FINAL DRAFT (October 18, 2010)

Citizen Review Panel Recommendations on

Encampments and Seattle's Unsheltered Homeless Population

The Citizen Review Panel on Housing and Services for Seattle's Unsheltered Homeless Population recommends the City of Seattle sanction and offer available property to a self-governed encampment to help meet the immediate survival and safety needs of individuals in our community who have no access to safe shelter.

While the Citizen Panel endorses the establishment of an encampment, panel members also strongly urge the City of Seattle to continue to aggressively develop permanent, affordable housing options for individuals and families transitioning out of homelessness. Encampments, along with other forms of substandard housing, should not become a substitute for safe, affordable permanent housing.

Background

The 2010 One-Night Count of people without shelter found 1,986 people outside in Seattle. The community's shelter system simply does not have the capacity to shelter all these in need. Currently Seattle is home to SHARE/WHEEL's Tent City 3, which operates under a Consent Decree with the City, and is also home to Nickelsville, a more informal operation run by Veterans for Peace, a 501 (c) 3 organization.

At a time when there are many unsheltered individuals on the streets, encampments can provide a viable housing option. An encampment can provide privacy, community and the freedom to come and go for very low-income individuals at a low cost. The appeal of encampment traditions in Seattle is that they provide 24-hour access, can accommodate couples and pets, and offer other benefits of self-governance. Well-managed encampments here and across the country have demonstrated they can provide community, safety and dignity in people's lives.

While encampments may be a low-cost, stop-gap alternative to more permanent housing options, moving any type of shelter every three months makes focusing on acquiring permanent housing more difficult. Encampment situations, legal arrangements and land use issues have to date required Tent Cities to move at least every 90 days. Seattle has a number of potential sites for a semi-permanent encampment, but establishing access may be difficult. Finding a suitable site for a long-term encampment may be challenging but it should lead to better outcomes for its residents.

Considerations

Location and facilities:

The location for an encampment should provide reasonable access to key services such as transportation. A measure of this is proximity to a bus stop. Nickelsville residents have told us they don't mind a semi-industrial area, as long as the neighbors are

“friendly.” Members of the Mayor’s committee worry, however, about the message of “marginalization” signaled by an isolated location.

An encampment should have access to adequate hygiene facilities, ensure for the timely removal of trash, and provide appropriate facilities for food preparation. We strongly recommend the site have access to electricity and running water. Access to a sewage hook up would reduce ongoing costs for removing waste.

In addition, the Review Panel recommends the City of Seattle allow alternatives to tents for residents. In particular, semi-permanent built structures that offer shelter from wind and rain would increase privacy and comfort.

The location of an encampment should also take into consideration the possible impact to the surrounding community. The City of Seattle should ensure that neighbors are provided appropriate notice of and have an opportunity to comment.

Cost:

Encampments have proven to be short-term alternatives to more costly permanent housing options. There are both fixed and variable costs. Nickelsville reports its variable costs to shelter 100 people are about $3000 per month, including honey buckets, sink, garbage removal, cell phones, printing, food for meetings, and occasional moves. This does not include bus tickets, estimated at $1200 per month, nor does it include salary costs for staff (regular leadership and communication people.) Tent City 3 reports costs of $6,000 per month, which includes bus tickets and salary costs for staff.

While encampments are generally low-cost, the Review Panel strongly urges the City of Seattle to weigh these costs against other potential investments that may have equal or greater positive impact in the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness. A 2005 City Council study suggests that encampments cost less than the cost of a professionally managed shelter. However, encampments should not be considered an alternative for professionally managed shelters that serve individuals who are not able to succeed in a self-managed environment.

Organizations operating encampments must set budgets that are sustainable and that emphasize new funding resources. Encampments cannot expect operating expenses to come from the City of Seattle. Encampments are expected to raise some portion of their own expenses. The City and County should consider contributing the public services they are in the business of providing, such as bus tickets and utilities.

Various alternatives to the low-cost, self-managed model were considered. These alternatives were rejected due to increased costs of implementation. These additional costs might make encampments more costly than more permanent solutions.

Size:

It is recommended that the initial size of an encampment not exceed 100 – 150 individuals. The Panel recognizes that a single encampment will not meet the need of all unsheltered people. The population for whom a self-managed encampment is appropriate may, however, be limited.

