



COUNTY OF ALBEMARLE

MEMORANDUM

To: Jeff Richardson, County Executive
CC: Trevor Henry, Assistant County Executive
From: Siri Russell, Director, Office of Equity and Inclusion
Date: July 27, 2019
Subject: Update on Consideration of Approach to Address Panhandling

Background

In early 2018, at the direction of the Board, staff engaged with the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), the Thomas Jefferson Area Coalition for the Homeless (TJACH), several localities nationally, and other key stakeholders to determine the fitness of installing signage discouraging panhandling in the County.

Given the lack of detailed information regarding panhandling activity in the County, at that time, and the support for a regional and strategic approach to discouraging panhandling, staff recommended that no signage program be initiated until TJACH has completed its assessment and developed a strategic/regional approach.

Since that time, TJACH has completed its three year (2019-2021) strategic plan, the 2019 Community Plan to End Homelessness.

Update on TJACH Efforts

2019-2021 Strategy

TJACH's 2019 Community Plan identifies seven guiding principles with aligned strategies and performance goals intended to provide focus and support for the community's homeless service system.

The 2019 Community Plan emphasis is on eliminating homelessness; its performance goals center around increasing incomes, reducing returns to homelessness, and a functional ending to both chronic and veterans' homelessness.

Reducing or eliminating panhandling is not specifically named, as according to Anthony Haro, Executive Director of TJACH, "panhandling is a byproduct of our community's economic and housing ecosystem. While it can often overlap with literal homelessness, it should not be seen as indicative of homelessness, rather indicative of deep poverty."

Mr. Haro has further remarked that in his experience with homeless services, "[he has] found that about half of the people panhandling in our community are experiencing literal homelessness, meaning they are living in a place not meant for habitation or in a shelter. The other half of people often stay in hotels or with friends and

family. That being said, in ten years of experience in homeless services, I have never met anyone panhandling who wasn't experiencing a deep level of poverty.”

Mr. Haro has identified the street outreach program as one of the key tools for TJACH to engage with unsheltered individuals who are panhandling. This program is highlighted in the 2019 Community Plan; one of the document’s guiding principles describes a focus on helping the hardest to serve/highest risk homeless population, with an accompanying strategic action step to create two new street outreach positions in 2019.

Street Outreach

During the summer of 2018, TJACH conducted a street outreach project seeking input from individuals experiencing homelessness in order to inform the 2019 Community Plan to End Homelessness. As a component of the project, street outreach staff interviewed individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Charlottesville/Albemarle.

These interviews included questions regarding whether they chose to panhandle and the reasons they chose to panhandle. Approximately 40% of respondents indicated that they did engage in panhandling at least occasionally; the vast majority (80%) of those individuals’ main reason for doing so was to pay for basic needs.

The information received during these interviews was used to inform the strategies/actions developed in the 2019 Community Plan.

TJACH believes street outreach to be a vital part of a successful homeless service system. In practice, street outreach relies on meeting people where they are and actively engaging over time to build trust and relationships-connecting those in need of assistance to available housing interventions or services.

Currently, TJACH has two funded outreach staff to service the five-county region, a number the organization believes to be insufficient to meet the identified needs. Scaling up its outreach projects locally would allow for deeper and more consistent engagement with unsheltered individuals and panhandling individuals-vital to establishing trust and connecting those individuals with available services. TJACH did apply for support for additional street outreach resources in the previous years ABRT process but did not receive funding; the organization will apply again during the upcoming cycle, as well as to other potential grantors..

In the interim, they will continue to prioritize the elimination of homelessness in our region.