



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Christopher Shorter, Assistant City Manager
Rodney Gonzales, Assistant City Manager

DATE: March 27, 2020

SUBJECT: Update on Homelessness Services During Response to COVID-19

This memorandum serves to provide updates on the impacts of COVID-19 to services related to homelessness within the community. The issues addressed in this memorandum include: (1) Access to Services: Basic Hygiene, Social Services, and Food, and Health Services and Community Coordination (2) Hotel and Motel Leasing and Acquisition, (3) The Homeless Outreach Street Team & Emergency Medical Services Community Health Paramedics, (4) Underpass and Encampment Cleaning Process and Coordination Efforts, and (5) Communications

ACCESS TO SERVICES

Basic Hygiene, Social Services, and Food

Shower, Restroom, and Hygiene Access

The Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) public showers and restrooms along city trails will remain open until further notice. Additionally, PARC has opened (5) five Controlled Shower Access sites for Health and Hygiene to be made available Monday-Saturday 10am-3pm. Locations are listed below. The Parks and Recreation Department will communicate any other decisions made as soon as possible.

- Gus Garcia Recreation Center - *1201 E Rundberg Ln, Austin, TX 78753*
- Austin Recreation Center - *1301 Shoal Creek Blvd, Austin, TX 78701*
- Barton Springs Pool - *2131 William Barton Dr, Austin, TX 78746*
- Bartholomew Pool - *1800 E 51st St, Austin, TX 78723*
- Springwood Pool - *13320 Lyndhurst St, Austin, TX 78729*

Two public restroom facilities are available 24 hours a day at 4th Street & Trinity and at 6th Street & Brazos. The Libraries remain closed for general services, but two locations are allowing for access to restrooms between 9:00am-5:00pm seven days a week including Terrazas Branch Library, located at 1105 E. Cesar Chavez and Little Walnut Creek Branch Library, located at 835 W. Rundberg Lane.

Portable toilets and handwashing stations have been placed in 20 areas across town, aligning with current Violet Bag sites and near areas of known encampments. Three more will come online Friday March 27th and will be placed at the ARCH. City staff are evaluating locations that may need to be added in order to promote hygiene and provide for basic needs.

The Other Ones Foundation is providing mobile hygiene clinics that include shower stalls with sinks and toilets, hygiene supplies, basic first aid, and some food until supplies run out. The initial schedule is as follows:

- Monday: Sunrise Community Church at Ben White and Menchaca
- Tuesday: First Baptist Surface Lot at 9th and Trinity
- Wednesday: IH 35 and Cesar Chavez (NE Side)
- Thursday: Under IH 35 across from Hancock Center (Directly across the service road from Community Care)
- Friday: TBD (Still looking for a good spot in the Cameron/183/290/St Johns area)
- Saturday AND Sunday: Camp Responsible Adult Transition Town (RATT), the State sanctioned campsite

Downtown Austin Community Court (DACC)

DACC remains open 8:00am-5:00pm Monday through Friday to provide essential services including service continuity for existing clients, connection to basic needs for walk-in clients through triage case management, and opportunities for maintaining hygiene for individuals using the restrooms. DACC's triage case management process and controlled access protocols have been updated significantly to ensure social distancing and other recommended prevention protocols are in place for clients and staff.

DACC has served 185 individuals through triage case management during the period of March 16 through March 25. These numbers do not reflect the numerous individuals daily who are able to access basic hygiene resources through use of the restrooms at DACC, or the clients on current caseloads that case managers continue to work with through teleworking capabilities and provision of offsite services.

DACC's Community Service Restitution (CSR) program enables City and Travis County residents to meet public service hour requirements through graffiti abatement, homeless encampment cleanup, right of way maintenance, and other municipal purpose and beautification jobs. DACC has suspended picking up probationers and defendants for the CSR program due to the order restricting non-essential business functions and public health recommendations for social distancing. All CSR personnel have been offered for reassignment to the Emergency Operations Center. When prescribed distancing is lifted, the CSR program will resume.

