



Allentown

435 Hamilton Street
Allentown, Pa. 18101

Minutes - Final

City Council

Wednesday, March 17, 2021

6:00 PM

Council Chambers

Committee of the Whole - Homeless Strategic Plan

Public Comment Provisions during COVID-19: The meeting will be live streamed. The link to the meeting can be found on the city website with the agenda and legislation at <https://www.allentownpa.gov>. Council will receive comments on the legislation prior to the meeting and will consider all comments from city residents. All comments must include your name and address, including your city, and be emailed to Michael.Hanlon@AllentownPa.gov by 2 PM on the date of the meeting. Comments can also be registered using the ecomment provision on each agenda item found on the city website. Comments received from city residents by that deadline will be forwarded to the Mayor and Council members prior to the meeting and will also be noted at Courtesy of the Floor or Public Comment periods of the meeting. These timely received comments will also be posted on the City's webpage as a supporting document to the meeting. Any comments received on the meeting day, after the 2:00 pm deadline, will be forwarded to the Mayor and Council as soon as practicable. In addition, if you would like to speak during the meeting, please send your name, address, including municipality, and telephone number to the email address above indicating what issue you would like to speak on or call the office at 610.437.7555 and do the same, and you will be called during the meeting.

Roll Call: Council President Guridy

Present: 7 - Candida Affa, Cynthia Mota, Daryl Hendricks, Julio Guridy, Ed Zucal, Ce-Ce Gerlach, and Joshua Siegel

[15-4152](#) Info on Unsheltered Population

Attachments: [Allentown Homelessness Strategy FINAL](#)

[HC Presentation - March 17 - FINAL](#)

[Hope Village](#)

[OATH HOPE VILLAGE PRESENTATION](#)

[Courtesy of the Floor Comments](#)

[Hope Village Brochure](#)

[LVRHAB Statement to Allentown City Council 03242021](#)

[RCI comments to city council 2021_03_24](#)

Mr. Tom Harrington stated that they have a slide to support their

presentation.

Mr. Julio Guridy stated that Mr. Harrington wants to start the slide presentation.

Mr. Michael Hanlon stated that it was up there, but it is not there. He has IT coming in to give him a hand.

Mr. Julio Guridy suggested to give a little time for IT to come.

Mr. Michael Hanlon stated that the presentation is on the website and on Council's iPads. If you go to your iPad you will see your presentation.

Mr. Tom Harrington asked Mike if he share his computer.

Mr. Michael Hanlon stated that he can, but it will be more gyrations. He has IT coming. It should be an easy fix. They have a copy of the whole Report.

Mr. Julio Guridy stated that the presentation is on the iPad.

Mr. tom Harrington stated he has the privilege and honor to be the Chair of the Allentown Homeless Commission. He is joined by three other member of the Commission who will be presenting tonight. Michelle Wagner who worked in the Street Medicine Program, Pastor Charlene Smalls with Ripple Church, Rob Nicolella who is the Director of Catholic Charities. Between the four of us, we will walk through this presentation and they will share with them some information. The Allentown Homeless Commission was authorized by City Council by February of last year. The Mayor has the opportunity to appoint up to 15 members which he has done. The purpose of this Commission is to advised the Mayor and City Council on issues related to homelessness. To educate the public about homelessness in the city. To coordinate the efforts of various providers and government entities develop a strategy to help end homelessness in the city and hopefully develop a strategy to end homelessness in the city. He showed the slides with the members of the Commission. He thanked each of them for the time and hours they have given to this. As they started their work, they developed a very simple Vision Statement which states that they envision a day where everyone living in the city of Allentown will have safe and affordable housing. They have not accomplished that vision yet, but is hopeful that this plan will help us get there. One of the reasons for them not having to accomplish that vision is the lack of affordable housing in our community. We know that more than 1 in 4 renter spends half of their income on housing. It is recommended that a family should not spend more than 30 percent so they have funds left over for other essentials. We know 1 in 4 families that is not the case. We know there are 36 affordable

rental units for every 100 families that need one. We know that most new construction in the city and throughout the country is for higher income families. All those dynamics are working together to produce a situation in which we have a number of families that are either experiencing homelessness right now or at the brink of homelessness or maybe one medical emergency or one layoff away from losing their housing. Tonight we want to first start and share with you some information about homelessness in America. The big picture and things that we learned in this process of what is happening with homeless or who are the homeless and what we can do about it in the country and we want to narrow it in homelessness in the city of Allentown. He asked Michelle Wagner from the Street Medicine Program to talk about homelessness in our country.

