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Community Solutions Workgroup on the Continuum of Housing and Services Needs

REPORT OF RECOMMENDATIONS **November 2017**

Purpose of Workgroup

The purpose of the Workgroup was to convene selected community stakeholders and city staff to make recommendations on prioritizing housing strategies to be adopted as part of the City's next 5-year Consolidated Plan and future Housing Levy. Through the Consolidated Planning process, the City gathers data and develops priorities addressing issues of housing, homelessness, community development, and related services. The workgroup provided input into the prioritization process, making recommendations for strategies on housing and homelessness to incorporate into the next Consolidated Plan and future Housing Levy. The 5-year Consolidated Plan is adopted by the City Council, following a robust public participation process, and review and recommendation from the Community Development Advisory Board.

Scope

The charge of this workgroup was to convene stakeholders from identified key community providers, residents, and city departments. Topics of focus included a process of identifying and prioritizing needs along the continuum of housing, including issues of homelessness, and the various housing options available. Specifically, the Workgroup was asked to:

- 1) Review the most recent Point-in-Time count and American Community Survey/Census data;
- 2) Review the inventory of emergency, transitional, supportive, and subsidized housing;
- 3) Identify the needs and gaps within the community; and
- 4) Recommend strategies and actions.

The ultimate goal was to identify the key issues, strategies and actions, and solutions for addressing homelessness and the continuum of housing needs in Bellingham. This group was not asked to identify strategies and actions to focus on unemployment, economic development, or education; its focus was on housing and directly related services.

Workgroup Members

City leaders and staff:

- Mayor Kelli Linville
- Councilmember April Barker
- Councilmember Dan Hammill
- Tara Sundin, Community & Economic Development Division Manager, Planning & Community Development Department (PCDD)
- Samya Lutz, Housing & Services Program Manager, PCDD
- Kate Bartholomew, Development Specialist II, PCDD

Community members:

- Ann Beck, CDAB, Representative, Ward 3
- Karen Burke, Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Services
- Alice Clark, Downtown Bellingham Partnership
- Katie Cruickshank / Riannon Bardsley, Northwest Youth Services
- Hill Cummings, Housing Advocate and Resident
- Ann Deacon, Whatcom County Health Department
- Steve Dillon, CDAB Representative, Ward 4
- Kate Donnelly, Bellingham Housing Authority
- Hans Erchinger-Davis, Lighthouse Mission Ministries
- Joe Nagel / Todd Medearis, Pioneer Human Services
- Emily O’Conner, Lydia Place
- Chris Philips, PeaceHealth
- Sue Sharpe, Chuckanut Health Foundation
- Greg Winter, Opportunity Council

Workgroup Schedule

TASK	July 2017	Aug 2017	Sept 2017	Oct 2017	Nov + 2017
Task 1: Define scope of work and timeline; overview presentation by staff of relevant data and trends					
Task 2: Four working meetings. Topics included:					
Review inventory of emergency, transitional, supportive and subsidized housing					
Identify needs and gaps from data, and brainstorm potential strategies for addressing them					
Prioritize among strategies to address needs along the continuum (homelessness to homeownership)					
Hold final meeting and produce recommendations, select a lead agency to develop each strategy					
Task 3: Communicate out on recommendations (produce a final report of recommendations)					
Task 4: Staff use recommendations to inform Consolidated Plan (Strategic Plan chapter) and next Housing Levy					

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Over the course of four working meetings, the group was presented with data about the existing needs and resources within the community, and was asked to address a series of questions. These included:

- Who are we trying to serve? What are the key issues? What information is still needed?
- What could your agency do to meet the current demand for subsidized rental housing? What are the barriers or systematic issues that affect your ability to succeed, or to better utilize your existing capacity? What other partners should we bring on board?

After compiling answers to the questions above, we asked:

- Have we captured the most critical barriers and gaps? Are additional strategies needed to address the gaps and barriers?
- What type of approach is best for each of these priorities? Who is the right lead to take charge of these priorities identified by the group?

