



Memorandum

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR
AND CITY COUNCIL

FROM: Councilmember David Cohen
Councilmember Pam Foley

SUBJECT: SEE BELOW

DATE: March 23, 2021

Approved

Date: 03/19/2021

SUBJECT: HOMELESSNESS ANNUAL REPORT AND ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: ENCAMPMENT AND ABATEMENT.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Direct City Staff to clarify guidelines for abatements and develop a set of criteria that ensures abatement is a last resort, used in cases of encampments that are in the public right of way, or that are in locations that pose a hazard to the health of the unhoused or to the residents living near the encampment. The proposed guidelines should also take into account environmental concerns around hard-to-reach encampments on creeks and waterways when considering encampments for abatement.
2. Direct City Staff to expand the current SOAR program to other large encampments as a means of centralizing services, improving quality of life for the unhoused and for San José residents, and connecting unhoused individuals with transitional/interim housing. Encourage city staff to increase funding to the SOAR program through potential federal, state, or local funds to improve outreach and provide services and resources to as many unhoused individuals as possible.
3. Direct staff to seek new avenues of dedicated funding for transitional and interim housing, using Bridge Housing Communities as a model, and to seek further funding through the state's Project Roomkey program that is not limited to COVID-19 response. For those locations already identified for new sites, we should make sure we are maximizing use of the space and building as many units as our community partners have capacity to serve.

BACKGROUND

In 2017, on January 24 -25th, the City conducted a census that counted 4,350 homeless individuals living in San José. Just two years later, in January 2019, the number had soared to 6,097, the vast majority of whom were unsheltered. This surge, unprecedented in the last twenty years, underscores the urgency of the homelessness issue in San José, and the vital need for a sustainable, more effective approach to the crisis.

The first crucial component of that approach must be robust efforts by the City to connect unhoused residents with transitional housing. Encampments are a symptom of the problem, not the cure, but they can be invaluable as a means of centralizing services and ensuring outreach workers from the City and from our community partners can help the homeless find stable housing. The SOAR program -- which provides not only housing outreach but also services such as meals and water, sanitation and hygiene, and trash pickup -- has proven very effective in this regard; formalizing and expanding it would be a more effective way to connect the homeless with housing than attempting to identify a location for a new encampment. One sanctioned encampment, even with services and assistance, will at best be able to host 150-200 unhoused individuals, nowhere near the capacity needed to create meaningful progress in solving the issue of homelessness in San José. We recommend that the Council direct staff to consider expanding the SOAR program to other existing encampments and providing them with comprehensive services, resources, and outreach.

Another component of a sustainable approach to resolving homelessness is ensuring there is a stable supply of transitional housing to provide for homeless individuals -- a place for the unhoused to stay while they seek more permanent accommodations. San José hosts several successful models for transitional housing, including the Bridge Housing Community located next to the Berryessa BART station, but these projects must be expanded if they are to be part of a long-term solution to the homelessness crisis. Thus, we recommend that the Council direct staff to seek new avenues for securing dedicated funding for transitional and interim housing, particularly in the form of grants from the state and the federal government, as well as further funding through the Project Roomkey program. Since locations for further construction are limited, we should also determine if it would be possible to build more units than currently allotted at locations that have already been identified for transitional housing.

Lastly, we recommend that the Council direct staff to develop a set of protocols to guide abatements moving forward, clarifying that abatements are a last resort for encampments that are impeding the right of way or whose locations present a clear hazard to the people living at them, as well as hard-to-reach encampments on creeks and waterways that pose the risk of a negative environmental impact and are not easily accessible to service teams and emergency crews. This would set clear criteria for which encampments merit abatement and under which conditions abatement is appropriate, recognizing that abatements make it more difficult for the City to connect unhoused individuals to services and thus should be used only when absolutely necessary.

The signers of this memorandum have not had, and will not have, any private conversation with any other member of the City Council, or that member's staff, concerning any action discussed in the memorandum, and that each signer's staff members have not had, and have been instructed not to have, any such conversation with any other member of the City Council or that member's staff.