

HOMELESS ADVISORY COUNCIL – Virtual Meeting

January 22, 2021 – 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Facilitated by Reggie Gordon, DCAO – Human Services

Mr. Gordon began by welcoming and thanking the Homeless Advisory Council (HAC) members. He relayed that homelessness is a complex and multilayered issue, and that is why the Mayor wanted to convene a group of citizens to provide recommendations to the Mayor, the City Council, and the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care (GRCoC) on specific action steps to further improve the local response to those in a housing crisis.

The timeline for the work of the HAC is thirty (30) days.

Each member of the HAC received an email in advance of the meeting with a digital copy of the “Homeless Advisory Council Workbook”. The workbook was also mailed to each member of the HAC. The workbook provides an overview, schedule, and other pertinent information. The HAC members will also receive a copy of the “City of Richmond Strategic Plan to End Homelessness 2020-2030”. The Strategic Plan, approved by Richmond City Council in May 2020, provides the framework for the work of the HAC. The goal of the process is to give the HAC as much information as possible in the first few meetings so that the group will be prepared to make evidence-informed recommendations by the end of February.

The Session Dates are as follows:

- Session 1: Monday, January 25 (3-4 pm)
- Session 2: Friday, January 29 (12-1 pm)
- Session 3: Wednesday, February 3 (4-5 pm)
- Session 4: Wednesday, February 10 (3-4 pm)
- Session 5: Tuesday, February 16 (3-4 pm)
- Session 6: Thursday, February 18 (9-11 am) – 2 hours
- Session 7: Friday, February 19 (2:30-3:30 pm)
- Session 8: Monday, February 22 (2-3 pm)

INTRODUCTIONS

Mr. Gordon asked the members and the staff to introduce themselves and describe how they connect to the issue of homelessness.

1. Reverend Dwyline Butler - Executive Administrator at the Sixth Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Sixth Mt. Zion had previously been the site of the cold weather overflow shelter for the city. Currently, the church provides a food pantry for those underserved in our community. She is excited about the city doing something to help people in need.
2. Katie Chlan - Program Manager for the homeless services at the Richmond Behavioral Health Authority. She has been in her current role for the last three years. She has been working with homeless services within different agencies across Richmond for about 16 years.
3. Annette Cousins – Vice President for Community Engagement at the Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond. The Foundation provides funding to agencies working with the homeless and affordable housing programs across the community. She is also the Vice-Chair of the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care.

4. Christine Elwell –Regional Manager for the Greater Richmond Regional Collaborative to End Sexual and Domestic Violence. She supports the work of their collaborative, which is six agencies in the region. She has spent the last 20 years of her career working on homeless services both academically and professionally. She also sits on the GRCoC Board.
5. Scott Firestine –Director of the Richmond Public Library. He has been working in libraries for more than 25 years and providing support for unsheltered people is one of the things libraries do, particularly urban libraries, regularly. He has been working with the homeless population in Richmond since he came here. He is glad to be here to support and share the experiences of the library.
6. Tracy Hardney-Scott – Virginia State Conference and Housing Chair for the NAACP, as well as Housing Coordinator for Homeward and working with the partners of the GRCoC.
7. Bonita Hogue – VCU Health Social Work Manager. She manages a team of social workers from the emergency department, clinics and inpatient units, and they provide medical care to unhoused people. They try to help them get permanent housing if they can.
8. Natasha Lemus – Waymakers Foundation. They are entering their first anniversary. They have been helping the Latino community with a food pantry with properly cultured foods since the pandemic started. With all of this, they have seen an increased demand for housing and homeless issues. There is a lot they can offer in speaking about the need for housing within the Latino communities.
9. Councilwoman Stephanie Lynch – Represents the 5th District. She is a social worker by training, trade, and heart. She got her start working in homeless case management and then worked at the state level – VDSS and with a couple of Governors. She has worked on various homelessness task forces, so this is the issue that is very near and dear to heart. She has been both on the ground in our current system and is looking at things from a policy perspective. She is glad to be here and appreciates the work that is done every day.
10. Nadine Marsh-Carter – President of Children’s Home Society of VA, a statewide licensing childcare placing agency, with a focus on bringing together vulnerable children and families. They are celebrating their 120th anniversary. They have a program that supports youth who age out of foster care, most of them come to the agency homeless. They have also been working to drive systemic policy changes that get to the underlying issues of not only homelessness but mental health challenges and a myriad of factors that often lead to people becoming homeless.
11. Ricky Martin – Owner and operator of Fit-to-Go, a mobile wellness company. He was the person who created the *Fitness Warriors*. He collaborated with the city and the Sportsbackers to provide fitness activities for the underserved community. He has been doing this for several years and has contracts with other organizations like RBHA. He is also a former Ambassador for Homeward, doing outreach in the field for the homeless and being part of their Board. He was once homeless. He is doing well right now. He believes he can help.
12. Zakia McKensley- Executive Director and Founder of NationZ Foundation. They are the first and only Black transgender nonprofit in the city of Richmond and Central VA. They provide free HIV and STI testing as well as emergency housing for the homeless and supportive services to those who identify as LGBTQ. She has had experience with being homeless since the age of 16. She knows what their community faces and the clients that they see on a day to day basis; they are facing emergency housing and rental assistance needs. She is excited to be here. She has worked with Councilwoman Lynch in providing resolutions to Mayor Stoney in protecting specifically LGBTQ folks in

housing/shelters. She is glad to be part of this council to create change, end homelessness or do what she can do to change this in the city of Richmond.

