

COB Homeless Response

9/16/21

Dear Neighbors,

Apologies for a delayed and lengthy response. The issue of homelessness is complex, emotional, challenging and hard to meaningfully address without going into some detail. I know this is more detail than requested, but want you to have access to more context, thus the lengthy communication.

Homelessness in Berkeley and the City's Response

For the past four years, homelessness has been increasing in the United States, a troubling reversal of what had been a decade-long decline in persons living without a home. Between 2019 and 2020, homelessness increased 2% nationally, driven largely by an increase in unsheltered homelessness in the nation's 50 largest metro areas. Given the huge increases in housing prices in metro America over the past several years, this is not surprising: we know from decades of research and practice that the single most important predictor of homelessness is a region's housing prices. Contrary to popular belief, mental health, substance abuse, and criminal justice involvement do not predict homelessness once housing affordability is taken into account; rates of mental illness, substance abuse and criminal justice involvement have not increased in ways that explain increases in homelessness.

Given the astronomical increases in prices seen across the Bay Area, and in Berkeley in particular, it is not surprising that Berkeley has seen a recent surge in homelessness, which is up 33% since 2015. On any given night, about 1,100 people experience homelessness in Berkeley, 73% of them in cars, in encampments, or on sidewalks. From the Federal Point In Time Count—the single most comprehensive source of real data on homelessness in Berkeley—in 2019 (the last year for which data are available), we also know that these Berkeleyans are our neighbors: 73% reported that they were last housed in Alameda County, with nearly half of them having been housed here for 10 years or more. When asked why they choose to sleep where they do, 34% stated that it was because they grew up here or that this was their hometown—by far the most common response. Only 9% stated that they choose to encamp or sleep where they do because of proximity to services. Put simply, a far greater number of “out of towners” come to Berkeley every year seeking a University education or a well-paying job than a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. There are obvious differences in the impacts they have on our community, but our values as a compassionate city that welcomes people of all backgrounds means that we treat our unhoused individuals with respect and dignity.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of unsheltered homelessness in Berkeley has had serious negative impacts on residents and businesses. Encampments often pose health and safety risks to neighbors and encampment occupants which adversely impact the quality of life for us all. To address these concerns, the City of Berkeley is working hard to shelter and house as many homeless people as possible while simultaneously mitigating the negative impacts of homelessness. With the 2018 passage of Measure P, our residents have generously voted to tax themselves to support these efforts, and the City Council provides additional general fund revenues to address homelessness. These resources have made a significant impact: since 2018, Berkeley has created 95 new shelter beds at the STAIR Center and the new Horizon Transitional Village Program; has expanded its permanent housing capacity by 209 units, including new competitive funding from HUD; and has increased mobile outreach services. All in all, our services have successfully rehoused 485 people since 2018. Additionally, with the support of voter approved Measure O, the Berkeley Way project with 53 units of homeless housing, 44 homeless shelter beds, 89 affordable units and a homeless services center will be open in the near future.

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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March of 2020 much of the momentum to shelter homeless people and clean public areas was paused as the City scrambled to protect everyone, including our most vulnerable residents from serious illness and death. To comply with health orders, we reduced our shelter capacity to enable greater physical distancing. This had the unfortunate effect of reducing the number of year-round shelter beds from a precovid 256 shelter beds to 129 beds. In response to the pandemic, the City shifted its winter shelter model from an inclement weather only shelter to an every night shelter between November 30 and April 15, increasing the number of shelter beds available by 19. In July 2021 the City opened a 50-bed shelter, the Horizon shelter, on Grayson St. To comply with guidance from the CDC, which advised communities nationwide to not clear homeless encampments without first making offers of individual rooms to every resident, we paused our efforts to close even the most dangerous and entrenched encampments. The pandemic also created serious challenges to the City's enforcement capacities, as many staff were forced to work from home and some of our outreach staff contracted Covid and were unable to work.

