

What Riverside is planning to help homeless, ease residents' concerns

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A small pilot program that offers job training and connects homeless people with employers is among a number of services Riverside [Riverside County, CA] will add to the help it offers people living on the streets.

The city has been working for several years to address increasing concerns from residents about people camping on public property, panhandling and leaving trash and drug paraphernalia behind.

Some residents and churches have urged compassion and aid such as meals and housing, while other people have argued that some homeless refuse to take help or follow rules and that handouts attract them to the city.

The City Council voted Tuesday, June 20, to move forward with several initiatives, including the jobs program, expanded health services from a nonprofit clinic, a partnership with Loma Linda University's graduate social work program and plans to build housing with supportive services.

Councilman Jim Perry echoed some of the frustration he's heard from residents and business owners, saying that people avoid city parks because they're overrun with vagrants and businesses are spending money to put up fences and hire security.

"We have neighborhoods that are in crisis," Perry said. "We need to do something."

Each of the half-dozen residents who spoke at the meeting said the city's plan sounds good, but perhaps the most poignant comment came from Christina French, one of four people in the jobs program.

"We did have drug problems. We had alcohol problems, and now that we are housed, it has totally changed us around," she said. "Now it's, 'What time do we go to work and when do we start?'"

The programs are not expected to cost the city anything up front because they're covered by grant money.

Chief Innovation Officer Lea Deesing told the council that Riverside will measure the programs' success by tracking how many people are placed in housing, how many become self-sufficient after getting city help and other statistics.

Homeless programs expand

Riverside officials are launching several new efforts to address homeless issues in the city.

Jobs: A pilot program is giving four people part-time work cleaning up the city, plus a place to live and career counseling to help them graduate to full-time jobs.

Outreach: Loma Linda University social work students will partner with the homeless outreach team to help meet the needs of homeless on the street.

Health: A medical clinic run by the nonprofit Health to Hope will expand services in a city-owned building next to the Hulen Place emergency shelter.

Homes: City officials are looking for potential sites across the city where permanent housing can be built. Some churches have offered to participate and could put homes on their property.

Alicia Robinson has been at The Press-Enterprise since 2007 and has covered Riverside and local government for most of that time, but she has also written about Norco, Corona, homeless issues, Alzheimer's disease, streetcars, butterflies, horses and chickens. She grew up in the Midwest but earned Southern California native status during many hours spent in traffic. Two big questions Alicia tries to answer with stories about government are: how is it supposed to work, and how is it working? Follow Alicia Robinson @arobinson_pe