In response to one of the earliest discussion questions about what information is needed, the group identified that we were lacking detailed information about the housing and service needs of individuals who are currently experiencing homelessness. To respond to this need, City staff worked closely with a group of local service providers who interact directly with the homeless population. Together we created a survey tool that case managers and other service staff could use to categorize the housing program needs, supportive service needs, and barriers to housing for well-known individuals experiencing homelessness. This exercise yielded detailed information about 244 households on the Housing Pool (housing waiting list), with results reviewed by the group during the fourth meeting. An additional 88 households were evaluated by the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), and these were later compiled with the previous dataset.

Gaps Identified

For the purposes of this workgroup, gaps were defined as deficits in any kind of resource required to meet the housing needs of our community (including funding, infrastructure, services, planning, coordination, or capacity). Barriers were defined as systematic issues, policies, or norms that prohibit the reaching of goals or operating at full potential.

[Gaps for low-income renters](#)

The workgroup was asked to start by identifying all gaps and barriers that make it difficult for low-income renters to find permanent, suitable housing. An extensive list of gaps and barriers was identified. These were compiled and summarized by City staff into the four broad categories below, keeping in mind that these categories have substantial overlap with the gaps that also affect the homeless population.

- **Inventory gaps:** An existing shortage of at least 500 rental units for low-income households, and an additional predicted shortage of 900-1,000 units over the next 5 years.
- **Service gaps:** Funding for 2.5 to 3 additional housing case managers needed immediately to fill available units and/or utilize available resources (rental vouchers).

- **Cultural gaps:** A climate in the general public that is conducive to addressing the identified barriers.
- **Coordination gaps:** A clear, comprehensive plan, backed by public/private partnerships; transparency among partners in order to understand the need for resources in real time; and access to good data about needs.

Additional gaps for the homeless population

They key barriers/areas of highest need identified by the service provider sub-group, the City, and Community Solutions Workgroup were:

- Services to promote social inclusion, community building, and independent living skills;
- Light-touch services available for those who could be housed stably with a little assistance;
- Job training and supported employment;
- Intensive, coordinated medical and behavioral health interventions; and
- Safe place(s) for people who are homeless to have shelter while the community works on other strategies.

Priority Strategies

For this workgroup, strategies were defined as possible solutions that may help either fill an identified gap or overcome an identified barrier. After a thoughtful analysis of the existing gaps and barriers in housing and services, the group identified and then prioritized a list of top strategies that could help to address those gaps and/or overcome the barriers. Those were:

- Acquire, preserve, and improve existing affordable apartment blocks in the city (purchase units in gentrifying areas);
- Change zoning to support a greater diversity of housing products in the market;
- Access & provide more funding for expanded case managers / landlord liaisons;
- Construct new housing units;
- Create an insurance or damage mitigation fund to minimize the risks to landlords renting to tenants with no/poor rental history;
- Expand mobile health services;
- Study options for general transportation services and decide if appropriate to integrate into other strategies (or keep as a standalone strategy);
- Create additional staffing to leverage resources, funding, and housing development deals more strategically and proactively; utilize innovative new funding models which are already being implemented elsewhere to build new housing;
- Create a rental rehab program that makes funding available to landlords who rent to low-income tenants who utilize vouchers for upgrades required to pass more stringent inspections;
- Conduct a housing equity audit by neighborhood;
- Increase programs that enable and empower tenants receiving subsidized housing to transition out and become integrated w/in the community;
- Check-in regularly between local funders and service providers to adapt to changing needs and trends;

- Develop a community liaison or trained peer health worker program to help keep people in housing and integrate with the broader community;
- Coordinate among services and programs to promote social inclusion and community building for those exiting homelessness;
- Light-touch case management services available for those experiencing homelessness who have lower vulnerability scores to get them housed quickly;
- Assess existing workforce development programs, and cultivate relationships with employers and/or develop linkages among programs to better serve the needs of those experiencing or recently leaving homelessness; and
- Develop and offer training community-wide about how to connect with and include those experiencing homelessness.

With many diverse stakeholders at the table, the group was asked to put forward a single lead agency for each priority strategy on the list above. This agency would be on-point for advancing the strategy and flushing out next steps, though not necessarily responsible for carrying out the strategy.

The list above has been divided into strategies which are 1) either underway or ready to go, and 2) need more research to be fully developed.

