integration), services and housing opportunities would be easier to access, which would expedite the process of taking someone out of homelessness. In addition, funding aftercare case managers with the savings would facilitate the downsizing approach because aftercare providers could help prevent reentry into homeless situations. Front end streamlining

and improved efficiency through centralized intake and post placement case management to reduce recidivism will reduce the number of people that stay at the winter shelter and make this plan possible.

Calhoun Street Subcommittee

ISSUE: The Task Force identified the “Calhoun Corridor” as a significant City issue. The Corridor, loosely defined as a block on either side of Calhoun Street (North and South of Street) and comprising a thoroughfare for homeless folks moving between Harden Street and the Elmwood Cemetery and river areas, is subject to numerous problems associated with homelessness. These issues include litter, loitering, public urination/defecation, sleeping in unauthorized areas, panhandling, jaywalking, vagrancy, poor information on homelessness, easy liquor access, vacant lots, and overall numbers for homeless on the streets.

DISCUSSION: The subcommittee focused on the Calhoun Corridor but quickly expanded in certain areas to all of the Business Improvement District because the issues had broader implications. The subcommittee met extensively and traveled the area to form recommendations and solutions. Many actions have been completed and are included in the recommendations below.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To combat loitering and panhandling, Robert Anderson **put up 7 signs** (4 no panhandling and 3 no loitering) at designated locations. Chief Santiago approved the signs and locations. The police had already helped Transitions with no loitering signs. Further signs in the downtown area may be required by the City, but the subcommittee areas and locations have been accomplished. The Police can determine if anymore are needed.
2. The City must continue to **empty the five new garbage cans** that it positioned along Calhoun. The cans have already become receptacles for large amounts of trash, covering areas where there were no outside garbage cans. The recommended locations from the subcommittee were completed by Robert Anderson. He can decide any locations for future cans based on need.
3. Transitions has increased garbage pick-up to Monday to Fridays. Teams go out in force in the morning with reduced pick-ups in the afternoons. The Adopt-a-Highway sign will go up this summer for Calhoun. Transitions must **continue trash patrols**.
4. City Center Partnership distributed the anti-panhandling fish poster that the subcommittee made around the BID, and this poster is visible in various businesses. They also included the message in the CCP newsletter. The Transitions Homeless Card is now used by City Center Partnership, Lexington Police, Columbia Police, and the Columbia Housing Authority (modified version). Continue to use the **card to educate homeless and businesses** in the Midlands and **hang more posters** in the BID as CCP determines the need.
5. AgFirst has occupied one vacant building on Calhoun which dramatically improved that portion of the street. Other vacant properties remain. The subcommittee has no current plan to deal with them. The City should **pursue filling vacant properties** with the Chamber and City Center Partnership.

6. Jaywalking continues in the area. The City needs to provide **more consistent foot police presence downtown** to fight jaywalking or better enforcement of the laws. The police presence will also curb panhandling. CPD can determine how best to accomplish better enforcement.
7. There was a significant community effort to stop a new alcohol store from going in on North Main, right off the Corridor. Cheap liquor will continue. The subcommittee made no progress in eliminating single servings of alcohol. The City should decide what **approach is possible with stores that sell alcohol**, especially single serving containers.
8. Sleeping in unauthorized areas continues. There are two homeless movement patterns for the year when the Winter Shelter is open or closed. The City, in conjunction with MACH, police, neighborhoods, and the CCP, should determine the exact numbers and locations of homeless folks in the downtown area. They also should use engagement strategies such as downtown outreach workers to assist with placement of the homeless into Emergency Shelter beds when they are available. The City should focus on moving folks to these vacant shelter beds. The Winter Shelter should be full for its duration, and its average occupancy this past year was only 180 or so. Oliver Gospel Mission also had vacancies in the winter. **MACH is making a virtual entry system** for the homeless where all providers will be linked into it. All beds must be filled every night. The homeless must seek programs and **go to Transitions Day Center** to get off the street in the day if they are not seeking employment or other self-improvement activity already. Continuing to allow the homeless to camp and pursue no positive outcome is unproductive.
9. MACH must use the release of the Point in Time Count numbers to **educate and inform the community of good programs and what to do to fight homelessness**. MACH must continue to educate providers and the homeless population on what is being offered to help in Columbia. MACH should work with the Community Development website from the City to make a basic site to help the City. All providers can update their basic information on capabilities, programs, and contact information to MACH and the City simultaneously. The information must be straight forward, so clients can quickly determine if that organization can help them. The **website must be linked to 211 and the new virtual entry system**. The new MACH system will go beyond just information, but actually direct and refer clients to facilities that have openings and meet the individual's need.
10. Elizabeth Marks from the Robert Mills neighborhood has contacted the proper railroad maintenance/grounds person. Neighborhoods do not want the brush cut around the Calhoun railroad overpass down by Harden Street. They do want the railroad security to patrol the area and remove garbage as necessary. Elizabeth will contact the railroad periodically. The City should coordinate with her to ensure the **railroad security is properly patrolling railroad property and picking up garbage along the tracks**.

