

Dallas homelessness commission asks for \$3 million; council wants more details

The Dallas Morning News, by Tasha Tsiaperas, August 3, 2016 06:23 p.m.

Tent cities are scattered throughout Dallas. Thousands of schoolchildren don't have a place to call home. Shelters for homeless adults are full.

The seemingly unsolvable homeless problem in Dallas boiled down to one question Wednesday at a City Council briefing.

"What's the price tag?" asked Mayor Mike Rawlings after listening to a brief report from the Dallas Commission on Homelessness, which was formed in May.

The group asked the council for \$3 million to finance a preliminary plan that includes quickly housing 600 of the city's nearly 4,000 homeless adults.

Reactions from council members were mixed. Some were critical of the commission's first presentation, saying the group didn't try to find new ideas to address homelessness.

Others asked for more details on how the millions of dollars would be spent and what the plan would look like. And some said it's time to take ownership of a problem that has plagued the city for years, even decades.

"If the council doesn't get serious about this problem ... we'll have this problem perpetually," council member Lee Kleinman said.

The mayor called homelessness a "very tough situation that, by the way, no one wants to own. The city doesn't want to own. The county doesn't want to own."

Commission goals

The commission was formed in May, less than a week after the city closed Tent City, a sprawling encampment under Interstate 45 near downtown.

Tent City became a lightning rod for criticism of how city leaders handled homelessness.

Downtown residents and other neighborhoods near the encampment, once home to 300 people, complained about panhandlers and trash.

Rawlings asked the commission to create a long-term policy to deal with homelessness in Dallas.

The 40-member group met four times and had six community meetings to develop the preliminary plan presented Wednesday.

The plan asks council members to approve guidelines for closing homeless encampments and adopt a "housing-first" approach that provides support services once people have homes, rather than making successful treatment a requirement for getting housing.

Britton Banowsky, the commission chair, called the homeless problem in Dallas "pretty bleak."

Every year, thousands of government-financed housing vouchers, worth millions of dollars, go unused. There is limited city oversight of the issue, and a fragmented system of nonprofits works with the homeless population.

"Dallas has not, like other cities have, put together structures. They don't have anyone really working on it 24-7," Banowsky said. "It all defaults to an array of nonprofits that all have their own missions."

The group has suggested that all nonprofit organizations that work with or shelter the homeless should use the same database to track the population and more efficiently match people with housing.

A hot housing market has made it difficult for caseworkers to find landlords who will accept housing vouchers from homeless people. There are 1,100 Dallas Housing Authority vouchers that could be used.

Banowsky said city money could pay for incentives, such as extra deposits, to encourage landlords to accept housing vouchers. The money also could pay for new caseworkers.

That money could help house 600 people, including 300 veterans and 300 of the chronically homeless, he said. "Chronic homelessness" is defined as being on the street for more than a year or being in and out of homelessness.

Housing first

A sticking point for many council members was the issue of accepting a housing-first approach, which is a federal standard.

But the definition was not clearly explained to council members or even members of the commission before the term was used in the recommendation to the council.

"We do have some on our commission that are not fully sold on housing-first," Banowsky told council members.

Many said the approach drops people into homes without fixing the root causes of their homelessness.

Some housing programs require people to go through mental health treatment or become sober before they are moved into a permanent home. But some advocates for the homeless say it's easier for people to overcome their problems once they are in a stable environment.

Council member Rick Callahan said homelessness won't go away without trying a housing-first approach.

"Get 'em in a house, stabilize them," he said.

But Callahan said that once people are housed, they need to show they are working to better themselves.

"I want to help people, but they also need to help themselves," he said.

Council member Tiffinni Young said city leaders need to deal with societal issues that are pushing people into homelessness, including unemployment and the lack of mental health financing.

She added that something needs to be done about the disproportionate number of luxury apartments being built in the city.

"We continue to build all these \$2,000 rent apartments," Young said. "Who is living in them? Do we have that many rich people in Dallas?"

Community reaction

The commission also conducted a survey asking residents what they thought about the homeless problem.

People overwhelmingly said their biggest concern with homelessness is the effect it has on quality of life in Dallas. And they pointed to a lack of available housing and mental health services as the main challenges for homeless people.

The results also showed that residents largely support a housing-first approach spread throughout the city. A smaller number supported creating a structured encampment.

The commission reported that over 60 homeless encampments of varying sizes are scattered throughout the city.

The full results of the survey and comments from the community meetings were not presented to the council Wednesday.

Council member Adam Medrano said he wanted to see those results and more detail on the proposal in the presentation. He said the community efforts were meant to come up with new approaches.

"Were y'all thinking outside the box? I don't think so," he said.

The commission members were asked to send the complete survey results and responses to the council. And they were asked to give a detailed budget and plan to the council's housing committee to consider covering the \$3 million recommended for the preliminary plan.

The group is expected to meet three more times and will present a final report to the council in November.