



# Memorandum

**TO:** THE HONORABLE MAYOR &  
CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** Councilmember Lan Diep

**SUBJECT:** AUDIT OF HOMELESS ASSISTANCE PROGRAM  
**DATE:** 11/26/2018

Approved

Date

11/26/18

## RECOMMENDATION

Accept the Auditor's recommendations and direct the City Manager to:

1. Reassess the City's homeless abatement efforts to determine whether abatement should be an interdepartmental responsibility; and
2. If it is determined that a single department should be primarily responsible for abatement efforts, then reassess which department is best suited to do it.

## BACKGROUND

There are over 4,000 homeless individuals in San José. To assist these individuals, in 2015 the Council adopted Destination: Home's *Community Plan to End Homelessness*. This plan embraces the "housing first" strategy, which prioritizes providing permanent housing to homeless individuals without preconditions. As the City attempts to build permanent housing for the homeless, its five-person-strong Homeless Intervention and Solutions team is tasked with assisting the unhoused and responding to community complaints regarding the impacts of homelessness. For fiscal year 2017-2018, the Homeless Intervention and Solutions team was budgeted \$13 million, and the City budgeted over \$2 million for homeless encampment abatement efforts.

The Housing Department is the lead agency in charge of homeless encampment abatement, taking over from the Environmental Services Department in 2013, as it was believed that the Housing Department was best positioned to provide services to individuals encountered during sweeps.

Since the Housing Department assumed responsibility for abatements, the number of abatements has increased dramatically. Per the City Auditor, from "July 2017 through April 2018, the Housing department initiated abatement of 563 sites compared to 49 sites from April 2013 to December 2013."

## ARGUMENT

San José lacks the resources required to end the persistent problem of homelessness in our community. It becomes of utmost importance then, that we get the most optimal result possible out of every dollar we put towards the problem. Experts suggest – and the City has agreed – that “housing first” is the best any only strategy to end homelessness. This means building permanent, supportive housing for the unhoused population to help them regain stability as a critical step towards escaping the vicious cycle of homelessness.

Creating such housing is an expensive and slow process, and as the unhoused population awaits assistance from the City, our housed residents demand that the City resolve the impact of homelessness on our communities: litter, visual blight, and concern over public safety. This is an entirely separate but related problem that the City must expend resources on. Ultimately, short of housing a homeless individual, the best the City can do for a resident disturbed by a homeless encampment is to move it. This does not solve the problem however; it simply shifts it around and creates a new problem for another neighborhood.

The two aims of offering services to the homeless and forcing them to move their encampment are contradictory. One incentivizes the homeless to seek out the City for assistance while the other conditions the homeless to fear and avoid the City. While this is perhaps unavoidable, it is worth considering whether it makes sense to assign both roles to the Housing Department.

Such a dynamic not only makes it difficult for the Housing Department to maintain credibility with the target population it seeks to help, but also creates an adversarial relationship between it and the homeless advocates that it should be aligned with. Additionally, the work of encampment abatement is unyielding and consumes a disproportionate amount of attention of the Homelessness Intervention and Solutions team that should instead be focused on permanently housing those in need.

## CONCLUSION

While the City figures out new methods to finance our efforts to end homelessness, we should be more thoughtful in how we expend the limited resources we have on this front. The City can continue to provide housing and abate encampments simultaneously, but it should reconsider whether housing these conflicting responsibilities within the same department is the best practice. Perhaps the time has come for a coordinated, citywide, and interdepartmental response to homelessness.



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