Ms. Michelle Wagner stated that as you can see on the slide, stable housing is the foundation upon in which people build their lives and without a safe and decent affordable places to live, it is next to impossible to achieve good health, positive educational outcomes or reach economic potential. Homelessness in America takes many forms. Often contrary to stereotypes. Long term about 15 percent who are experiencing homelessness is chronic homeless adults. Studies show that 46 percent within the emergency shelters were intact families and 19 percent of families living in emergency shelters were fleeing domestic violence. According to the United States Conference on Homelessness, the age in which people are at highest risk of entering homeless shelters are infancy. Youth experiencing homelessness are particularly vulnerable. Children who are experiencing homelessness are impacted socially, emotionally and academically. Lack of housing stability is an important ingredient for success for children in youth in school. Children in a shelter for 90 days are 40 percent more likely to enter the child welfare system and every child in foster care costs between \$25,000 - \$37,000 per year. Among homeless youth, about 40 percent who identifies as LGBTQ+ and youth who are experiencing homelessness in general are commonly couch surfing and that leaves them particularly vulnerable to trafficking and/or drug or alcohol abuse and homelessness impacts our emergency rooms, detox centers and jails costing about \$30,000 per year, per person. Again, contrary to popular belief and stigma 50 percent of homeless adults does not suffer from a mental disability and one out of every 14 Americans experiencing homelessness at some point in their lifetime. It has not always been this way. Until the early 70s, most America communities had sufficient supply of rental housing that was affordable to low income families. Homelessness among children and youth did not exist the same way it does today. Over the last 35 years, the number of people experiencing homelessness in the US has remained high even in good economic times and that is due to several different factors. One being the lost of affordable housing and increases in foreclosures. Another is the inability of wages

and public assistance to keep pace with rising housing cost and the cost of living and the closing of the state Psychiatric Institutions without a commitment to the creation of some community based housing services. It hasn't always been this way. They are hopeful for the future. Eighty cities in the US have committed to reducing homelessness to a function zero. Built for a zero initiative. She stated that their question is if Allentown can make a similar commitment.

Ms. Charlene Smalls thanked Michelle for that information. She stated that they are here to talk about homelessness in Allentown. In 2019, 1,426 people in Allentown alone experienced homelessness and 63 percent of that is in Allentown. The Lehigh Valley encompasses three tri-cities and Allentown has a 63 percent homeless rate. In 2020, there were 527 new requests for help with homelessness. Of that 305 were literally homeless. She stated that 195 were families with children and 99 came for help for domestic violence situations. In 2020, Allentown School District identified 1,095 children who have experienced homelessness. That is the fourth largest number in the state of Pennsylvania. This includes families that are doubled up. That speaks to the way that homelessness is impacting our youth and our community. In 2020, 70 percent of our homelessness in the Lehigh Valley within the 18102 zip code which is the Center City Allentown district. The number one reason for homelessness is insufficient income. A family of four in Allentown earns an average of \$34,000 a year. A one bedroom apartment can range from \$1,000 to \$1,300. The number two was eviction and being kicked out. Number 3 was mental health. Number 4 is domestic violence and contrary to popular belief, Number 5 was substance abuse which is four percent of homelessness. Often uncounted is homeless youth. One in three adolescence, that is children between the ages of 13 and 17 will experience homelessness. In Allentown alone, 292 youth will experience homelessness this year. Again, it speaks to the impact of homelessness on our youth. She stated that the shelters are full. CACLV and the Sixth Street Shelter currently have a waiting list of three to four months. There is also no immediate shelter for families or single women and no housing for parents with intellectual disabilities with young children. That is another group that they often do not identify. She stated that with that information, she will turn it over to Tom.

Mr. Tom Harrington thanked Charlene stated that is kind of the background of homelessness in America and homelessness in Allentown. The commission has been meeting since September, monthly with a Strategic Planning group meeting in between the meetings. They developed five key strategies that they think will address the issue. He asked Rob Nicolella to walk them through the five strategies.