- 13.** Nury Mojica – Professional in workforce development, assisting youth, adults, veterans all in the capacity of workforce development. However, due to the pandemic, she is also representing the Southside Community Development and Housing Corporation. They have been assisting in giving grants to the Latino community to help with rent, to prevent Latino homelessness. She is Latina too, there are a lot of homeless Latinos. She is driven to give more into this particular field. The Latino community needs resources, guidance, and better communication – they are afraid and have no trust. That is what she is here to do, to connect or be a bridge. She can provide resources so they do not have to be afraid. More and more clients need help and communication. She is providing financial opportunity centers to help them become more self-sufficient and learn how to become homeowners. She has been serving this community for 30 years. Their goal is to become homeowners; we want to provide the resources that they need to realize their dreams.
- 14.** Councilwoman Ellen Robertson – (not available for this meeting.)
- 15.** Michael Rogers – Homeward. He works with the planning and coordinating agency for the GRCoC. He leads the collaborative funding initiatives and work with the board and the various subcommittees on planning and policy initiatives, partners, and engagement to provide capacity building of communities. He will speak on these efforts of the GRCoC.
- 16.** Diana Thomas – Woman’s Emergency Supervisor at CARITAS. She is very passionate about homelessness. She came through the program. She experienced domestic violence years ago; she is an alumna of CARITAS. Since then she has obtained her degree in Sociology. She works with the CARITAS housing coordinator as well as their resource navigator to support their ladies in their stabilizing plan (they aid in housing, workforce development, and employment) all to assist them in becoming self-sufficient.
- 17.** Timika Vincent – She has a non-profit, *Welcome Solution*, started in 2018. She is feeding, clothing, providing resources, and finding safe shelter (often paying for a hotel). She had the passion to start this from her son, in a Chesterfield School, finding out there were kids and their families that were suffering from homelessness. When they moved into the city, she continued the non-profit. She is on the ground with them on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. She is feeding, offering job training, providing safe housing, often paying for hotel stays, or referring them to different resources. She’s glad to be on this council to make connections on an ongoing basis.
- 18.** Dr. Alex Wagaman – VCU School of Social Work. Advocate for youth housing stability coalition.
- 19.** Thomas Washington Jr. – Lives in the 4th District, and employed by the RPS in the Office of Engagement. He is actively involved as a volunteer in Step Program and CARITAS.
- 20.** Charles Willis – Executive Director of the United Citizens Against Crime. He also serves under the leadership of Tracy Hardney-Scott and the Virginia State Conference and Housing for the NAACP. His input would be as a community advocate to call on everyone (state and city) to connect and come together to assist those experiencing homeless to find housing. He experienced homelessness for five years.

NOW THE WORK BEGINS

Following the introductions, Mr. Gordon asked the HAC members to review the workbook, which includes:

1. The Mayor's letter to City Council proposing the creation of the Homeless Advisory Council.
2. Homeless Advisory Council Objectives and Deliverables
3. Norms for the Advisory Council Members
4. Technology Support
5. Framework –based on the city's *Strategic Plan to End Homelessness (2020-2030)*
6. Homelessness Advisory Council Members
7. Meeting Schedule and Guests
8. Maps – will provide locations of homeless shelters to visit, if you find others, let us know. To find more resources check Help1rva.org: a database of social service providers. A helpful resource for all in need of resources and assistance. Search by zip code and needs.
9. Appendix

STORY OF HOMELESSNESS IN RICHMOND

Mr. Gordon gave introductory remarks.

“A lot of people on this call have experience working with homeless or have experienced it themselves. Everybody's voice and everybody's story is important. I would like to give my version of homelessness in the context of our community.

My stepdad – passed away last year, he was 95. He grew up in Church Hill in the 1920's, 1930's – 40's.

He said in his family, they had an Uncle Bob. Uncle Bob was an alcoholic. Uncle Bob could never hold a job. And Uncle Bob lived with them. This was his mother's brother and he said that his entire life, even though his dad might say something to his Mother about her unstable brother, she would say, 'well that's my brother and we have to take care of him.'

Uncle Bob would disappear for a couple of days come back in and dry out, sleep on the couch, or in a room. He was inconsistent with his work his job, he didn't have his own family so he lived his whole life and died as part of my stepdad's extended household.

When I heard that story, I realized that in America, for decades, we were able to bring in our family members that were experiencing challenges. A sister, beaten up by her husband; come and live with us. Relatives moved to different cities and couldn't find a job; come and live with us. I think Nury said earlier, the Latino community has families doubled up and tripled up in their houses. In the 30's 40's, 50's, 60's and early 70's that is how most families lived.