Our committed staff rose to the challenge admirably, utilizing new State and Federal resources to create 18 new noncongregate shelter beds. Additionally, staff supported Alameda County and Berkeley shelters to move people who met the CDC's criteria for high risk if COVID-19 positive into Project Roomkey hotels and partnered with Alameda County to establish 69 non-congregate units at two Safer Ground hotels in Berkeley. Shelter operations continue at one hotel where 40 new households will be supported in finding permanent housing. Additionally, staff collected debris from encampments at least once each week, with a crew of two public works staff, a police officer and a staff person from the City Manager's Office. Over the last 12 months nearly 250 tons of debris have been removed from encampments in Berkeley. Clearly however, the resources at our disposal were not enough to bring every unsheltered Berkeleyan indoors or to keep the city clean. Unfortunately, many of our tent and vehicular encampments became entrenched with significant detrimental community impacts resulting.

The Road Ahead -

With high rates of vaccine uptake in Berkeley and a reopening economy we agree that current conditions are unacceptable, and we have begun enforcing applicable municipal codes to reduce the impacts of encampments in our parks and on our streets and sidewalks. We always seek to encourage voluntary compliance first, by providing outreach services and real offers of shelter; we do this not only because it is the right and effective thing to do, but because we must comply with Federal court rulings that have upheld the Constitutional due process rights of people living outside. Since July, when enforcement was initiated again, we have successfully moved 47 people into the Horizon shelter and have removed over 26 tons of garbage and debris from encampments during the course of enforcing our sidewalk and park ordinances.

We know that we have much more work to do. The pandemic, and the ensuing CDC guidance and serious staffing challenges that it created, resulted in a backlog of over a year's worth of enforcement work. Given the backlog, we are prioritizing the largest and most impactful encampments from a health and safety standpoint. For example, we partnered with Caltrans and Alameda County to successfully close the large encampments at I-80 and University, conducting weekly outreach for three months and

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eventually moving 50 people into hotel and shelter beds. Additionally we have closed encampments on Durant and Allston and moved a number of people out of parks and other sidewalks and into the Horizon shelter. We are enforcing our ordinances, but what took a year to build up cannot be solved overnight.

By the end of September, the City will be opening its first off-street safe parking program for people living on our streets in RVs. The Safe RV parking program will provide temporary parking accommodations for up to 40 households living in their RVs, and is designed to be as low barrier as possible. It will have a fence for security, but no nighttime curfews. Pets will be accommodated, but not minor children. (In the event we encounter families with minor children in the course of our outreach, we immediately refer them to family shelter beds). There will be water for hand-washing and portable toilets; for guests that prefer to use their own septic systems, we are creating a voucher program for vehicles to dump their wastewater at a nearby off-site licensed dump station. Due to cost and timing constraints, we will not be providing electrical hookups, but will allow guests to operate a personal generator if they have one and will provide charging for personal devices at the on-site office.

Enforcement of Remaining Encampments

We are unable to commit to a timeline for the removal of every encampment or tent from Berkeley's streets. To do so would be unrealistic: given our focus on addressing health and safety impacts, we must be able to reprioritize our responses when conditions change on the streets, much as an emergency room must sometimes force a person needing stitches to wait when a person with gun trauma enters. Moreover, our homelessness population is not static; as housing prices continue to grow, more and more of our neighbors are losing their housing and winding up on our streets every week.

That said, with the adoption of the fiscal year 2022 budget, the City Council approved roughly \$900,000 in new funding to create an Encampment Response Team, which will increase our dedicated presence addressing encampments and their impacts from our currently budgeted one day per week to a target of up to three days per week. This will enable us to increase the frequency of garbage removal as well as increase the rate at which we can close encampments across the City. Given the legal constraints we face and the complexities of working with unsheltered people who are often suffering from addictions or serious mental illness, closing an encampment is often an intensive process that requires up to a dozen or more full-time city staff from Public Works, the City Manager's Office, and the Police Department (to be available for intervention in the event there are threats to worker safety). Because we must offer shelter beds at every closure, it also requires close coordination with staff from our Health, Housing, and Community Services Department, the County, and numerous nonprofit partners. In short, it is a very labor intensive, all-City effort, which challenges the frequency with which it can be performed.

We are committed to a clean, safe, and accessible Berkeley for all, and we will continue to balance the Constitutional rights of our unsheltered population against the needs and rights of their neighbors. We always welcome your feedback and recommendations for how we can improve our response.