

Night-by-Night Shelter Community Forum

SW Washington Fairgrounds – Blue Pavilion

March 31, 2022 – 5PM-7PM

Attendance

Seventy-two community members attended, not including additional county staff who helped run the forum. Materials were available in English and Spanish, and translators were present to conduct a bilingual forum. However, none of the attendees expressed a preference for Spanish translation when asked; with the audience's agreement, the forum proceeded in English only.

Introduction

As background for the forum, participants received the following information:

- **A night-by-night shelter is a type of emergency housing.**
 - It opens each afternoon, providing a place to sleep, eat, shower, and other necessities.
 - It closes each morning; those who stayed must go elsewhere.
 - The shelter opens again that afternoon, restarting the process.
 - No spots are guaranteed from one day to the next, so any given person has a chance to find shelter there each night.

- **The reason for having the forum is that, one way or another, a permanent night-by-night shelter is coming to the Centralia/Chehalis area.**
 - There are humanitarian reasons for a shelter, such as kindness, community, or basic human support. Even without those, however, there are legal reasons:
 - First, under a federal court ruling, *Martin v. City of Boise*, it is unconstitutional for a community to enforce rules about sleeping in public or camping on public property unless it provides emergency housing.
 - You cannot punish someone for having nowhere to go; you must offer a place to go. We have laws about where people can sleep in public, so the constitution requires us to have a shelter with space available each night.
 - Second, under a law passed last year, HB 1220, cities and counties must plan for and include emergency housing in their areas. Cities are now required to allow shelters wherever hotels are allowed; one could pop up there at any time.
 - A state agency will study emergency housing in each area and make recommendations about shelters needed and where they should go.
 - Cities and counties cannot simply ignore the recommendations. If cities and county do not follow them, they will need to demonstrate that they have enough emergency housing, or else be found in violation of the law.

- **Through the forum, the local community can set goals and priorities for any night-by-night shelter program, rather than a state agency doing so.**
 - The people of Lewis County do not like state agencies to tell them how to arrange their communities. We want to do this for ourselves.
 - It is better to plan for emergency housing now—to have the community, not a state agency, decide what is important when establishing a night-by-night shelter—choosing how the shelter runs based on its values.
 - The forum feedback will define broad themes about what the community finds important about a night-by-night shelter, which will go into a request for proposals (RFP) for the shelter services.
 - An RFP is a process in which the county publicizes a project to be accomplished, along with goals, preferences, and scoring criteria about what makes one way of doing it better than another. Private applicants submit proposals about how they can do the project to meet those goals, preferences, and scoring criteria. The best proposal wins the project.
 - The community’s values and concerns expressed in the forum will go into the RFP’s goals, preferences, and scoring criteria. Any applicant to run the shelter will have to describe how it will serve these values and concerns. The applicant that best demonstrates how it will do so gets the job.

Discussion and Results

Participants then engaged in individual brainstorming, small-group discussion, and full-group discussion on the following question:

What are the benefits and problems of a night-by-night shelter?

Participants were encouraged to share and listen to all perspectives, but not debate right and wrong. Collectively, the community identified the themes and issues in the photographs and tables below. The participants did not rank the themes or issues. Therefore, the benefits and problems are not listed in any order of priority. Please see the next pages for the materials.

Community Participants' Responses



Benefits					
Regulations / Administration		Public Safety		Humanitarian Purpose	
Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion
Local control	Gives community control of shelter instead of state directing the activity. [Also included as a problem – see below.]	Allows laws to be enforced	Right now, not allowed to move folks along if they are staying in an inappropriate place; shelter provides an appropriate place to go	Basic needs met	[No additional discussion]
Meet requirements	Allows community to meet constitutional or other legal requirements	Reduce crime	[No additional discussion]	Moral imperative	[No additional discussion]
Job Opportunities		Perceived public safety	Because there is a location where those experiencing homeless receive services, people feel safer because they may not wander into other residential areas.	Place to sleep out of the elements	[No additional discussion]
Card	Summary of Discussion			Safe place for vulnerable population	People who are fleeing domestic violence or other bad home situations have a place to go
Job opportunities for shelter workers	[No additional discussion]				
Provide jobs	[No additional discussion]		[Additional discussion] This category is distinct from the Community Benefits/Reduced Costs category because it is about improved public safety, not reduced financial burden for community services.	Shows we care about our community members experiencing homelessness	Related to moral imperative