If you had a relative with mental health challenges –they probably were in a hospital, if they weren't living with you.

In the 70's America changed. We had deinstitutionalization and there were some people, for various reasons, that it was deemed better to let them go home and receive care from their respective community. The assumption was that they would be embraced back, or some mechanism would be in place to help families take care of them.

This was in the 70's – what happened? The people who came home from the hospitals were considered strangers, not relatives. In Richmond the Uncle Bobs and the sister with kids also became strangers. The prevailing sentiment from their families was that they did not have the money or the space to take care of them anymore. They became people without housing.

The faith community responded to this crisis in Richmond, as it did throughout the U.S. The “winter cots” program was established in Richmond to take care of these people who no longer had a place to stay. The faith community stepped up and several ministries eventually evolved into non–profits filling the family void.

By the mid to late 90's, the city of Richmond was in turmoil about the number of people who were allegedly experiencing the crisis of homelessness. Lots of non-profits existed at that point, lots of ministries. *The urban legend was that Richmond had 4-5 thousand people sleeping on the streets of downtown Richmond, and that is why downtown died. That's why businesses like Miller and Rhoads and Thalhimers closed. Because there were 1000's of people sleeping downtown.* And it was scary, these people were no longer our “Uncle Bob.” They were nameless, faceless homeless people.

During the time Tim Kaine was Mayor, he appointed a Homeless Task Force. Every city in the country had these same issues. Richmond looked at Columbus, Ohio, and New Orleans, Louisiana. They had success in addressing homelessness. It was observed that those cities had something that we did not have in Richmond . . . a coordinated effort. Richmond had many ministries and nonprofits, but we did not have a coordinated effort.

The Mayor's Task Force recommendation was that we need to have one group in charge, or we would have chaos. And this is how Homeward was created and the reason I know that is because I was the first Director of Homeward.

It was a horrendous time – we had lawsuits threatening us, stakeholders were pointing fingers and blaming each other, no one seems to want to move away from the status quo. Systems integration and coordinated service delivery were dirty words. Nonprofits had money flowing in. Grants were flowing at that point; people were starting to jockey for position to be champion of the homeless. Ministries and agencies wanted to maintain their stature and hold on to “their homeless people.”

Homeward was established to organize the system, so we could get some things done to help solve this issue – solving homelessness. We knew that we needed:

- Coordinated intake process
- An Information Management System
- A place for people to go who were actually using drugs, like the Healing Place
- A coordinated process of applying to the Federal Government
 - We needed it for funds from HUD to support this work
 - That is how we got a fully realized Greater Richmond Continuum of Care. We will hear more about this in the weeks to come

Although there are some problems, we have undoubtedly moved in the right direction Richmond. One sobering fact is that people in this crisis are not strangers to us, they are our neighbors and family members who are experiencing this crisis. Please think about this history as we listen to the presentations and analyze the data and all of the information you will receive. We need the recommendations from this HAC to help us move forward as a community.”

We have learned many lessons about this issue over the past decades. We will hear from Annette Cousins and Michael Rogers about the current work of the GRCoC and Homeward. Our community has adapted to societal changes, in order to meet the needs and incorporate nationally recognized best practices.

Clearly, several systems have issues or fractures. When those systems falter, people default into the homeless services system.

POLL

The members of the HAC were asked to answer five questions by a poll. Here are the questions and results.

1. Is Richmond doing a good job addressing those in a housing crisis?

- Yes27%
- No47 %
- Not Sure 27%

2. The entity that has the primary responsibility for making sure that our community adequately addresses the needs of those in the housing crisis is:

- The Mayors Administration..... 33%
- The City Council28%
- The Greater Richmond Continuum of Care.....39%
- The Faith Community 0
- Other 0

3. In your opinion which is the top issue area that needs more resources or attention in order to prevent homelessness

- Affordable Housing..... 67%
- Criminal Justice System0
- Substance Abuse..... 6%
- Mental Health 11%
- Economic/Wages17%

4. If someone catches a bus and comes to Richmond from another state, because they heard Richmond has a shelter program that provides a free hotel room and three meals a day should you:

- Help them with no questions asked50%
- Not admit them to the shelter, but give them a bus ticket to go back home7 %
- Admit them to the shelter, but only allow them

to stay a few days before they would be

required to leave and go back home 43%

5. If a resident of the homeless shelter services is receiving a monthly social security disability check for housing and food, should he be required to pay something to the provider?

- Yes53%
- No41%
- Not sure.....6%

CLOSING

Mr. Gordon informed the HAC that the poll was just to open the group up to unpacking every aspect of this issue. The poll will be revisited at the end of the 30 days.

He reiterated that the HAC is going to receive a lot of information. The group will review processes. The HAC will be asked to answer questions dealing with what is the most appropriate and compassionate way to address underlying issues, within the parameter of available resources. It is all about love and collaboration and a unified approach to help thousands and thousands of people.

In closing, the HAC was advised to reach out to staff, if they had any questions.