Mr. Rob Nicolella stated that the Five Key Strategies: Prevention is the

first, Property Owner Engagement is the second, Expand Housing Options is the third, Funding Sources is the fourth and the fifth is Community Wide Coordination. The first strategy is the key strategy of what they are trying to accomplish. Keeping people in their homes. This is by far one of the best outcomes if we can prevent them from being homeless in the first place. As many of you are aware because it is hitting the news quite regularly. There is \$20 million a new form of funding from Lehigh County. Allentown definitely encompasses Lehigh County. The money is available to any resident that might be in need. It got very generally guidelines. It has to be either directly or indirectly affected by Covid 19. There are a couple other stipulations. Get this information out the public as much as possible because it is available to all individuals who live in Lehigh County. In addition to that, he wanted to mention besides government funds, there are always needs for flexible dollars. One example of having flexible dollars is the Allentown School District's Rooster Fund. This gives a little bit more flexibility because government dollars usually has a variety of strings attached. The next slide is Property Owner Engagement Initiative. The first item is hiring housing navigators. These collaborate with landlords in order for them to better equip landlords so that they understand the population of homelessness in order for homeless individuals to move into housing. The next one is Landlord Incentives. When we talk about Landlord Incentives thing about sometimes we might need a second security deposit because the riskiness of bad credit from some of the individuals who might be housed. A Risk Mitigation Fund. This is a fund set aside in case a property gets damaged. We are having conversations with many property owners and usually this is very advantageous, but they know that this money is available to them. The last one, Landlord, Tenant Remediation almost cycles back to that navigators, but Landlord, Tenant Mediation is individuals who can help and be able to accommodate between the landlords and sometimes the homeless individuals who is into housing. Since the Housing Navigators and the Case Workers work together in order to be able to help with those things that might come about. Expanding Housing Options. Option1. Rapid Rehousing - when we talk about rapid rehousing, we are talking about moving in someone that might be homeless or doubled up right into an apartment. It has to have low barriers and when we mention low barriers we are talking about maybe they are still involved in drug treatment or have mental health services. The idea is to get them right into that apartment and into stable housing as quickly as possible. This method is less expensive and it is one of HUD best practices because it does not go through the cycle. It does not go through the shelter system. It does not go through the changes in housing. It goes right from homeless into an apartment. You do need wraparound case management services. They cannot be left there alone. The case management services are essential in order for this to work affectively. Option 2. Renovating Vacant Homes - this is consistent and a constant

ongoing, but maybe additional resources may need to be put forth in order to have this improved. There are about 2,100 vacant single homes in the city of Allentown. The Redevelopment Authority has taken 50 + properties and he stated that they support the Community and Economic Development idea of a Land Bank. He went into what a land bank is. A vacant, abandoned, tax delinquent property are often grouped together as problem properties because they destabilize neighborhoods, they create safety habits, they bring down property value and drain local tax dollars. Land Banks are intended to acquire title to those problem properties, eliminate the liabilities and transfer the properties to new responsible owners in a manner the result in outcome assisted with a community based plan. In our situation, those plans are possibility rehabbing for the homeless individuals or families in need. Option 3 - Permanent Supportive Housing. This is long-term housing for the chronically homeless. The other component to this is usually there is a disability that is involved. You have to connect the individuals to community services and because the disability involved in helping those homeless households, it does improve health outcomes and lowers public costs. Option 4 - Tiny Home Village. This is an example of a PILOT home. They are usually built for one or two people. They are efficient and low cost to implement. There are many examples of PILOT homes or Tiny Home Villages throughout the country. Some that can be used as an example. This is considered Austin, Texas; Orlando, Florida, and Ithaca, New York. Another idea is having a year-round emergency shelter be implemented. We are aware that the Allentown YMCA does implement the shelter in the winter months, but is it possible to expand this to a year-round shelter. When we propose the ideas such as this strategy, it is always good to have to develop new funding streams. That is what the strategy is for. Public Funding options might be considered. Like to designate a new tax revenue for housing such as an Affordable Housing Trust. Maybe a bond issue for Capital Expenses. Private/Public housing funding should also be considered. An example is low income housing with tax credits and that allocates tax credits to states that develop use and raise capital for construction for affordable rental housing. Community-wide corporation is strategy #5. What was mentioned earlier is a movement to end homelessness across communities. It focuses on different populations. For example: Chronic or veteran homelessness to learn what it takes to get to zero. They use a bidding list by each household and collaborate with agencies in the community to get the homeless population to zero.

Mr. Tom Harrington thanked Rob and stated that is a summary of the Five Strategies that we are recommending and a little bit of background about homelessness in our country and in our city. All of the things that the commission has recommended is all important and all needs to be done. We all can't do it all at once. We have come up with some suggested

short-term action items. He stated that they have five short-term action items. The first is obviously the rental assistance program. With \$20 million of federal funding coming into the community. They are already on it. The Catholic Charities are administering that right now and please, as Rob said let your constituency know about that. That is there to help people. He asked Rob how long can that rental assistance last a family like the buildings that Project Home built in Philadelphia or just renovating the apartments that we have right here.

