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REBUILDING HOPE

ENDING HOMELESSNESS

CREATING COMMUNITY

December 21, 2022

RE: Request to address public health and safety

I write today in response to concerns over interactions with unhoused persons in the downtown area and specifically, the recent suggestion of adopting new ordinances. I recognize and appreciate the problematic issues identified but firmly believe the issues are best addressed with a multi-level collaborative approach within a health and housing perspective. Community Rebuilders wishes to provide considerations, suggestions, and support for collaborative efforts to promote a healthier, economically thriving, safe community where homelessness is rare, brief and does not reoccur.

To understand the interaction between structural and individual causes of homelessness, there is an analogy of children playing musical chairs that is often referred to by those of us who work on the issue of homelessness. When the game of musical chairs is played the most vulnerable child is usually left without a seat. At the end, a fast, larger, confident child gets the last available seat. You can say that disability or lack of physical ability caused the child to end up chairless. But in this case, being chairless is inevitable. The only reason anyone is without a chair is because there aren't enough of them.

When we apply this analogy to homelessness we can talk about the vulnerabilities of individuals, and the problems in their lives but when there is a shortage of affordable housing it all but guarantees a certain number of people will become homeless. Lack of affordable housing is the underlying cause of homelessness. We must look at infrastructure and systems; understanding how people flow in and out of the homeless response system is essential. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/01/homelessness-affordable-housing-crisis-democrats-causes/672224/>

Regulating and putting additional restrictions in place have proven to be ineffective, expensive, and actually worsen the tragedy of homelessness. Punishment and fines distract from implementing programs and strategies that are cost effective and proven to produce results.

We must work together with clear objectives and a reliance on each other to restore our streets to their intended purposes and ensure businesses and our community members thrive. Improving community safety and vitality is more than simply regulating the unhoused. We must stop the cycles that prolong homelessness with intention and compassion.

Our community has a vision for transformation. The Grand Rapids Area Coalition to End Homelessness has created a Compass that lays out the mission, vision and goals of the Coalition. It is a clear and compelling vision for planned transformation. The Coalition Compass is the result of input from numerous stakeholders and is meant to serve as true north for the Coalition. It's intended to quickly align stakeholders and resources around a common direction and vision and to drive clarity into the unique identity and purpose of the Coalition. You can find it here: <https://endhomelessnesskent.org/about/strategic-plan/> We must build the will to align around this compass.

Homelessness is a solvable problem. Let's embrace the values outlined in the Compass and build a Community where homelessness is rare, brief and one time.

The city of Grand Rapids and the downtown business community have taken extraordinary measures to create opportunities and increase positive outcomes for everyone. We appeal to you now, to take extraordinary measures to solve the crisis of homelessness and restore our streets to their intended purpose.

Community Rebuilders offers the following strategies to produce the intended results of a healthier, economically thriving, safe community where homelessness is rare, brief and not reoccurring.

1. Provide decentralized locations of scattered site Interim Housing models that are housing focused and low barrier.

Emergency shelter can and must play an essential role within an effective, housing-focused crisis response system. However, we must consider the impact of broad changes and improvements within our crisis response system before reactively expanding the supply of traditional emergency shelter to meet the needs of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Interim housing is an answer to the limitations of traditional shelter and has been adopted by many communities. We must provide the unhoused with temporary accommodations that mirror living in one's own home. For some people who are unhoused, moving out of their own tent in an encampment community and into traditional congregate shelter does not meet the need of "a safe and secure place to call home." It may involve giving up one's possessions, being separated from their partner or a beloved pet, not to mention a measure of independence and freedom of movement. Scattered site rental units have been proven effective for this purpose in our community. The Housing Connection Center, a successful interim housing model operated by Community Rebuilders, was previously housed in a repurposed church rectory. Repurposing vacant spaces and use of rental units are opportunities that could be pursued. The pandemic made the plight of the highly vulnerable unhoused population even more visible and urgent than before. Recognizing the shortcomings of traditional congregate shelter, and the scale of suffering on our streets prompted some local shelter providers to innovate by adding motel rooms to provide non-congregate accommodation. **We urge our community to innovate again and adopt interim housing models that result in housing as an outcome.**

2. Prioritize building lasting solutions to homelessness by ensuring a system wide response to reach functional zero for all unhoused persons.