Benefits (cont'd)					
Centralized Services / Outreach		Next Steps / Admin. Plan & Execution		Community Benefits / Reduced Costs	
Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion
One location for services and interactions	Per an attendee, studies in other cities show that having one location for services improved their effectiveness	NGO & other public assist at a committed level	Other organizations will see how they can fit in and build their work upon the shelter's baseline. Q: Is a night-by-night shelter going to attract other services, since it is temporary for residents? Response: It needs to be a part of a greater system of services that addresses other needs.	Reduce stress on law enforcement and EMS – time & resources	Per an attendees, studies show that a shelter reduces costs for services
Location for outreach to visit	[No additional discussion]			Reduce costs to healthcare and emergency services	[No additional discussion]
Connection to services	[No additional discussion]			Late Additions (turned in at end)	
				Card	Summary of Discussion
Security for people, place for support services	[A late-turned in card elaborated that it would reduce need for encampments.]	Must be stable to achieve progress	To get your life in order, you need an address, a phone number for a job interview. Q: Does a night-by-night shelter provide that stability if you are not guaranteed a spot? Response: In some locations, this is permitted.	Place to clean up for job interview if help services available	[Compare to "Humanitarian Purpose;" "Centralized Services"; and "Next Steps"]
Point of contact for resources	Similar to other services cards			Provide a liaison between homeless and shelter authorities	[Compare to "Centralized Services"]

Problems

Feasibility/Operating Procedures/Practical Concerns		Neighborhood Impacts	
Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion
Location – available transport	There needs to be transport to and from the shelter's location; there is no good shelter location within walking distance. Twin Transit sent in written comment after the forum that the shelter should be on a transit line, open/close during transit hours, and use the Unite Us service-coordination platform.	Lowers property values – Environmental concerns in area	You can tell where shelters are in other cities by encampments and garbage nearby, as people congregate by these facilities
Security (drug-weapon control)	It is a problem for those staying at the shelter and the community if there are no security personnel	Location of Facility	Someone will object to the location no matter where it is located. This can't be fully solved but should be addressed. Also, if the facility is located close to a drug trafficking area, it may not be successful, whereas if it is near hospital and care facilities, it would be more successful.
What you do with homeless who don't obey rules	If it is an open facility with no rules, that poses problems. If it is a more closed facility with rules, and you exclude people who don't follow them, they may camp outside in the area, causing different problems.		
Facilities maintained long-term (toilets, trash, etc.)	This look nice when new, but in a year or two it can have trash everywhere and sewage problems. You have to maintain it.	How many beds or how many shelters	Need to define how many beds and how many shelters—we already have some of these. What makes this different? Why do we need more?
Safety of staff / volunteers	If someone has a mental health issue, it can be dangerous for staff. The shelter needs to address safety to function.	Problem protecting surrounding property from transgression	This is a problem if it is not addressed; addressing it is a benefit.
Crisis staff at shelter? (SUD/MH)	There needs to be a plan and staff for substance use and mental health assistance - without it there can be safety problems or other issues		

