

HOMELESSNESS IN MENDOCINO COUNTY IS A COMMUNITY CONCERN

August 16, 2021

SUMMARY

The City of Ukiah is the epicenter of County services for homelessness and transient populations in Mendocino County. Local businesses have served a growing community of people including displaced and homeless populations for the duration of social distance and masking protocols.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed disparities and service gaps in outcomes of the Mendocino County Homeless Services Continuum of Care (COC) services and local community policing strategies. Local governments and agencies should assess the outcomes of their strategies and look for ways to improve.

Many businesses operating around the intersection of Talmage Road and State Street have identified a rise in theft, loitering, vandalism and loss of revenue. Protecting the health and safety of frontline employees and customers is a major concern. Police dispatch calls pertaining to alleged crimes increased but options to respond in the field were severely limited.

Without viable tools for referral to COC funded services or actionable enforcement measures from police, the employees of local businesses are left unassisted to manage these problems.

BACKGROUND

Limited housing and rental inventory in the City of Ukiah and throughout the County has contributed to the establishment and growth of homeless encampments. Meeting the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter is essential. Vulnerable or addicted people have little choice in methods to make these acquisitions. Theft, loitering and pandering can be necessary for survival.

Law enforcement is tasked with the primary role of protecting the community. County and local governments, private providers and local non-profits are responsible for addressing the care of those in need through collaborative efforts and protecting the rights of the business community. During its investigation, the Grand Jury (GJ) noted that the perception of businesses and local service providers is the Ukiah Police Department (UPD) operates in a reactive role. The safety of the community is often addressed on a case-by-case basis depending on the severity of the reported occurrence.

Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) is the lead agency responsible for addressing the immediate needs of those who seek personal necessities and other assistance. The COC is a Federal, collaborative model tasked with coordinating grant funds and services to vulnerable people. The local COC includes appointed County Staff, a UPD representative, private care providers and the local business community who volunteer their time and effort.

On paper, the County, City, and the COC funded private sector work together in a collaborative effort to meet the needs of homeless families and individuals. The GJ received multiple citizen complaints pertaining to the collaboration of services and police.

METHODOLOGY

The GJ reviewed documents and interviewed key stakeholders with the County, City of Ukiah, the COC, local providers and the business community.

DISCUSSION

The GJ focused on two key areas in the investigation:

- growing impacts of the homeless community on the City of Ukiah and the response of law enforcement,
- identifying key stakeholders that are addressing current issues of homelessness County wide.

Enforcement

The UPD is the primary responder to any law enforcement call for assistance within the city limits. Both the California Highway Patrol (CHP) and Mendocino County Sheriff's Office (SO) are available to help with any emergency as needed.

All law enforcement is tasked with addressing each enforcement issue on a case-by-case basis while observing the law and protecting the rights of the parties involved.

In 2015, the City of Ukiah formed a Special Enforcement Team to address quality-of-life issues. The staffing level for this team consisted of one sergeant and two deputies. Due to budgetary and recruitment issues the team was unstaffed in August 2019 and presently remains unstaffed according to the UPD website.

In 2019, the UPD website identified the Top 10 Officer Calls city-wide. Of the approximately 25,000 reported calls 3,030 were transient-related. These calls were ranked first and accounted for 12% of the annual call volume. As reported in the Ukiah Daily Journal on October 14, 2020, transient-related calls near the intersection of State Street and Talmage Road had increased by 40% between February and August of 2020.

UPD operates with an engaging philosophy that focuses on Community Policing¹. As defined by the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) - a department of the United States Department of Justice - Community Policing is a way to promote organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the conditions that give rise to public safety issues.

¹ City of Ukiah 2020/21 Budget Report

In 2020/21 the City of Ukiah budgeted \$10,741,428 to law enforcement. In the 2021/22 proposed budget for law enforcement, the UPD is scheduled to receive \$11,249,999. Police Services is the largest department in the City's budget, even at a 62% staffing level with 26 officers. Recruiting and retaining officers is a recurring problem within the department and throughout the county.

