



TO: Elizabeth Pauli, Interim City Manager
FROM: Anita Gallagher, Chief Policy Analyst to the Mayor, City Manager's Office
COPY: City Council and City Clerk
SUBJECT: Resolution- Emergency Action on Homelessness – May 2, 2017
DATE: May 2, 2017

SUMMARY:

The purpose of this memo is to advise the Interim City Manager and City Council of Mayor Strickland's request for the Interim City Manager to prepare and present to the City Council an emergency temporary aid and shelter program to respond to the homelessness crisis. Mayor Strickland further requests that staff prepare and present an ordinance supporting the City's Council's declaration of a state of emergency relating to the current homelessness crisis, authorizing the suspension of certain regulations to facilitate the emergency temporary aid and shelter program, and providing for approval of such emergency services contracts as are necessary to support this program.

COUNCIL SPONSORS:

Mayor Marilyn Strickland

STRATEGIC POLICY PRIORITY:

The strategic policy priorities aligned with this action are:

- Strengthen and support a safe city with healthy residents.
- Ensure all Tacoma residents are valued and have access to resources to meet their needs.

BACKGROUND:

The City of Tacoma continues to experience large numbers of individuals and families who are homeless due to such factors as job loss, family crisis, substance abuse, economic reasons, mental health issues, and loss of temporary housing. The pattern of stagnant and declining wages and shortage of available affordable housing has also contributed to the rising numbers of homeless individuals and families. The homelessness crisis is occurring in communities throughout the West Coast causing cities like Seattle, Washington, Portland, Oregon and Los Angeles, California, to declare states of emergency in order to provide emergency services and shelters for the growing number of unsheltered homeless individuals and families. Point-in-time counts conducted in the greater Tacoma area have identified 1997 homeless persons in year 2012, 1303 in year 2013, 1474 in year 2014, 1283 in year 2015, 1762 in year 2016 and 1321 in year 2017.

Despite the improving economy the point-in-time counts reveal that at any given night large numbers of people, including families, experience homelessness and can be found sleeping on the streets and in parks, cars, abandoned buildings, steep slopes, under highway overpasses and in other places not meant for human habitation. The 1321 homeless persons counted in the point-in-time count for 2017, 21% were identified as chronically homeless, 14% were households with children, 39% were female, 14% were victims of domestic violence, 6% were unaccompanied youth and young adults, 10% were veterans and 41% were people of color.

ISSUE:

In years 2015-2016, the unsheltered population in the greater Tacoma area increased by 46%, and since 2010 the unsheltered homeless population had increased by 192% with more individuals and families living in places not fit for human habitation. The supply of available temporary and permanent support housing for homeless persons residing in Tacoma is inadequate to meet demand resulting in long lines for



emergency shelters (the wait list for some shelters is as high at 80-90 people per night), long waits for support housing and a rising number of unsheltered households. On any given night, homeless encampments in Tacoma may be occupied by 100 or more persons.

Homeless encampments occur without appropriate sanitation facilities or proper trash receptacles and often become contaminated with garbage, human wastes, used needles and dirty dressings resulting in occupants facing serious health and sanitation issues. Conditions in homeless encampments are personally stressful and expose occupants to communicable diseases like tuberculosis and respiratory illnesses, violence, malnutrition and harmful weather exposures and exasperate common conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and asthma because there is no safe place to store medications or syringes properly. Behavioral health issues such as depression or alcoholism often develop or are made worse for people living in homeless encampments, and these conditions frequently co-occur with a complex mix of severe physical, psychiatric, substance use, and social problems. According to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, persons “. . . experiencing homelessness are three to four times more likely to die prematurely than their housed counterparts, and experience an average life expectancy as low as 41 years . . . ”

Health care services are not effective when a patient's health is continually compromised by street and shelter conditions and inpatient hospitalization or residential drug treatment and mental health care do not have lasting impacts when the patient is returned to a homeless environment. Conditions in homeless encampments that are dangerous to human health include: garbage that becomes a food source for vermin; vectors (organisms that transmit diseases or parasites) and related pathogens; the lack of proper food storage and clean dishes that can facilitate the spread of food-borne disease; the lack of sanitary facilities to dispose of human and animal fecal waste which can lead to contamination of ground and surface water supplies and transmittal of disease; improper disposal of discarded medical and sharps waste; the accumulation of combustible materials that can ignite; the lack of poor hygiene which contributes to dental and skin problems; and the victimization of homeless persons by both sheltered and non-sheltered persons. These conditions arise from human-made events and are contributing to, and will continue to contribute to, significant human suffering, creating an immediate need to provide temporary aid and shelter for the homeless persons occupying these encampments regardless of where in the City they may be found.

The housing and homelessness crisis presents an existing and on-going threat of significant harm to human health and life requiring immediate action. Residents of homeless encampments have needs that include: provision of social, public and mental health services, stability, storage and safety, portable drinking water, solid waste disposal, and human waste disposal. Many of these conditions can be mitigated through interim measures designed to meet the immediate survival and safety needs of those persons occupying homeless encampments such as the provision of hygiene facilities, trash collection, sanitary facilities, temporary shelters, and outreach and gateway services within the encampments.

It is in the best interest of the public health, safety and welfare, for the City Council to exercise its police power authority to declare a housing emergency and to authorize an emergency program for establishment of temporary housing and aid stations to address basic humanitarian needs in areas with significant concentrations of homeless persons, and to authorize emergency contracts to provide aid and temporary shelter services at such locations.



ALTERNATIVES:

The City Council could choose not to exercise its authority to declare a housing emergency and direct the Interim City Manager to prepare and present a temporary aid and shelter program. The City could choose to continue to combat the homelessness crisis using its existing practices of encampment abatement and funding of programs aimed at prevention and intervention of homelessness and boosting housing stability, and do nothing further. However, continuing to take these actions alone will not address the immediate need to mitigate human suffering and serious public health concerns presented by street homelessness.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the City Council declare a housing emergency and direct the Interim City Manager to promptly prepare and present to the City Council an emergency temporary aid and shelter program to respond to the homelessness crisis, and to prepare and present an ordinance supporting the City's Council declaration of a state of emergency relating to the current homeless crisis, authorizing the suspension of certain regulations to facilitate the emergency temporary aid and shelter program, and providing for approval of such emergency services contracts as are necessary to support this program.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact.