

Meeting Minutes
New Tacoma Neighborhood Council
Homeless Encampment Forum
Wednesday, September 9, 2015
6:00-7:30 PM
Carwein Auditorium, UWT, Tacoma

The Forum was called to order by Liz Burris at 6:00 pm. Panel introductions and welcome comments were made with an overview of the Agenda. Liz mentioned the story board in the lobby and encouraged audience members to add a question or story.

Board Members Attending: Tom Ebenhoh, Jori Adkins, Elizabeth Burris, Dalton Gittens, Jo Davies, Denny Faker, Rick Jones, Jane Moore

Panel Members:

Korbett Mosesly: Moderator

Gerod Byrd: Safe Streets

Troy Christensen: MDC

Lynette Scheidt: Friends of McKinley Parks

Allyson Griffith: Community Based Services, City of Tacoma

Colin DeForrest: Homeless Services Manager, City of Tacoma

Guests: See attached attendance rosters (others in attendance may not have signed in)

Panel Discussion:

Korbett opened the Forum by asking panel members if homelessness can be solved. There was considerable discussion and panel members had mixed opinions if the issue is solvable. For example, Gerod and Troy discussed why they believe it is solvable, while Lynette discussed why she believes it is not. Allyson mentioned as a collaborative effort she believes it can be solved. There was agreement among the panel that it is a collaborative effort and everyone has to work together toward any solution. The panel also agreed that it is a challenging issue without a simple solution. Colin discussed the challenges from his perspective and possibly in the long term, there may be some workable solutions. Gerod discussed the Safe Streets role in educating neighborhoods and providing resources to teach and provide information. He also mentioned the benefits of the Innovative Grant and discussed efforts in reclaiming neighborhoods and the importance of addressing the mental health challenges and addictions. Korbett posed a series of questions to panel members for discussion. Below is a synopsis of discussion points.

What is the face of homelessness? Colin discussed the challenges of quantifying the number of homeless. It is a point in time count and a challenge to have a precise number. He discussed the visibility that increased; however, the camps have actually gone down. Gerod discussed homelessness will not end without housing and challenges among homeless groups, such as, but not limited to, the veteran population.

What about neighborhood involvement and environmental design? Lynette mentioned using the resources available such as 311 and positive interactions. She stressed being active such as environmental design and adopt a spot initiatives and knowing your community. It is up to citizens to get involved and be a part of the solution. She discussed the importance of citizen reporting and using the resources available. She also shared a story about a homeless family that did make it out of homelessness.

What is the next step and what are potential barriers? Troy discussed services available to assist with encampments and the homeless; encouraged them to be used. Although it appears more visible and increase in population, it is actually on the decline. More housing needs to be available and homeless will say “yes” to services and help. Colin mentioned reality of housing is all can’t get in. There are barriers to entries such as no sex offenders, or those with substance abuse issues. Also, if a tent city is closed or encampment folds, they move to the streets. This was another significant topic of discussion. Some homeless are more comfortable in the woods or on the streets. An individual has to be harmful to themselves or to someone else or they can stay on the streets. Homeless must commit to wanting help.

Solution Discussion: Colin mentioned to bring blankets, socks, etc. They need it. Allyson mentioned using City resources and to call 311 and law enforcement if aggressive behavior. Troy cited multiple examples of the homeless population such as veterans and families and discussed those programs available to help them. He cited other examples of getting the right skills and resources in the right places.

Success stories and examples of housing were mentioned, such as, but not limited to, New Nativity House. All panel members agreed it is more than just a City of Tacoma issue and encouraged reaching out to Pierce County and City of Tacoma elected officials.

Parties agreed on benefits of success stories and looking at other examples, other Cities, in which initiatives worked. Examples such as, but not limited to, positive interactions, Housing First, City of Tacoma Ordinances, and the Rapid Housing in Virginia were discussed. Colin mentioned exploring all intervention type programs. Troy provided a very detailed update on estimated population numbers, the challenge in dealing with exclusion issues (such as not being able to have housing due to substance abuse) and self-governance of homeless tent cities that may work for some, but not all. Again, it does not completely address solution to ending homelessness.

All parties agreed there were significant challenges with funding initiatives to provide services and resources. Colin also discussed the exclusion impact, such as, but not limited to, once homeless do get a job, they may no longer be eligible for benefits and hard to use shelters anymore, even if still homeless.

Allyson discussed challenges with tent cities and encouraged trying it as an option. Often there are stereotypes associated with homeless and impact on City; however, tent cities are an option that appears an underutilized option. She also provided a detailed update on various City programs and services and encouraged the audience to use those available.

Troy discussed the cost benefit and focused on importance of Pierce County involvement and adopting the 1/10 of 1% tax (there was considerable discussion). He discussed the expense of homeless population compared to housing them. It is less expensive to provide housing. He also mentioned ability to track housing development.

There was some discussion on the numbers and estimates on how long people remain homeless. Again, the issue with encampments is when camps go away, population moves to the streets.

The panel had considerable discussion on pro and con issues to having tent cities and encampments and all the challenges associated with both sides. Parties agreed regardless of tent city or homeless encampments, the fact is the homeless situation needs solutions. It has not ended if living in a shelter, tent city, or encampment.

Audience Open Session:

How many homeless deaths? Two in Tacoma; four in last few months (approximately).

There was some audience discussion on shelters, rules, improvements in the shelters, and that some homeless do not want to be in a shelter and what, if any, options are available under these circumstances.

There was a question on how to interact with homeless? Panel had considerable discussion on this; don't call 911 unless an emergency. They stressed positive interactions.

Carol Mastberg shared his story of being homeless in 2001 and his progress and journey through today.

Korbett and Liz thanked everyone in attendance and encouraged audience to stay involved. They highlighted the forum is only the initial step in finding solutions. Questions/stories from the bulletin board were collected.

City of Tacoma Councilmember Campbell also provided some closing remarks and expressed appreciation to the audience, encouraged continued involvement, and expressed his appreciation that he was able to attend and listen to what was being shared.

Key themes of discussion:

- 1. Encampments and homeless is not just a City of Tacoma issue; Pierce County and other Pierce County City involvement is a must.**
- 2. Assertive marketing of services and programs available.**
- 3. Partnerships; Government, citizens, Nonprofits, the homeless, and more.**
- 4. Funding for mental health services is a must.**
- 5. Get/stay involved.**
- 6. See what works...and what does not. Research programs in other Cities, Counties, States, and Countries.**
- 7. Solutions are a challenge; ending homelessness is a challenge. Don't stop seeking solutions.**
- 8. This Forum was initial step to possible recommendation for a Citizen Advisory Task Force. Will be a follow up item and not just a moment in time.**

Adjournment: 7:15 pm