Meals Subcommittee

ISSUE: This subcommittee was tasked with addressing the impact of meal service to the homeless in our city. If issues were found, this committee would then provide recommendations to the city to take action in an effort to diminish the impact on our community as a whole. As all members of this subcommittee agreed, serving the homeless, some without the resources to provide nourishment for themselves, is an essential component in this city's respectful and responsible effort to improve the state of homelessness in Columbia in general. Although meal service to Columbia's homeless population has been a consistent standard in our city for many years, after researching the existing resources, the subcommittee found several elements of meal service on the whole that can be adjusted to improve the efficiency of this service while respectfully addressing the needs of Columbia's homeless while still allowing those called to give in this manner the forum to do so. In making these recommendations, this subcommittee considered area businesses and neighborhoods, the homeless themselves, meal service providers, and faith based organizations. There are currently over 40 established feeding programs in downtown Columbia; this does not include the sporadic volunteer groups that organize to feed the homeless.

DISCUSSION: An examination of the current meal service locations and times revealed that it was possible for the persons receiving meal services to actually have multiple meals during the same hours of the day. For example, one meal provider could serve their lunch from 11 am – 12 pm, while another could conduct serve their meal from 12:30 to 1:30. This subcommittee acknowledges that for a person in need, having two lunches is not an absurdity, but the duplication in services does increase foot traffic in the downtown business area and throughout the neighborhoods as people traverse from one meal site to another. This subcommittee is not anti-food, or anti food events for the homeless, but it does recognize that food services habitual impact our community.

After conferring with area business leaders and local neighborhood officials, the subcommittee deduced that a reduction in foot traffic would reduce the residual litter that derives from their respective meals and a reduction in foot traffic to and from the meals would be recommended. Subcommittee members spoke to established weekday lunchtime meal providers and coordinated an effort to adjust their times of service so that the chances of duplicating meals are dramatically reduced. From continued research, this subcommittee realized that the number of providers serving meals is quite staggering. While acknowledging that it may not be feasible for city leadership to ask meal providers that serve in nontraditional, outside locations, such as parks and parking lots to discontinue their services, we do recognize that a fixed site location for meals is less likely to generate complaints from neighborhood residents and surrounding businesses. This subcommittee would like city leadership to establish a position on unregulated or unsanctioned meal service in outdoor locations. This subcommittee contends that if meals can be monitored and coordinated, positive change will result for the homeless, meal providers, the church community, area residents, and the businesses that Columbia strives to promote.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

This subcommittee recommends the following to improve aspects of large scale meal services.

1. The City will convene a Feeding Summit to gather input from the community and work to reach a consensus on these goals.
2. Lunchtime meals may only be served at fixed site locations (established lunch providers that serve indoors). Washington Street, Oliver Gospel, Transitions, Christ Central N. Main, etc. Lunchtime meals may only be served from 11:30am – 1:00 pm.
3. During the time that the winter shelter is operational, the Salvation Army will serve dinner at the shelter and the fixed site dinner meal will not operate.
4. The dinner meal at the winter shelter will be for winter shelter guests only and not open to the general public.
5. Establish an indoor dinner meal option for the time in which the winter shelter is not open.
6. Meal providers should be encouraged to police themselves and monitor trash around their location. Providers should be held accountable for their waste.
7. Discourage the continued activities of outdoor meal providers. (Lack of operational bathrooms, trash accumulation, no DHEC health standards).
8. Encourage the city to establish a position on meal provision by utilizing some or all of these recommendations and enforce according to city regulations as needed.