Strategies Ready for Implementation

[Acquire, preserve, and improve existing affordable apartment blocks in the city \(purchase units in gentrifying areas\)](#)

Summary: This strategy addresses the gap in affordable housing inventory by preserving existing stock. The City in partnership with agencies would support the strategic acquisition of apartment buildings which are still affordable for low-income residents with a goal of preventing future displacement. This strategy would target neighborhoods at risk of gentrification based on recent or planned infrastructure investments or other triggers that correspond to increased property values over time.

Lead agency: City **Partner agencies:** All local and regional affordable housing development, management, and financing agencies; County; private development community

[Construct new housing units](#)

Summary: This strategy addresses the gap in affordable housing inventory by supporting more housing developments managed specifically for rental to low-income households who face housing insecurity. This strategy also increases the overall housing stock available in the City, contributing to slowing the escalation of housing costs.

Lead agency: City **Partner agencies:** All local and regional affordable housing development, management, and financing agencies; County; private development community

[Change zoning to support a greater diversity of housing products in the market](#)

Summary: The strategy addresses the inventory gap by making more housing available at price-points that are affordable to working families and individuals through the private market. The current land area of Bellingham is predominantly zoned for single-family housing only, leaving fewer areas where more affordable housing types – like townhomes, duplexes, and apartments – are allowed. Changing these zoning regulations would accommodate other types of building in more areas of the City, instead of concentrating additional density and multi-family housing in a few pockets.

Lead agency: City **Partner agencies:** All – community advocacy

[Access and provide more funding for expanded housing case managers/landlord liaisons](#)

Summary: This strategy addresses service gaps. Currently, housing service providers have seen their caseloads continue to grow, without extra funding. By funding more case managers, households on the housing interest pool could be moved into appropriate, stable housing more quickly. Landlord liaisons have also been successful in working with private landlords and property management companies to make more housing units available to those who have housing vouchers or barriers to housing in their rental history.

Lead agency: Whatcom County **Partner agencies:** City, PeaceHealth, and partner agencies providing housing case management and/or landlord liaison services

[Create a rental rehab program that makes funding available to landlords who rent to low-income tenants for upgrades required to pass inspections](#)

Summary: Property owners who rent to Section 8 and other voucher holders must pass health and safety inspections, which are a bit more rigorous than Bellingham’s own rental registry inspection. In order to increase inventory available to these tenants, this strategy would develop a funding program which landlords could use to make health and safety repairs and upgrades to meet those standards.

Lead agency: Opportunity Council **Partner agencies:** Lydia Place, Bellingham/Whatcom County Housing Authority, Northwest Youth Services, City

[Housing equity audit by neighborhood](#)

Summary: This strategy addresses the cultural gap and barrier of public opposition to allowing more diversity of housing types in all neighborhoods. In the past, cities have done equity audits of public investments such as parks and transportation. Conducting a systematic housing equity audit would allow decision-makers to talk in more concrete terms about the disparities in access to housing by neighborhood, and could inform planning decisions.

Lead agency: City **Partner agencies:** TBD

Regular check-ins between local funders and service providers to adapt to changing needs and trends

Summary: This strategy addresses a collaboration and communication gap. Some service providers reported that their grants sometimes held them to standards that were not appropriate or effective measures of success, and that situations and needs are ever changing. Having more frequent, face-to-face communication with donors, and having donors strategically align standards with one another whenever feasible, could help avoid some of these problems and make service dollars more impactful.

Lead agency: City **Partner agencies:** County

Develop a community liaison or trained peer health worker program to help keep people in housing and integrate within the broader community

Summary: Throughout the workgroup process, the idea of enlisting the expertise of those who have lived experiences with homelessness or housing instability resurfaced again and again. This strategy could help address a service gap that exists where the appropriate role of a caseworker ends. Trained peers or community liaisons with lived experience could be available 24/7, and trained to assist those exiting homelessness with independent living skills, coping mechanisms, social inclusion, and healthy choices.

Lead agency: Chuckanut Health Foundation **Partner agencies:** Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness, Opportunity Council, PeaceHealth, North Sound Accountable Community of Health, Whatcom Alliance for Health Advancement, County

Coordinate among services and programs to promote social inclusion and community building

Summary: The desire to belong and to be accepted is a fundamental human need. Our workgroup discussions and survey of service providers revealed that a lack of social inclusion is a significant barrier to successful housing and recovery for the homeless population, and no current programs explicitly target this gap. There are many local community organizations (such as various interest clubs, WWU, faith groups) who could participate by introducing clients to a new hobby, or giving them something to do and new friends with whom to do it. There is a need to coordinate and enlist volunteers to make this happen.