Coordination with External Partners

City staff across multiple departments are in contact with social service providers who for the most part are maintaining some level of services, but are taking all necessary precautionary steps to protect staff and clients from exposure to COVID-19. Some services have switched to virtual interactions with clients when feasible, and inpatient programming in some cases have temporarily ceased intake to enable proper social distancing. Some community partners have closed temporarily out of necessity for health and safety. The City is maintaining an [updated list of resources](#) that includes active services, modified services, and temporary closures.

Emergency Food Access Plan

The Homelessness Taskforce is working on food access issues by partnering with community agencies while developing pilots to secure food from organizations that provide emergency meal distribution as well as fresh food to communities in need. One of the organizations; Revolution Foods has the capacity to provide prepared meals to multiple locations within 48hrs of being requested. This flexibility allows for expedient mobilization of food throughout the City to people experiencing homelessness as COVID-19 has negatively impacted established mechanisms of food access for this population.

In addition, the Office of Sustainability is investigating strategies and organizations that leverage local restaurants who have the capacity to prepare meals for underserved populations within the City of Austin with the goal of addressing ongoing food access needs caused by the changing landscape due to COVID-19.

City Staff have multiple proposals to address:

- Emergency meal distribution for individuals experiencing homelessness
- Emergency meal distribution for food insecure families
- Neighborhood-based food access

We anticipate the various food access programs will include capacity to open multiple pilot sites and distribute approximately two hundred meals per site, per day, seven days a week for people experiencing homelessness. In addition, we anticipate the programs will leverage local nonprofits and restaurants to provide over five thousand meals per week to within food insecure neighborhoods and directly to vulnerable families. The intent of the pilots are to develop solutions to the critical and immediate food needs in our community for underserved populations including people experiencing homelessness, help stabilize local food sector businesses, and utilize a micro-food-distribution model to reduce the need to gather in large numbers and allow for better execution of current best practices regarding preventing the spread of COVID-19. The Office of Sustainability in conjunction with City Staff are immediately implementing pilots and retroactively seeking authorization from council on April 7, 2020.

Furthermore, APH and the Office of Sustainability are working to streamline communitywide food access efforts for people experiencing homelessness by developing a daily homelessness food access task group comprised of City of Austin staff and homeless service providers. The goal of this group is to collaboratively leverage resources by utilizing targeted strategic planning to rapidly get people fed while adhering to health and safety protocols.

Health Services and Community Coordination

Coordinating Community Efforts

The City of Austin, Healthcare for the Homeless, the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO), Integral Care, and other community and health partners are working with a consultant to finalize screening and decision-making protocols for addressing health needs associated with COVID-19 within the homeless community. These new protocols will ensure all partners have clearly defined roles, establish a uniform referral process, and include standardization of care based on criteria including symptoms, risk factors, and standard best practices.

Emergency Operations Center – Social Services Branch

Austin Public Health (APH) and Travis County Health & Human Services are standing up the Social Services Branch of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Task forces within this branch include City Services, County Services, Homelessness, Food Access, Behavioral Health, Seniors, Group Home, Faith Based, Child Care, Customer – Client Services, and Equity. Members of each task force will work in their respective area and coordinate across areas.

Hotel and Motel Leasing and Acquisition

The Office of Real Estate Services (ORES) has finalized a lease agreement for the Crown Plaza, which includes 292 rooms. This space will be operated through EOC coordination for quarantine and isolation purposes. These efforts have begun and will be expanded as needed in the coming days and weeks.

Rodeway Inn, which includes 87 rooms, has a closing date of April 17, 2020. It's estimated that four weeks will be needed after the closing date for safety related improvements. Additional hotels are being considered and negotiated for lease, purchase, and lease to purchase. Further information will be provided as this process progresses.