We must ensure the system is not disjointed and fill the service gaps that are required to get to functional zero. A resource inventory dedicated to functional zero efforts is required and was successfully utilized when our community reached functional zero for Veterans. Additionally, service providers must be willing to share data on who is flowing in and out of their services and utilize coordinated entry's standardized assessment and referral system to fill vacancies with prioritized persons.

3. Ensure coordinated access, assessment and prioritization for homeless and housing services through an improved coordinated entry system, Community Housing Connect 2.0.

Despite millions of dollars, excellent people and the best of intentions, the current Coordinated Entry system is failing to produce the desired results because the process and technology are not set up for success. Examples of challenges include a manual intake and matching process, inconsistent/unequal prioritization, lack of trust in metrics due to offline capacity, housing supply and demand are reactive with minimal forecasting, planning and resource development leading to long wait lists and poor system-wide outcomes, federal regulatory compliance burden, administrative burden, and the lack of collaboration overall. In response to this concern, CommunityHousingConnect.org was piloted and resulted in The Continuum of Care, the City and philanthropic organizations coming together to support the expansion of Community Housing Connect to serve as the new Coordinated Entry system. Community Housing Connect 2.0 is being designed to solve the problems outlined and will be ready for community use in late 2023.

4. Promote cross sector collaboration to address the social determinants of health of those living unhoused. Prioritize, housing, health, employment and transportation coordination of services.

We must address the underlying contributors to homelessness. The Gather Resources Align Community Effort or G.R.A.C.E. Network, has brought together 30 community based organizations working together to promote access to safe affordable housing and the resources and supports needed to maintain stability and live fulfilling lives in our community. All partners on the network have a shared vision and see how their work or priorities fit with the goal to bring about a new reality where homelessness is rare, brief and nonrecurring in Kent County by meeting needs around health, income, employment, education, transportation and more.

5. Lead with a focus on racial justice and equity for marginalized communities and populations.

People with lived expertise must have consistent leadership and decision making roles regarding systemic efforts to end homelessness. True social equity can only be achieved when those who are marginalized, underrepresented, or not represented experience equity.

We urge our community to truthfully and transparently review our system level data related to homelessness. When considering all strategies, we must focus on activities that produce the greatest promise or achievement in client access, client satisfaction, performance outcomes and other values identified in Continuum of Cares Compass. Together we can restore our streets to their intended purpose and ensure those living unhoused are thriving and contributing to our community. Together we can eliminate disparities and not exacerbate them. We must address the highest need unhoused populations first- those who are medically fragile, older, unsheltered. We must grow partnerships that result in more resources and deeper impact. We must get people into housing if we want economic recovery. We must act quickly and not criminalize sleeping outside or make remaining unhoused an acceptable option. Individuals deserve a safe place to call home.

I hope you will find time to read the attached addendum that details immediate actions our community can take.

Thank you for your time and dedication to our community.

Vera Beech

Vera Beech,
Executive Director,
Community Rebuilders

ADDENDUM: DETAILS, DOCUMENTATION AND ACTIONS FOR PROPOSED COMMUNITY BASED STRATEGIES

STRATEGY 1: Decentralize emergency shelter locations by offering additional Interim Housing models that are housing focused and low barrier.

The term “Interim Housing” is meant to refer to a full range of shorter-term, crisis options for temporary accommodations which may currently be referred to by a variety of terms: congregate or non-congregate emergency shelter; navigation centers; bridge housing; or other models or terms. Interim Housing has a goal of exiting persons served to permanent housing. It is aligned within systemic efforts to end homelessness. It contributes to a reduced length of time homeless, and increased exits to permanent housing.

CONSUMER VOICE:

“When living on the streets and in and out of shelter I had no control over time, no control of when to eat, when to sleep, when to shower and often no control of my belongings. I felt like I was prevented from doing necessary things, because I had no control over my time or space. I was forced to pack up my things and move along each day. When I came to the Housing Connection Center I could finally rest, and think clearly. Someone actually helped me focus on my goal of getting a place to call home. It was the first time someone talked to me about housing. I had been homeless for 18 months. Now I’m in my own house and I love it. Thank you for giving me the time to rest, and a place to think while helping me move into my home.”

–Quote from a person that utilized Community Rebuilders Housing Connection Center, an example of Interim Housing.

The Housing Connection Center operated by Community Rebuilders was a piloted example of Interim Housing that is low barrier and housing focused. This Interim Housing solution supported flow from housing crisis to housing stability by offering assistance to obtain permanent housing while having a safe place to stay. It was operated in what was formerly a church rectory. When the owner of the building decided to sell it was forced to close despite producing some amazing results. Currently Community Rebuilders operates interim housing using scattered site rental properties. There may be additional small scale vacant buildings available for interim housing in our community.