Sanitation Committee

ISSUE: This committee was established to evaluate the facilities for use by the homeless population and to determine what is available in the City of Columbia as it pertains to:

1. Restroom facilities
2. Bathing facilities
3. Washing of soiled clothing

DISCUSSION: It was confirmed early on that few if any facilities in the city were available to the general public after 7 pm on a daily basis. This does not speak to the businesses that have restroom facilities. These are in most, if not all cases, available to customers and patrons, but off limits to the homeless population as well as visitors that are in town for sightseeing and are not patronizing a specific business establishment. We began looking at this issue only looking at the homeless population, but soon realized that we must consider the problem as it pertains to tourism, impacting thousands of tourists who visit the City of Columbia.

Numerous meetings have taken place with the former City Manager, two assistant managers and department heads representing Public Works, Utilities plus Parks and Recreation, The City of Columbia departments have limited and/or direct influence on placing, maintaining and oversight of bathroom, bathing, cleaning and/or maintain regulatory control of such facilities. All persons contacted said they understood the importance and significance of planning for, in addition to, installing and continuous maintenance of sanitary facilities. Interim Chief of Police Ruben Santiago has worked with the committee and has done a massive amount of homework locating portable sanitary facilities within the armed forces. As of now such items are in short supply and the military is making use of every latrine facility they can get their hands on.

The technology and equipment is currently in the market place to facilitate the disposal of human feces and urine. Prices have been confirmed and currently exist from the affordable port-a-potty to the very expensive enclosed stainless steel units. A major issue facing the city at this time is where such units should be located and who will be responsible for maintaining and providing security for sanitary facilities? Do we look to the city to provide property/ location or do we see if there are locations that could be utilized for public access outside of the property owned by the City? What about parking garages or even facilities in or near a police office or district police headquarters? Do we use city park facilities or upgrade existing facilities for 24 hour use by the public? These are not easy decisions to be made because all require on-going government funding to have a working and successful program.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Suggestions have been made to look at what other cities in the southeast are doing with the homeless population. Two cities were suggested for contacts: Asheville, NC and Savannah, GA. Contacts have been made with individuals in both cities and visits are being arranged to review

sanitation facilities installed to address public use. It has been determined in both locations there are working relationships between local governmental offices, private services, faith community and not for profit agencies. This has assisted in preventing duplication of effort as well as broadening services for the clientele. The intent of the committee is to have conversations with individuals, understand their organizational structure and to obtain information on what applications worked for their community and what problems were addressed to overcome possible failures. This compilation of information will assist the committee in making recommendations for the City of Columbia.

The visits are underway at this time. Updates and recommendations will be made in the very near future.

Contacts are as follows:

City of Asheville and Buncombe County, NC
Ms. Gibbie Harris, Buncombe County Health Director
Dr. Richard Munger, Buncombe County Human Services Support Team

Savannah, GA City Government
Ms. Earline Davis, Housing Director
Mr. Larry Lee, Savannah Homeless Authority
Mr. Peter Doliver, Director, YMCA

Conclusion

The four subcommittees have presented to you their ideas and recommendations to solve some of the social and economic issues of the homeless crisis that are critical to the sustained development of the City Center, USC, the surrounding economic clusters like Five Points and the Vista, and most importantly, the surrounding neighborhoods.

The recommendations were based on problems and activities that occurred during the period October, 2012 to June, 2013. In the scheme of things, that is a very short period of time.

The first Homeless Meeting in Columbia was called in February, 1981 in response to a perceived problem of the homeless in the downtown area and the need for more affordable housing. With Columbia's growth in the last thirty-five years, the homeless problem has now, for lack of a better word, exploded. Whether the City wants to or not, it has to continue to assume the lead role in making this work for all involved: business, non-profits, and neighborhoods.

We have completed Phase I of this project based on what we believe were the tasks assigned to us by Mr. Gantt at Council's directives. We feel like our work has just begun but to this point, we have been very successful. The Committee wants to expand to problem solve several other issues like mental illness and the exit of the prison population into the downtown area.

The Committee is here to serve the Mayor and City Council of Columbia.

The Committee wants to continue to serve in this capacity.