

# Addressing Homelessness

When I ran for city council in Columbia, Missouri, the issues important to me were infrastructure, good government and sustainability. My work in social services did not feel as immediately relevant as my opponent's experience in business and city commissions. The day after the election, however, I ran into one of my clients who I knew to be homeless. He had seen my campaign signs and asked if I had won. When I told him yes, he said: "Wow! I feel represented. I've never felt that way before." At that point, I realized addressing homelessness was going to be a big part of my political agenda.

Columbia has a strong system of care with the active involvement of nonprofits, all levels of government, faith-based organizations and active citizens. Columbia city government has been a leader in these efforts, funding a strong social services program through a purchase of services model, as well as convening and participating in many community initiatives to address the basic needs of our most vulnerable residents.

## Understanding Homelessness

To understand homelessness, it is important to recognize two distinct groups. Individuals who are chronically homeless have been homeless for at least a year or have had four or more episodes of homelessness over three years. The main drivers of chronic homelessness are mental health and substance use disorders. The remainder of the homeless



population is a more transitory group, as individuals and families move in and out of homelessness. The main drivers of homelessness for this group is poverty and lack of affordable housing.

When we think about addressing homelessness, our thoughts immediately turn to homeless shelters. However, the research and best practices to address the issue is leading us to a "housing first" model. Housing first is the simple concept that homeless individuals and families should be provided with permanent housing and ongoing support to ensure they maintain it. Previous service delivery models made many preconditions about obtaining sobriety and/or engaging

in treatment to receive housing support. Often individuals would lose their housing for rule violations or not engaging in treatment.

Getting sober on the streets is nearly impossible. I first implemented a housing first approach in 2008. An individual I worked with had been on the streets of Columbia for more than 10 years and homeless most of his adult life. He had a personality disorder and was verbally combative and drank heavily on a daily basis. We obtained a housing voucher where his rent would not exceed a third of his disability income and provided support services. Within months he stopped drinking, was better engaged with his church community, and was housed for the rest of his life before passing away of natural causes last year. He reunited with his family and helped get some of his former homeless associates into treatment and housing. Not everyone who is housed has positive outcomes, but far more than most people would think.

## Strategy

As a city official, before addressing the issue, it is a good idea to understand the local conditions and think about strategy. SAMHSA (the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) recommends looking at these issues from a Recovery Oriented Systems of Care (ROSC) perspective. Effective ROSCs include close collaboration, a "no wrong door" approach, and a positive recovery-focused approach. While most service providers are organized around single population groups, it is important to note that systems

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**Operation Safe Winter is an anarchist mutual aid project who provides outreach and material support for rough campers.**

should be designed for those with the most barriers. If you assume everyone has an underlying mental health condition, substance use disorder, physical disability and trauma history, and provide services accordingly, everyone will be well served.

Federal homelessness services funding is organized regionally through Continuum of Cares (CoCs). Columbia has led the Boone County efforts by actively participating in the CoC. We have ensured close collaboration and led community issues first through a Basic Needs Coalition and now through the Functional Zero Task Force (FZTF). The concept of Functional Zero comes from federal efforts to end Veteran homelessness. Functional Zero recognizes some individuals will move into homelessness, but if we have

services to rapidly rehouse those individuals and families, we have still arrived at functionally zero homelessness.

The FZTF has compiled a “by name list” of homeless individuals, all of whom have been given a vulnerability assessment (the likelihood they will die on the streets). This collaboration allows for all providers to come to the same room and ensure limited housing resources go to those most in need. We also have the Columbia Housing Outreach Team (CHOT) that coordinates street outreach to identify and engage vulnerable individuals who are unsheltered.

The county has also led on this issue by examining the intersection of homelessness and incarcerated individuals with mental illness. They convene the judicial and law enforcement task force to collaborate on these complex issues and have led a sequential intercept mapping exercise to identify gaps in the service delivery system.

### Tactics

After a solid understanding of the underlying conditions, and ambitious but achievable goals and strategies have been developed, it is time to turn to tactics. I no longer believe there is a solution to homelessness, but a large array of small steps that will help us turn the corner on homelessness.

Columbia’s approach to homelessness in general has been a broad-based approach to address the gap between what it costs to live in Columbia with what people earn in Columbia. We have attempted to address affordable housing through changes in our development code, approving new

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**The Columbia community has engaged in specific initiatives around homelessness, including financial and law enforcement support for Room At The Inn (RATI).**

housing, fostering a Community Land Trust for permanent affordable housing, and administering our HOME investment partnership program and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds strategically. On the income side, we have incentivized new employers focusing on jobs that pay a living wage but do not require a college education, as well as supporting entrepreneurship and facilitating our existing employers to remain and expand.

The community has engaged in other specific initiatives around homelessness including financial and law enforcement support for Room At The Inn (RATI). Our community's churches have banded together to provide an inclement-weather shelter that rotates through the church community through the winter months. In my first year on the council, I championed funding and providing a police presence to help the faith-based community meet this critical need. With modest financial support they have supplemented their voluntary efforts with paid managers and been able to expand their efforts earlier and later to cover more of the



**Operation Safe Winter in Columbia, Mo.**

cold weather season. The City provides police overtime for officers to sign up to engage positively with the community, build relationships and set a tone of respect in addition to responding to calls when there is an occasional disturbance.

Last winter I heard from a CHOT member that RATI and all of the other shelters were full and it was going to be a bitterly cold night. After contacting the city manager with this

news he opened the municipal bus station as an overnight warming center through that cold spell, no doubt saving lives. From that experience, city staff developed a "Code Blue" policy where we will open an overnight warming center when forecasted temperatures are expected to be nine degrees or colder. We issue press releases, social media blasts and coordinate with the homeless outreach providers to get the word out.

Not every effort leads immediately to success. One of my early initiatives was to find a permanent location for our homeless day center that could also serve as an inclement weather shelter location and one-stop resource center. The City purchased a plot of land and issued an RFP for the project that would have been funded with CDBG funds with assistance by the veteran's administration. Unfortunately, not enough community engagement was made in advance. With much neighborhood opposition, the proposal was withdrawn.

Those efforts continue with a community-led coalition trying to move the project forward. In addition, new players continue to come on the scene. Operation Safe Winter is an anarchist mutual aid project who provides outreach and material support for rough campers. They have a mobile soup kitchen and provide tents, sleeping bags and other cold weather gear all funded by community donations.

I have also continued to address the issue professionally. In collaboration with Columbia's downtown Community Improvement District (CID) I created an assertive outreach and detoxification program. The CID funds outreach workers to engage those who are homeless or panhandling downtown and offer coaching, connection with services and some direct support to help move individuals into permanent housing. After some initial difficulties, the program has been a huge success, placing 15 individuals in permanent housing in the last two years.

Despite growing community competency and increased collaboration, we are barely treading water. Housing costs have skyrocketed in Columbia while wages have been flat. Even in a strong economy with minimal unemployment, poverty continues at a high rate and more individuals and families fall through the cracks. We continue to examine our housing policies to increase the amount of affordable housing. We continue to foster meaningful collaboration amongst all aspects of our community willing to address this issue. It is a horse race, with the problems and solutions both growing rapidly. I am proud of the accomplishments made and look forward to further engagement until homelessness is ended in our community. 🍃

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