A larger encampment may be divided into 2 or 3 “neighborhoods,” where most of the day-to-day self management of the community would occur. If Seattle continues to have large numbers of unsheltered individuals with no other recourse to shelter, and if no other cost effective solutions have become available, consideration should be given to ether increasing the size or number of semi-permanent encampments.

It is recommended that consideration of increasing the number or size of encampments only be considered once agreed upon benchmarks are met. These benchmarks could include encampment governance, maintenance of encampment site and encampment structures, funding capacity, and accessibility of services.

If benchmarks are met, the City of Seattle should consider increasing capacity at that site (if physically possible) or another encampment begun.

Management:

The current self-management of encampments provides a number of benefits including resident empowerment and low cost. These reasons suggest a continuation of facilitated self-management is desirable.

A renewable lease agreement negotiated with the sponsoring non-profit is recommended. Renewal would be conditioned on the meeting of City-defined expectations in a written agreement. If renewal is not offered, the Encampment would have to close or go find private property on which to continue its operations, such as a church. It would be expected that the encampment operator fully honor all contract provisions, including those addressing the end of the encampments tenancy.

The Review Panel recommends that the City of Seattle work with the present encampment manager of Nickelsville (Veterans for Peace - Chapter 92) to establish a semi-permanent encampment. The city of Seattle should also consider contracting the Veterans for Peace for the on-going management of a semi-permanent encampment.

Please note that at the present time the Review Panel cannot recommend contracting directly with SHARE/WHEEL. The City of Seattle’s consent agreement with SHARE/WHEEL would make it difficult for SHARE/WHEEL to manage an encampment under the conditions set forth in this recommendation. However, once the consent agreement expires it may be advisable for the City of Seattle to work with both Veterans for Peace and SHARE/WHEEL to create the strongest possible management system for an encampment.

Regardless of the management arrangement the encampment should work with the City of Seattle to ensure that all pertinent insurance coverage is up-to-date and provides appropriate coverage to encampment residents.

Rules

The rules for a sanctioned encampment need to be similar to those currently upheld by the self-governed Nickelsville encampment, including no drugs, no weapons, required ID, and no housing for sex offenders. Encampment governance can establish rules on pets, children, medications, and duties.

We recommend the self-governed structure include a process to conduct impartial hearings for rule violations, and for an appeals process.

Support Services:

The Review Panel strongly recommends that encampment managers provide residents access to information on how to access support services for finding jobs, housing, health care and the like. The Review Panel recommends that the encampment provide facilities suitable for other service providers to use on-site. Further, contracting with agencies providing outreach and engagement services may be useful as a way to link encampment residents to critical support services.

Eco Village:

Ideally, we envision the encampment as a place that empowers residents to organize collective enhancements to their site. Perhaps an organic garden or a central building to serve as a kitchen and gathering place. Architects and engineers might offer to showcase their green energy designs or other design concepts, while transferring skills to encampment residents. Universities and schools could also partner with the village to create learning opportunities for students and residents.

Data Reporting Requirements:

We recognize the need to monitor our progress towards the goal of eliminating homelessness. It is reasonable to expect the entity selected to provide management and oversight to an encampment to comply with any data reporting requirements mandated by the City of Seattle or any other public or private funder.

Alternatives to Encampments:

Encampments provide a viable, low-cost alternative to individuals who are unsheltered. However, there are other possible alternatives the City of Seattle may want to consider in addition to encampments. With some additional funding it may be possible to expand the availability of faith-based shelters, although we acknowledge those may not meet the needs of all people. The City should also consider opening public spaces (e.g. City Hall) for the use of individuals seeking shelter.

Evaluation:

The City of Seattle shall conduct regular evaluations of encampment management.

Final note

While the Review Panel does recommend the creation of a City of Seattle sanctioned semi-permanent encampment, it does so knowing that an encampment should never be considered a long-term solution to homelessness. The Review Panel urges the City of Seattle to continue to pursue real, lasting and permanent solutions to homelessness. The Review Panel recognizes that providing unsheltered individuals access to a safe

alternative is humane and important. The Review Panel also recognizes that once established, an encampment is likely not to close until the level of shelter and housing in this community is sufficient to meet the demand.