In the budget narrative, the city deferred patrol car replacement which may result in a decreased pool of reliable patrol vehicles. This decrease in patrol vehicles may impact response time to non-life-threatening calls. The budget accounts associated with proactive or specialized enforcement have been reduced in anticipation of a limited workforce and increased service calls associated with an economic recession and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020, a goal was identified by the UPD to study and evaluate co-responder models. To develop a program to serve vulnerable populations more effectively and safely in the field requires working closely with support services and community partners. As of the date of this investigation the GJ did not find a status update.

Housing

HHSA works to provide mental health and outreach services to those in need. Local non-profits work in a collaborative effort to provide for the three basic essential needs of food, shelter and clothing.

Coordinated outreach by public and private providers was sporadic. Without consistent service outreach, self-dependency and survival instinct can lead to increases in crimes of desperation.

Gaps in services often result in a greater concentration of transient people around local businesses which leads to lost clientele and revenue. The GJ investigated the factors that contribute to the increase in homelessness in the community and how those concerns can best be addressed.

In January 2017, directive CPD-17-01 Notice Establishing Additional Requirements for a COC Centralized or Coordinated Assessment System was issued from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The notice established new requirements for the COC and recipients of COC Program and Emergency Solutions Grants Program funding. They must now develop and use a centralized or coordinated assessment system. The Notice also provides guidance that applicants should incorporate written policies and procedures to achieve outcomes for the homeless.

In April 27, 2020, the COC adopted the Strategic Plan to Address Homelessness in Mendocino County (Plan). The Strategic Planning Committee and more than 31 public and private non-profit organizations throughout the county which serve the homeless collaborated to draft the Plan. The Plan identified a need to share with the community a common agenda and plan of action to make homelessness rare, brief and a one-time experience. It also identified a fragmentation of the existing system that reduces the effectiveness of the level of service delivered, homeless-related funding and system performance. Key goals identified in the Plan

were to strengthen the collaboration between the COC, its governing body and the community at-large.

According to the Plan, poverty, leading to the inability to pay for housing is the single greatest risk factor for homelessness. It identified the trend in homelessness and proposed a strategy to meet these needs. Some key information in the Plan identified a reduction in the Point in Time (PIT) Count of 1,242 homeless in the County in 2016 to 785 in 2019. This equates to a homeless count reduction of 457. The survey also identified the homeless count in the City of Ukiah in 2019 as between 198 to 225. In studying the PIT Count process, the GJ learned that the numbers are based on a limited timeframe and a geographically restrictive area for counting the vulnerable. Since many identifiable areas of unsheltered homeless live in remote and less traveled sections of the City of Ukiah and Mendocino County, the ability to get an accurate count is problematic under the current PIT procedure.

In a February 28, 2020, communication from the State of California Business, Consumer Services and Housing Agency, Department of Housing and Community Development, Division of Financial Assistance notifying grant applicants that Federal HUD Grant funding in the amount of \$5 million in new federal funds for the Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) program was available. Funding would be available pursuant to Subtitle B of Title IV of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The ESG program provides funding for the following:

- Engaging individuals or families experiencing homelessness,
- improving the quality of Emergency Shelters (ES) for individuals and families experiencing homelessness by helping to operate these shelters, and by providing essential services to shelter residents,
- rapidly re-housing individuals and families experiencing homelessness,
- preventing families/individuals from becoming homeless. County of Mendocino System of Care receives HUD funding annually. Any service provider receiving funds are required to participate in a Coordinated Entry System (CES). The CES connects the most vulnerable persons in the community to available housing and supportive services.