Problems (cont'd)					
Local Control		Stigma from "Shelter" Concept		Late Addition (turned in at end)	
Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion
Local Control	Community is responsible for shelter's success or failure, and may need to bear financial burden. Even if there is state funding now, it might cease. [Also included as a benefit – see above.]	Stigma	People are proud. Some who have a living arrangement, like in their cars, do not want to come to a shelter for people who are "homeless"	Lacks sustainability	[Compare to "Symptom Management" and "Feasibility / Accountability"]
Quality Control		Eligibility & Population		Feasibility/Accountability	
Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion	Card	Summary of Discussion
Over-servicing	Having too many services in one area for individuals can trap them in a never-ending cycle where they do not become self-sufficient	What about families with children?	Don't want to house families with children in the same place as single individuals. Need a policy for what to do if families show up. If it can accommodate children it is a benefit.	Cycle if no intervention	Night-by-night shelter can lead to an environment where people just cycle through without change; they need to break the cycle to see improvement
Attracting new homeless to area	Whether perception or reality, there is a concern that a shelter would bring people here and end up serving those from outside of the area	Accommodating pets necessary	Folks with companion animals will not come if they can't bring their pets, but you need a plan to manage this for the safety and comfort of others	Mental/medical services need to follow through	Talking to someone once does not work; need to follow to address need; if a provider has just one touch with people, they lose trust in the system and won't accept future help; this is under-servicing. Won't this always be a problem at a night-by-night shelter where people leave? That's why it is important to have a means to follow through with people even if they leave the shelter, or else you make no progress
Symptom Management		Mixing families with sex offenders and people actively using	[No additional discussion]		
Card	Summary of Discussion				
Stigma	Experiencing homelessness is stigmatized in the community, independent the shelter, and a shelter does not address that				
No root-cause solutions	Shelter is a small piece of a larger problem that can't be solved in one night or with this facility alone				

Optional Attendee Survey

Participants were also invited to fill out an optional survey to provide more information. The surveys contained three open-ended questions:

1. What are your concerns about a night-by-night shelter in the Centralia/Chehalis area?
2. What solutions do you think could address your concerns?
3. What other thoughts would you like to share about a night-by-night shelter?

Demographics

Twenty-one surveys were returned. Almost all of those who returned the forms supplied optional demographic information, reflecting a mix of ages (from 26 to 66+) and estimated hourly incomes (no income or low income to \$61+ per hour). The large majority of attendees owned their own single-family residence, although a few individuals identified renters or as houseless. Almost all of the attendees identified as white.

Results

Multiple participants expressed concerns that:

- The local community would bear the financial cost of the shelter;
- The shelter would enable homeless people and might be abused by its occupants, rather than giving them a viable path that they would take to heart;
- The shelter would have insufficient capacity;
- A night-by-night shelter is a band-aid (even if necessary), and won't do enough to move people out of homelessness, help them long term, or increase affordable housing;
- The night-by-night format has limitations, such as the lack of shelter during the day when it rains or the lack of stability;
- The shelter's location must allow access for its occupants, but should be safe and at a distance from surrounding residential areas;
- The shelter would attract more homeless people to the area than it could help; and
- Negative community sentiment or lack of acceptance would prevent the project.

Multiple participants suggested the following solutions in whole or in part:

- Establish this night-by-night shelter year-round, permanently.
- Nest the night-by-night shelter within a hub of supportive services addressing mental and physical health, substance abuse, life-coaching, education, job training, peer support, transitional housing / bridge to permanent housing, transportation, childcare, and daytime storage.
- Engage public, private, and faith-based community partners to ensure that service providers are active, available, and committed to serve this population/facility.
- Ensure safety and security at the shelter, with clear rules, enforcement, and incentives (including a law enforcement presence)—and enforce current laws concerning vagrancy to create a reinforcement structure for the shelter and address community impacts.
- Establish time limits to avoid abuse / a cycle occupants never grow out of.

Multiple participants offered the following additional thoughts, or parts thereof:

- There should be “no free lunch”: the shelter occupants should help with maintenance and upkeep, and the shelter should direct occupants into services for a next step or longer-term improvement to their situation to reduce future need for services.
- The shelter should plan for the diverse needs of the populations it may serve, such as the elderly, families with children, un/underemployed, mentally ill, substance users, or people being released from institutions.
- A nonreligious option should be available.
- The county should continue to work on affordable and available housing outside of this shelter program.

Thank You!

Public Health & Social Services, and the Lewis County government as a whole, is deeply grateful to all who attended and participated at the forum.