Lead agency: Lighthouse Mission Ministries **Partner agencies:** Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness, partner agencies providing case management for people experiencing homelessness or newly housed, faith-based groups, other community groups

[Light-touch case management services available for those with lower vulnerability scores to get them housed quickly](#)

Summary: As the number of clients on the housing pool grows, caseworkers by necessity prioritize those who have the highest degree of vulnerability. That can mean that households who have relatively lower level intensity of needs can remain on the waiting list for many months. This strategy is meant to address that service gap.

Lead agency: Opportunity Council **Partner agencies:** County, City, partner agencies in the Coordinated Entry system

[Community-wide training about how to connect with and include homeless population](#)

Summary: Some organizations within the community (such as the public library, school district, and health department) have had great success with trainings that help public employees better understand the trauma of homelessness and create more welcoming environments for those who are experiencing homelessness. This strategy would help to address a lack of social inclusion by offering training at the community level.

Lead agency: Whatcom County **Partner agencies:** City, Whatcom County Coalition to End Homelessness

Strategies Requiring More Research

[Increase programs that enable and empower tenants who receive subsidized housing to eventually transition out and become integrated within the community](#)

Summary: Housing costs continue to rise, even as wages do not. There is a disincentive for beneficiaries of low-income housing to seek employment opportunities or earn higher wages, as doing so could disqualify the tenant from their housing, without the ability to afford living anywhere else. This strategy aims to investigate the prevalence of this ‘benefits cliff’ with regard to housing, and learn how to help households eventually transition to financial independence.

Lead agency: Bellingham/Whatcom County Housing Authority **Partner agencies:** City, County, Whatcom Dream

[Expand mobile health services](#)

Summary: The most vulnerable clients in need of a variety of physical and mental health services have multiple barriers to making and keeping appointments at disbursed office locations. Bringing the services to the client is a best practice for overcoming these barriers, though the availability of these mobile services is less than the need.

Lead agency: County Health Department **Partner agencies:** Unity Care, Sea Mar (federally qualified health centers)

[Study options for general transportation services and decide if appropriate to integrate into other strategies \(or keep as a standalone strategy\)](#)

Summary: Transportation is a major barrier for many homeless individuals and families as they search for housing. Opportunities to get to apartment viewings and turn in rental applications can be spontaneous and immediate. Additionally, caseworkers report they spend a significant amount of time with clients just driving them to appointments for various services. General transportation services may be needed, depending on how this issue aligns with other strategies being pursued.

Lead agency: City **Partner agencies:** TBD

[Create an additional staff position to leverage resources, funding, and development deals more strategically and proactively; and utilize innovative new funding models which are already being implemented elsewhere to build new housing](#)

Summary: This strategy is meant to generate new funding sources and new affordable housing units via a new staff position crafted to leverage funding and multiply housing resources. More research would seek to define specific tasks and services needed to promote additional development and generate financing interest.

Lead agency: City **Partner agencies:** Opportunity Council, PeaceHealth

[Assess existing workforce development programs, cultivate relationships with employers and/or develop linkages among programs to better serve clients who are homeless and formerly homeless](#)

Summary: A gap identified by the workgroup was appropriate job training and employment opportunities for those who have experienced homelessness. There are several organizations in Bellingham that offer job training services, and more research is needed to see if these programs have the capacity to place individuals that may have multiple barriers to employment.

Lead agency: Opportunity Council **Partner agencies:** Northwest Youth Services

[Create an insurance or damage mitigation fund to minimize the risks to landlords renting to tenants with no/poor rental history](#)

Summary: This strategy addresses both cultural and inventory barriers to housing. In an already tight housing market with low vacancy rates, a housing voucher can inhibit the likelihood of finding affordable housing. This strategy would offer an incentive to landlords, in the form of a fund they could tap into if there were damages to any unit rented to Section 8 or other voucher-holders exceeding the security deposit.

Lead agency: Opportunity Council **Partner agencies:** Bellingham/Whatcom County Housing Authority