Sample Snapshot of impact of Interim Housing:

Time Period: 4/1/2020 – 6/30/2020

Measure	Interim Housing	Statewide Emergency Shelter Average
Length of Stay	126	34
Positive Destination Rate	76.92%	20.36%
Recidivism Rate	0.00%	23.61%

Data is pulled from the “ESP Emergency Shelter length of stay and Recidivism v1b – (Provider or Provider Group)” ART report in the DHS ESP Reports folder.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

- Leverage public and private funding to add interim housing opportunities to help move persons off the streets and into housing, then assess the system impact.
- Commit to providing an additional 30 beds of interim housing within our community and coordinate with systems efforts to prioritize unhoused populations and areas.

STRATEGY 2: Build lasting solutions to homelessness in our community.

*We have achieved and are maintaining Functional Zero for Veterans, what does that mean? We have a well-coordinated and efficient community system that assures homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring and no Veteran is forced to live on the street. This means that every Veteran has access to the supports they need and want to avoid staying on the street and move quickly to permanent housing. **Veteran homelessness continues to be rare brief and non-recurring in Kent County.***

How did we do it? We created a coordinated, cross sector network of service providers and other community members who are:

- Collectively contributing to and responsible for achievement of the goal to end Veteran homelessness
- Focused on providing housing first and interim housing supports necessary to while Veterans seek more permanent housing.
- Committed to finding, naming and counting every Veteran experiencing homelessness
- Relied on data to drive decisions. Data is vetted by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness to maintain this designation as a community who functionally ended Veteran Homelessness.
- Focused on finding solutions that fit the needs of each individual veteran served
- Actively realigning and inventorying the resources available and necessary to meet the needs of unhoused veterans.
- Monitoring a Veterans “By Name List” so no Veteran remains unhoused.

WE CAN GET TO FUNCTIONAL ZERO FOR ADDITIONAL POPULATIONS!

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION:

- Ensure the local FUSE projects, Build For Zero Project and Efforts to End Family Homelessness coordinate and build on best practices for reaching functional zero.
- There must be a champion with expertise on getting the job done. Appoint leadership to ensure short and long term goals are identified and met to achieve functional zero for each population.
- There are simply not enough resources in the system to address every population at one time. Prioritize by population and or geographic area.
- A list of names of the unhoused without the inventoried resources and provider focus to get people housed is just a list. Inventory and deploy efficient resources targeted to reaching functional zero.
- We must ensure our coordinated outreach results in a connection to interim housing, then permanent housing. All outreach should be person-centered and emphasize building rapport and trust as a means to helping people obtain housing with appropriate services.
- Ensure adequate connections to employment for those transitioning to housing.

Let's create this kind of opportunity for more people:

CONSUMER VOICE:

“For 12 years I lived in the camp and people and churches were real good to us. They brought us food and blankets and even a wood stove. I didn’t believe I would be able to have housing. I still can’t believe it today. When you all rolled up in your vehicles and told us you would help us get housing, I didn’t believe you. But for some reason I took the chance. What I always wanted was housing, I just didn’t think it was possible. I’ve been housed for three years now, I can’t thank you enough, I got a life now.”

-Quote from a former resident of a closed encampment in Kent County

- We have demonstrated that Geographically Targeted Outreach works, expand it and create opportunity to solve for prioritized populations and areas.
- The Walker Police Department, public business, local landlords, Community Rebuilders and The Salvation Army worked together to close the North Camp in 2017. This evidenced the mobilization of cross sector partnership working effectively with the unhoused and law enforcement to restore the streets to their intended purpose.

We must pursue and build on what has produced results. We have successes in our community. We must seize the day and map our plan to close all encampments using these humane approaches that produced the intended results.

STRATEGY 3: Ensure coordinated access, assessment and prioritization for homeless and housing services through an improved coordinated entry system, Community Housing Connect 2.0.

What is Coordinated Entry? The coordinated entry (CE) process is an approach to coordination and management of a crisis response system’s resources that allows users to make consistent decisions from available information to efficiently and effectively connect people to housing and service interventions that will rapidly end their homelessness. Through coordinated entry, our community can ensure that the highest need, most vulnerable households in the community are prioritized for housing and services first.