Mr. Rob Nicolella stated that it could have 12 payments if there is a need. They have to qualify for the 12 payments.

Mr. Tom Harrington stated that secondly is the Property Owner or Landlord Engagement Initiative. We need to identify property owners who are willing to rent to people who are homeless and make more housing available. The third is the idea of building a Land Bank of renovated blighted properties. What a great idea? If you look at the expense that homeless people or people that are experiencing homelessness cause our society, we are going to spend \$30,000 to ER visits and/or shelter stays. Why not spend that on a blighted property and get a family into a permanent home or just create a Homeless Coordinator within the city. The other commissions that support the city's work he is told have full-time staff members to make sure the work progresses. We see a need for a person working within the city to help support these efforts and finally pursue the Build From Zero Initiative. Getting all the providers together and coming up with binding list is an activity that they think they should start right away. Those are five short-term actions. Long-term, we want to explore the concept of tiny homes and a tiny home village. He stated that he knows a number of Council heard about that and next Wednesday there is a meeting that's the focus just about the tiny homes village. The second is, as a community they need to develop more permanent supportive housing and that can take a lot of different formats like the buildings that Project Home build in Philadelphia or just renovating apartments that we have right here. Third, we definitely we need new and more shelter beds especially for families and people with disabilities and obviously pulling that all together are identifying some new funding streams. He stated just some closing thoughts. He stated that 1,400 homeless people is heartbreaking. It is overwhelming to think how many people and if you had 1,400 people in your City Council Chambers that were homeless, you would not fit them all in there. It is heartbreaking, but not an impossible obstacle or challenge to overcome for our city. We know we need to address those that are homeless tonight, but we also need to do things to prevent homelessness from happening in the future. You know we have to act quickly and we also know that we need to use data and facts and evidence to make sure we are doing the right thing. Finally, we need to turn down the temperature if

there is any temperature about this issue or any political aspects of this issue. This is not a political issue. This is a human issue and we need to realize that we all want to do the right thing. He stated on a personal note, for him this really hit home two years ago when he went out with Lehigh Valley Health Network Street Medicine Program and went to the homeless encampment across from the Parkettes. He stated that he drive there everyday and did not know that there were 25 - 30 people living back there. He spent about an hour walking around with folks and on the way back, we crossed this bridge and through the trees, we can see all the amazing new construction that was happening in the NIZ and downtown Allentown. He thought back and it struck him the disparity within walking distance, but secondly he thought that 10 years ago, who would have envisioned that downtown Allentown was going to look like it did today. He stated that he is sure there were some visionaries because that is why it is here. Most of us did not envision it. The question is, what is Allentown future housing for the homeless going to look like 10 years from now. Well, the future housing 10 years from now for the homeless looks like this, a tent for families, kids, adults, people with disabilities. Is that the future housing for the homeless 10 years from now or is this the future of housing? Some beautiful, safe, stable, supportive, affirming housing for people who need it. He closed with a story that he was in a meeting yesterday with Representatives from Lehigh County Children and Youth and they were talking about homelessness and the impact that has on the families that they are serving and one of the case workers recounted a story that in this past December there was a lady experiencing homelessness who could not get into a shelter and the police found her sleeping in her wheelchair in December, behind a building in an alley. He stated that it broke his heart just to think about that. Just to picture that. He read a quote from Dr. Marybeth Shinn who is a professor at Vanderbilt. She is a national expert. She studied homelessness for the past 30 years. She said that homelessness is a choice. It is not the choice by people living in the streets, but the choice of the rest of us to look the other way. He thanked Allentown City Council, the members of this Commission and the members of the public who are tuning in tonight to make the choice to not look the other way and realize that these are people that we need to help. He stated that he appreciates their time, attention and opened it up to any questions or comments that they might have.

Mr. Julio Guridy thanked Tom and stated that he appreciates the presentation. He stated that Council actually got the package of the slides and the video and the package of the presentation you had. He stated that this will be discussed further on the March 24 meeting. We will have a chance to continue that discussion. We do have, unfortunately another meeting at 6:30 PM and it is 6:31 PM right now. We are going to have to pass that and keep moving and hopefully, on the 24th we will have more

information and more questions. He thanked him for the great presentation.

ADJOURNED: 6:31 PM