To monitor and oversee the Homeless program the COC Board was established to fund administration and housing issues in the County. The COC has between 30 to 40 seated members of which 18 of those members are seated on the Board of Directors. In the organizational chart of the COC, there are two Co-Chairs that oversee the Executive Board of Directors. The COC oversees the PIT Count of individuals and families experiencing homelessness, Coordinated Entry, Permanent Housing and collaboration toward securing and maintaining HUD funded housing projects for addressing homelessness in Mendocino County.

The COC developed a rating tool for Renewal/Expansion and New Projects. The Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) application process on the COC website was last updated on May 4, 2020. The COC selects four committee members to serve as the primary review and grading of all competitive and non-competitive applications. The Renewal/Expansion and New Project Rating Tool rates key areas to assist committee members in Housing, percentage of beds, population needs and financial information. The measuring process does not identify whether renewal applicants achieved specific goals or objectives from the previous year.

Applicants must file grant applications annually to receive funding. Upfront funding requests are rarely approved. Grant funds are commonly disbursed as a reimbursement of costs to local service providers. Program funding is applied for based on available services which are collectively limited in scope. If a service does not exist, such as hygiene stations, grant monies cannot be applied for.

FINDINGS

- F1. The Mendocino County COC website is outdated and there is no single point of contact, such as an 800 number, for those in need of homeless services.
- F2. The COC is limited to coordinating funds to locally available services which can result in service gaps for the homeless.
- F3. The breadth of locally available services does not have or require written policies and procedures to monitor the level of service being provided for the homeless which results in service outcomes for the homeless not being measured.
- F4. Gaps in the Homeless Services System of Care, such as coordinated, collaborative response teams of service providers and law enforcement, are filled by law enforcement agencies that are resource-limited and have unfilled liaison positions for effective Community Policing.
- F5. The COC has a quantitative rating system to grade service provider applicants. The rating tool does not evaluate prior objectives of an applicant to determine a history of successful outcomes. There is no rating system for similar services funded separately through County Health and Human Services.
- F6. Law Enforcement agencies are represented on the COC by the UPD. With the absence of Federal guidance on how to coordinate police with program services, there is a collaboration gap between providers and government agencies that requires creative local solutions to establish protocols, and define clear roles for service providers and agencies, to foster working relationships.
- F7. The majority of members on the COC are employees of other agencies and struggle to address the level of service needed locally without policy guidance from the Board of Supervisors, City elected officials, or other assigned staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. the COC update its website, expand information dissemination, and develop a toll-free number to address homeless questions and issues by January 3, 2022. (F1)
- R2. the COC develop clarity of responsibility for the issuance of funds and a process to evaluate the qualitative merits of a grant application by January 3, 2022. (F3)

- R3. the COC develop clarity of responsibility for the grant applicants that require the agencies to identify specific goals and objectives for the grant funding period by November 30, 2021. These submittals will provide a baseline rating system for the COC to determine if the applicant can provide the identified goals and objectives prior to the issuance of funds in the next grant cycle. (F5)
- R4. the COC, through local partnerships, place a high priority on addressing the hygiene needs of the homeless within 90 days of the release of this report. (F2)
- R5. the COC work with local elected officials to identify and develop a Homeless Housing element by July 1, 2022. (F2, F7)
- R6. City of Ukiah's City Council and the COC evaluate standards for partnership with HHSA and Law Enforcement within 180 days of the release of this report. (F4, F6)
- R7. County and local elected officials prioritize the development of specific objectives that meet the homeless issues identified in the Strategic Plan within 180 days of the release of this report. (F7)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code § 933 and 933.05, the GJ requests responses as follows from the following elected county officials within 90 days:

- Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (F7, R7)
- City of Ukiah, City Council (F6, F7, R6, R7)

REQUESTED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code § 933 and 933.05, the GJ requests responses as follows from the following respondents:

- COC Governing Board (F1-F7, R1-R7)
- Mendocino County Chief Executive Officer (F1-F7, R1-R7)
- City of Ukiah, City Manager (F1-F7, R1-R7)
- City of Ukiah, Police Department (F3-F7, R6)

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code § 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.