




MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

THROUGH: Shannon Jones, Interim Assistant City Manager
Rodney Gonzales, Assistant City Manager
Stephanie Hayden, Director, Austin Public Health

FROM: Dianna Grey, Homeless Strategy Officer 

DATE: April 6, 2021

SUBJECT: Updates on Resolution No. 20210204-049 (HEAL Initiative)

On February 4, 2021, Austin City Council adopted Resolution No. 20210204-049, regarding funding and implementing a Housing-Focused Encampment Assistance Link (HEAL) Initiative, designed to immediately connect individuals living in designated encampments to housing or housing focused shelter and supportive services. The intention of the HEAL Initiative is to create strategies that leads to the end of unsheltered homelessness through a collaborative approach to encampment outreach and re-housing.

The Homeless Strategy Division (HSD) is in the process of developing the first phase of the HEAL Initiative which will target homeless encampments fitting the criteria identified in the Resolution. The HEAL Initiative will be created using best practices and lessons learned from previous initiatives, including those addressing veteran homelessness, youth homelessness, and the Guided Path Program. HSD recognizes that Council has set a challenge to staff to use these learnings to develop and implement the first phase of a program that can subsequently be expanded to house people experiencing homelessness in encampments across the city.

This update covers the direction to staff to complete the following:

- Implement the HEAL Initiative through a phased approach beginning with four encampments that pose risks to health and safety
- Develop a timeline, preliminary budget, and additional resources needed for Phase I of the HEAL Initiative

- Create a multi-organizational collaboration to guide planning and implementation
- Identify potential strategies for encouraging voluntary compliance in areas where camping is or will not be permitted

Subsequent updates will be provided at least monthly to the Health and Human Services Commission and/or full council, and will address, at a minimum:

- Activities, progress, and outcomes, to include demographic data as well as the number of individuals encountered, engaged, sheltered and/or housed
- Additional resources needed to effectively implement Phase I and/or future phases
- Challenges encountered during the planning and/or execution process
- Recommendations for prioritization of future encampments for HEAL Initiative efforts, based on health and safety considerations
- Recommendations for revisions to the existing ordinance, if any.

Development of the HEAL Collaboration

Homeless Strategy Division staff have engaged key internal and external partners including community-based housing providers and other City of Austin departments with roles in homelessness, housing, or public space management.

In addition, as part of the ongoing Summit to Address Unsheltered Homelessness, two affinity group sessions were held on Encampment Response and Street Management, both occurring on March 26, 2021. Community partners in attendance included a diverse cross-section of City of Austin departments, homeless service providers, faith-based organizations, community activists, harm reduction groups, street medicine, homeless outreach providers, Travis County and City of Austin officials, and individuals with lived experience.

HSD also requested the assistance of the Austin Homelessness Advisory Council (AHAC) through a survey administered on February 17, 2021. AHAC members provided valuable feedback from their collective lived expertise with homelessness regarding approaches, resources, and solutions for individuals living in encampments. A summary of survey responses can be found attached to this memo. Key feedback included recommendations that outreach services be provided utilizing a nonjudgmental approach, that an array of services be offered (such as case management, basic hygiene, medical and mental health services), and that program design acknowledge giving people hope as a critical component in the choice to move into shelter or housing.

Drawing on the feedback garnered in these settings, HSD expects to convene regular HEAL Collaborative meetings beginning this month.

Program Design and Timeline for Phase I

The four primary elements of the HEAL Initiative program design are outreach, temporary shelter, permanent housing, and the assessment, improvement, activation, and encouragement of voluntary compliance at each site.

Outreach Activities

HSD is exploring the possibility of targeting existing resources (HOST and/or Integral Care's PATH teams), expanding staffing, and/or adding outreach functions to shelter and/or rehousing contracts. Functions of the outreach teams would likely include: early needs assessment, completion of site-specific census, engagement and relationship-building with occupants of encampments, meeting immediate basic needs, supporting individual decision-making, communicating timeline and process for encampment relocation, and ensuring warm-handoff and coordination with shelter and housing providers.