Homeless Outreach Street Team (HOST) & Emergency Medical Services Community Health Paramedics (EMS CHP):

HOST has been performing the following tasks & roles since the beginning of the COVID-19 event:

- Providing information about COVID-19 based on APH sources and recommendations to those that are experiencing homelessness including emphasizing the importance of social distancing, hygiene, and other preventative measures
- Addressing inaccurate information and various rumors from the homeless community and the public about COVID-19
- Searching for resources that can address food, water and hygiene needs for the homeless community, which is a significant concern given that some of the normal resources the homeless utilize for day-to-day needs are closed or otherwise not available
- Coordinating with and providing information to partner agencies, businesses, and individual citizens that want to donate food, water, and other basic needs items to help individuals experiencing homelessness
- Integral Care staff have been directed to work from an office or home, however, other HOST and EMS CHP team members are working to distribute phones (provided by Integral Care) so Integral Care can try to maintain contact and serve individuals experiencing homelessness
- HOST and EMS CHP team members are attempting to assist Integral Care's Programs for Assistance in the Transition from Homelessness (PATH) team maintain contact with their clients out in the field and provide service while PATH staff are teleworking
- EMS CHP team members continue to work with HOST resources (i.e. Integral Care, DACC, APD, etc.) to serve the homeless community in areas outside of downtown, including the major corridors along Ben White Blvd. and US Hwy 183
- EMS CHP and HOST continue to provide as much access to mental and medical health care as possible

Underpass and Encampment Cleaning Process and Coordination Efforts

Austin Resource Recovery has not suspended service and continues to provide twice a week trash removal at the following Violet Bag sites with the exception of Terrazas Branch Library, which is receiving daily service.

- Highway 71/Packsaddle Pass
- Cesar Chavez/Pleasant Valley (near the IBC Bank)
- 183/Burnet Road
- 183/Cameron Road
- 7th Street and Gonzalez (under the bridge)
- Highway 71/Menchaca
- Highway 71/Burleson Road
- Pleasant Valley/Riverside Drive (located in the median near the McDonald's)
- I-35/Airport Boulevard
- 183/Oak Knoll
- Terrazas Branch Library—receiving daily service

At this time, Watershed Protection Department's contractor, WorkQuest, is pausing all encampment cleanup services to evaluate their processes and protection needs in light of COVID-19. Watershed Protection is in the process of evaluating essential functions related to encampment cleanups, critical infrastructure, and safety. Currently, Watershed Protection has paused encampment cleanup activity until appropriate protocols, safety measures, and all necessary resources can be determined in partnership with Austin Public Health and Austin Resource Recovery. Watershed Protection will communicate any decisions made as soon as possible.

The Parks and Recreation Department has also paused notification and encampment cleanup activity until appropriate protocols, safety measures, and all necessary resources can be determined in partnership with Austin Public Health and The Other Ones Foundation.

Public Works is working with Austin Public Health and the Law Department to provide the necessary documentation and details to restart encampment site cleanups. If and when this happens, the cleanup schedule will resume. Homeless encampment cleanups are mission essential because of the impacts on critical infrastructure and the health and safety for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Communications

The Homelessness Priority Communications Team within the Communications and Public Information Office is focused on engaging those experiencing homelessness in the Public Health Response while helping them meet basic needs in a rapidly changing environment. In service of that goal the communications team is:

Communicating directly with people experiencing homelessness

- Repurposing austintexas.gov/homelessness to targeted information include a specific page to help individuals experiencing homelessness [access resources](#)
- Creating and distributing flyers with educational information through existing city and community channels
- Developing a GIS map to help people experiencing homelessness find locations for accessing basic needs during the Covid-19 response

Staying up-to-date, and when possible, coordinating services available to those experiencing homelessness

- Continuing collaborative calls within the City and with community partners
- Expanding the number and types of partners participating in the coordinated response
- Identifying and acting on unmet needs and opportunities identified on the calls

Communicating efforts to the broader public

- Fielding media inquiries and developing language for leaders to communicate efforts
- Currently developing plans for communicating how to help people experiencing homelessness

As our local conditions continue to evolve, we will adapt as necessary to ensure continuity of essential services for individuals experiencing homelessness and all residents of Austin. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any comments, questions or suggestions for how we can best serve the community.

CC: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
CMO Executive Team
City Department Directors and Assistant Directors