In 2020 Community Rebuilders piloted an enhancement to the coordinated entry system called Community Housing Connect.org for families. This system was also piloted with unhoused families and individuals involved in the successful Geographically Target Outreach Program. It was demonstrated to be effective and on September 17, 2021 the Steering Council of the Grand Rapids Area Coalition to end Homelessness voted to develop and adopt Community Housing Connect 2.0 as the coordinated entry tool for all populations as appropriate. Community Rebuilders is developing this tool for use with all populations experiencing a housing crisis. It is anticipated this tool will be released for use late 2023.

An effective Coordinated Entry (CE) System has the power to transform our continuum of care from a network of homeless assistance projects making individual decisions about whom to serve, into a fully integrated crisis response system. By gathering information through a standardized assessment process, coordinated entry provides a continuum of care and community partners, with data that can be used for client level service linkages, system and project planning, and resource allocation. Currently many projects operate individually by developing and implementing their own admission criteria, assessment and eligibility screening, prioritization processes and enrollment decisions. CE orients the community to a standard set of prioritizing principles by which the community is able to make consistent decisions about how to utilize its resources most effectively. By having standardized processes, the system increases accessibility for clients; it is no longer about who the person happens to speak with on a given day or making a person fit into a program. Rather, it is about understanding and responding to the person’s individualized needs so that homelessness can be rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

Coordinated entry requires concerted effort and engaged participation from all system partners, including homeless shelter programs. Although initially challenging, transitioning the crisis response system from a set of independent agencies, and providers making project-specific decisions to one that puts participants first and ensures standardization in processes and consistency in decision-making ultimately results in more efficient and effective housing and service outcomes for everyone.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION:

1. Champion the role of Coordinated Entry and support organizations sharing of their service and inventory with the homeless response system and take referrals through the coordinated entry system.
2. Utilize the data from the coordinated entry system and the longitudinal system analysis to measure the impact of services within our community

3. Ensure the Coordinated Entry system is effective and efficient for both those with a housing crisis and the providers that are expected to use it.
4. Support the development of Community Housing Connect 2.0.

STRATEGY 4: Promote cross sector collaboration to address the social determinants of health of those living unhoused. Prioritize housing, health, employment and transportation coordination of services.

Housing alone is not enough. We must work with cross sector partners to resolve the social determinants of health impacting housing stability and well-being. A group of 30 organizations have come together on the Gather Resources Align Community Effort or G.R.A.C.E. Network to collaboratively address health needs, income, employment and education of the unhoused population.

OPPORTUNITY FOR ACTION:

We urge you to support and strengthen this transformation effort. Look at the data, see what we are learning and where there are gaps in meeting the needs of the unhoused population. Fund the community based organizations that are producing outcomes and sharing data across this network.

STRATEGY 5: Lead with a focus on racial justice and equity for marginalized communities and populations.

Each of the strategies outlined above lead with a focus on racial justice and equity for marginalized communities and populations. We have the Housing Kent, Housing Stability Alliance, and the Continuum of Care all working collectively to make strides on this strategy. We encourage work with these organizations and provider organizations, including front-line staff and clients with recent system experience to generate capacity-building and quality improvement priorities and strategies. It is essential to build, support and sustain ongoing structures such as the Veterans Action Board through which people with lived expertise have consistent leadership and decision making roles regarding systemic efforts to end homelessness.

Engage with and compensate people with lived expertise, including people who are unsheltered, to: analyze and document the most significant system-level and program-level barriers to access to housing and identify strategies for removing such barriers and better support people's pathways from unsheltered and sheltered homelessness to permanent housing.

We urge our community to truthfully and transparently review our system level data related to homelessness. When considering all strategies, we must focus on activities that produce the greatest promise or achievement in client access, client satisfaction, performance outcomes and other values identified in Continuum of Care's Compass. Together we can restore our streets to their intended purpose and ensure those living unhoused are thriving and contributing to our community. Together we can eliminate disparities and not exacerbate them. We must address the highest need unhoused populations first- those who are medically fragile, older, unsheltered. We must grow partnerships that result in more resources and deeper impact. We must get people into housing if we want economic recovery. We must act quickly.

Community Rebuilders is a West Michigan non-profit organization working to build a community where homelessness is rare, brief and one time. We are committed to ending homelessness, rebuilding hope and creating community by providing access to housing opportunities and supportive services. Visit communityrebuilders.org for more.