Temporary Shelter Resources

Providing immediate access to very low-barrier shelter with direct connections to housing resources is integral to the success of this strategy designed to help end unsheltered homelessness. Shelter is expected to be available at a dedicated shelter facility, and potentially at alternative locations, depending on each individual's needs and choices. HSD has identified a potential central shelter site, and staff are in the process of solidifying the contracting process for housing-focused shelter for Phase I of the HEAL Initiative.

Permanent Housing

Key strategies for connecting people to safe and stable housing as part of HEAL are threefold: Diversion, Rapid Rehousing (RRH), and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH).

HSD expects to contract with a service provider or providers to dedicate Diversion and Rapid Rehousing program capacity to the HEAL Initiative. Contracted services would include location services, case management, and financial assistance, typically for 6-24 months. HSD will work with its partners to promote explicit linkages to PSH programs for those individuals needing support beyond the scope of Rapid Rehousing program resources. These linkages may be to existing PSH programs (with placements made as turnover occurs) or to new PSH resources currently in the pipeline, which could include dedicated sites (including hotel conversions) as well as scattered-site units in the larger housing market.

Site Assessment, Improvement, Activation, and Compliance

Assessment of physical locations will begin substantially before outreach and re-housing activities. In contrast to outreach and re-housing functions, portions of this planning will be carried out largely in coordination with the entity or jurisdiction that owns or manages the site, such as the Parks and Recreation Department, Austin Public Library, or outside entities such as the Texas Department of Transportation.

Planning elements are expected to include:

- Site stakeholder convening
- Neighborhood engagement
- Site analysis: Short and long-term improvement options, budget, funding Sources
- Plan for Perimeter control and clean-up upon completion of rehousing
- Implementation plan for site improvements and/or re-activation of the space through events and activities
- Continued outreach presence on site

Timeline

HSD has developed a summary of the anticipated overall timeline for Phase I of the HEAL Initiative, as well as an example of a timeline of activities for efforts surrounding any particular encampment location, as follows:



HEAL Initiative Phase 1 - Individual Encampment Timeline



Preliminary Budget

The negotiation of contracts and MOUs for services to include outreach, shelter, personal storage, case management, housing and other supports has already begun. Funding and potential contracts for public space changes will appear on City Council agendas over the next month.

HEAL Initiative: Preliminary Budget	Amount	Funding Source
Outreach & Engagement	\$400,000	New Funding in APH FY21 Budget
Bridge Shelter	\$1,300,000	Included in APH FY21 Budget (original South Austin shelter funding)
Rapid Rehousing	\$2,400,000	New Funding in APH FY21 Budget
Personal Storage	\$200,000	New Funding in APH FY21 Budget
TOTAL PROJECTED OUTREACH & SERVICES	\$4,300,000	

Site Restoration, Improvements, Activities	TBD	TBD
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Strategies for Encouraging Voluntary Compliance

HEAL envisions that once the encampment relocation has occurred and the site has been vacated, camping would no longer be permitted in that location. The Council resolution explicitly directs staff to identify a range of strategies for encouraging voluntary compliance with the no-camping rule, using non-punitive methods. This approach is informed by research and best practices in the field. The issue brief, *Inclusive Public Space Management*, authored by Barb Poppe, Stephen Metraux and Mimi Ray, finds that punitive approaches to addressing homeless encampments leads to individuals experiencing greater trauma, feelings of not being accepted, loss of personal items, criminalization, and destabilization. Non-punitive tools include, but are not limited to, the strategies and examples outlined below.

Reimagining / Reinventing Public Spaces

Experts in reinventing community spaces since 1975, the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has supported place-making and public land asset transformation in over 3,500 communities. The project's approach to placemaking empowers cities to create and test temporary concepts with direct community involvement. Notable benefits include:

- Activating amenities in previously underutilized public spaces.
- Working through resistance to change, while empowering communities that have lost faith in the *possibility* of change.
- Generating the interest of public and private investors.
- Cultivating pride and co-ownership of public spaces.

Where investments in public space restoration and place-making are most needed, the Homeless Strategy Division will collaborate with internal and community partners to engage residents and stakeholders in visioning, design, and delivery of efficient activation strategies that augment existing amenities and infrastructure. PPS suggests that traditional top-down capital planning processes often have highly unpredictable outcomes. In environments where the place-making method is appropriate, interim projects may invite and inform future investments.

