

RECOMMENDATION

Austin Homelessness Advisory Council

Recommendation 20190529-02: Storage for Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

WHEREAS, the Austin Homelessness Advisory Council (AHAC) is a group of individuals that are currently or have previously experienced homelessness in Austin, Texas; and

WHEREAS, the work of AHAC is supported by the City of Austin with the administration and facilitation of AHAC managed by Downtown Austin Community Court (DACC); and

WHEREAS, AHAC meets bimonthly to hold discussions and provide input regarding policies, practices, and services related to homelessness; and

WHEREAS, the 2019 Point in Time Count identified a five percent increase in individuals experiencing homelessness in Austin, for a total of 2,255 individuals identified; and

WHEREAS, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness is likely much higher due to people that are temporarily staying with friends or family, in hospitals, or incarcerated who are not counted in this process; and

WHEREAS, the City Council adopted Strategic Direction 2023 (SD 2023), which sets addressing homelessness as a top priority for the City; and

WHEREAS, a strategy under the Economic Opportunity & Affordability Strategic Outcome in SD 2023 is to “Define and enact our response to homelessness focusing on efficient and effective use of our resources to address disparities, prevent homelessness, and support housing stability;” and

WHEREAS, access to storage is a basic need, a matter of human dignity, and critical for individuals to be able to go to job interviews, maintain identification documents and important personal belongings, and directly impacts the ability to achieve housing stability; and

WHEREAS, current availability of storage for individuals experiencing homelessness in Austin is inadequate; and

WHEREAS, the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH) offers a limited number of lockers as part of the Day Resource Center (DRC), which will be discontinued for any individuals that are not residents of the ARCH when the full transition for their new agreement with the City is implemented; and

WHEREAS, through a contract with Austin Public Health, the National Alliance to End Homelessness released a report in June 2018 titled Recommendations for the Re-Design of Emergency Shelters in Austin (NAEH Report); and

WHEREAS, The NAEH Report includes a recommendation that services currently provided through the ARCH DRC to non-ARCH residents such as access to telephones, restrooms, showers, mail, and lockers “should be provided elsewhere to people not staying at the ARCH and should be accompanied by housing crisis resolution assistance as well;” and

WHEREAS, the population experiencing homelessness in Austin is diverse with varying needs, and multiple program structures for storage may be necessary to serve this population effectively; and

WHEREAS, any storage program(s) should be developed thoughtfully and with input from stakeholders from lived experience; and

WHEREAS, different factors including physical features, location(s), service connections, lease terms, and cost should all be weighed in developing any storage program(s); and

WHEREAS, different structure options such as mobile storage, smaller storage facilities dispersed throughout the City, or one large centrally located storage facility with associated social services all have benefits and challenges that should be weighed; and

WHEREAS, physical features such as solar panels to enable charging for phones, mail slots, ventilation, solutions for bed bugs, protection from heat, and options for locking mechanisms should all be considered in structural design for storage; and

WHEREAS, location(s) for storage should be central and in areas where individuals experiencing homelessness can easily access facilities, with predictable hours of access to meet a variety of scheduling needs due to work, entering shelters at specific times of day, and other factors; and

WHEREAS, City-owned property, churches, libraries, transit centers, bus stops, recreation centers, outside of the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless, and parking lots could all be options for storage locations; and

WHEREAS, Manchaca intersecting with Congress or Ben White, North Lamar and Highway 183, Highway 290 and Cameron Road, Highway 183 and Payton Gin, 7th Street and Pleasant Valley, and Oak Hill near encampment sites should all be explored as potential location options due to proximity to individuals experiencing homelessness and accessibility to public transit; and

WHEREAS, safety and security features including bright lighting, emergency call buttons, staffing, cameras, and mechanisms to preclude loitering, theft, and vandalism should be considered; and

WHEREAS, service connections such as bus passes, optional entry into case management, and communication through staff or posted bulletins about services available in the community could be incorporated into a storage program; and

WHEREAS, there should be a low barrier to qualifying for participation in storage programs with participation in Coordinated Assessment offered as an option, but not a requirement, for those willing to participate; and

WHEREAS, availability of storage could be a tool to incentivize participation in case management services by guaranteeing that every individual with a case manager has an option for storage, but any storage program should still allow for storage for some individuals not engaged in case management; and

WHEREAS, lease terms for storage should not be less than three months in length, and options for a digital, automated, and in-person renewal process should be explored; and

WHEREAS, lockers should be free or low-cost, with an option to pay for storage through community service; and

WHEREAS, if storage facilities do have fees, there should be waivers and an option for sponsors for individuals with disabilities or the inability to pay due to lack of resources; and

WHEREAS, programs should be structured to collect emergency contact information and set aside a minimum of 30-45 days to attempt reconnection with storage clients where contact has been lost prior to discarding or donating abandoned items; and

WHEREAS, the benefits of features and program structures should be weighed with the associated costs to develop appropriate storage options that are not financially burdensome; and

WHEREAS, all funding sources should be considered for initial construction and ongoing operations expenses including the City's Capital Budget and General Fund, philanthropy, and public private partnerships; and

WHEREAS, the City should explore direct provision of storage and conducting a solicitation for one or multiple nonprofits that could also provide some level of social services along with storage; and

WHEREAS, the City Council will have the opportunity to consider funding storage programs for individuals experiencing homelessness during the Fiscal Year 2019-2020 budget process; and

WHEREAS, the Downtown Austin Community Court Advisory Board is charged with making recommendations to the City Council on operations and policies of the Community Court, which includes provision of effective services for individuals experiencing homelessness;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Austin Homelessness Advisory Council recommends that the Austin City Council allocate funding for one or multiple storage programs to serve individuals experiencing homelessness during the Fiscal Year 2019-2020 budget process, if not sooner.

AHAC recommends that a solicitation or direct City program for storage be developed that fully considers all options for physical and safety features, locations, program structures, associated social services, and funding options. This development process should engage City staff from appropriate departments, representation from community advisory groups including Downtown Austin Community Court Advisory Board and Austin Homelessness Advisory Council, and other community stakeholders.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Austin Homelessness Advisory Council requests that the Downtown Austin Community Court Advisory Board forwards this recommendation from AHAC to the Austin City Council, and takes action to recommend that the Austin City Council consider inclusion of funding for storage for individuals experiencing homelessness in the Fiscal Year 2019-20 Budget.