Communication Strategies

Notice of anticipated relocation of encampment occupants will be given in both verbal and written form by outreach staff, as well as through high-visibility public postings. Once an encampment is closed, temporary or permanent signage may be used to reinforce the change in use, and outreach teams may frequent the area to sustain communication with people experiencing homelessness in the area.

In Seattle, Washington, after an encampment site has been removed; the site is designated an "Emphasis Area" meaning it is an encampment-prohibited area. Signage is then installed with this new designation of the area. Deploying outreach workers to "Emphasis Area" site to connect individuals experiencing homelessness to services.

Built Environment and Site Amenities

In spaces that are meant for public use, implementing inclusive public space management is key to designing public spaces for all, while minimizing the need for punitive enforcement approaches. Thoughtful design allows for appropriate utilization of the public spaces, creating opportunities for positive engagement with others and greater community cohesion. This can be achieved by designing spaces with specific purposes in mind, based on the expressed needs of community members, both housed and unhoused.

Landscaping, including both plantings and hardscaping, can influence the public use, perception, and experience of a site. Examples of amenities that may be considered include public art installations, benches, game tables, water fountains, restrooms, permanent sinks, a community garden, picnic areas, playgrounds, dog parks, shade structures, bike-share stations, or personal storage lockers.

Public Activities & Events

Hosting community events for service provision, recreation, community building, and/or entertainment can be an effective strategy for encouraging maintenance of a site as a non-camping area, especially in the immediate period post-relocation. In 2014, Louisville, KY, launched ReSurfaced, a temporary transformation of a central lot. From Thursday to Sunday for over a month, the site became an all-day outdoor event space featuring food trucks, live music, poetry slams, outdoor movies, games, and other activities.

Art is a catalyst for placemaking, and the City of Austin has formally championed this principle since 1985. Non-institutional interactive art and community art events may be suitable at one or more HEAL Phase 1 sites. City staff will explore opportunities for coordination with Art in Public Places, Art From the Streets, and other successful programs through the City's Cultural Arts Division and community partners.

Restricted Access

Once people move to temporary shelter and/or housing, fencing may be used temporarily to reinforce that the site is no longer accessible; this also allows clean-up work to begin unimpeded. Where a site poses significant health and/or safety risks to potential occupants, or where the location, character, or use of the site precludes other strategies, fencing may be utilized to restrict access, either temporarily or permanently.

Conclusion

HSD looks forward to continued collaboration with Council Member offices to advance this important initiative. Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at dianna.grey@austintexas.gov.

Austin Homelessness Advisory Council

HEAL Initiative Survey

The Austin Homelessness Advisory Council (AHAC) is a group of approximately 15 individuals with lived expertise of homelessness in Austin who provide recommendations and information to City leaders and other organizations. AHAC members responded to a February 2021 survey about strategies to best serve persons living unsheltered. Key themes and insights are below.

What can service providers do to build trust with individuals living in encampments and/or encourage them to access available services?

- Ensuring outreach services are provided consistently utilizing a nonjudgmental approach
- The need for outreach workers to provide clear, accurate and transparent information about accessing services and housing
- The importance of creating individualized needs assessment in collaboration with individuals living in encampments
- The need for service providers to be well-trained
- Utilizing people who have lived experience with unsheltered homeless as part of outreach teams

What types of services do you think will be most important for individuals living in encampments? Please explain your answer

- Drug treatment
- Mental health treatment
- Medical services
- Assessment of need
- Access to basic needs i.e. food access, showers, portable toilets, handwashing stations
- Case management

What do you think are the most appealing or important things that might cause individuals to prefer encampments rather than accepting housing or shelter options?

- Freedom, no curfew
- Sense of community
- Lack of trust in the larger systems
- Various barriers to housing
- Sense of individual identity

What advice do you have ...that would make someone more interested or comfortable accepting housing or shelter?

- Allowing guests
- No unnecessary rules
- “Offer something of value, that puts them on the path for the future”
- “Give hope”