

Joint problem statement submitted to supplement Stephen Whitaker testimony
Mayday 2020

This topic is expansive and deserving of more thorough treatment. What follows is a brief outline of thinking, which is admittedly incomplete and oversimplified. In my limited experience, the forces currently in play make a fundamental implicit assumption that those experiencing homelessness have failed, and will continue to fail. This will be refuted by many individuals working with this population - but on an institutional level, we prioritize protecting funds from abuse by the occasional bad actor over making opportunities accessible for those who might succeed. We often want to solve problems by throwing resources or more detailed planning at an existing system. And this can be successful to some degree, although with diminishing returns. I often find that it is more effective to examine the transitions between systems and components. These are often murky and poorly articulated, and often where things fall apart. I believe a more thorough examination of the entire social services structure and its relationship to the private sector could illuminate some unidentified opportunities to increase efficacy, measured in terms of individual stability and an overall reduction in homelessness. An initiative of this magnitude needs to be chartered at a high enough level to secure the resources needed.

Basic assumptions about the current state:

The current infrastructure - consisting of state, local, and private (non-profit) organizations does not adequately meet the needs of the population experiencing homelessness.

All actors are well intentioned and acting in good faith, and are underfunded and understaffed.

We understand the needs of those experiencing homelessness, but each actor involved encounters obstacles that prevent them from being more effective in providing assistance.

The system is complex, disparate, and challenging to navigate, despite efforts to coordinate services

The state has a need for fiduciary responsibility and accountability for public monies spent.

Desired future state

Services are available in a way that accounts for obstacles experienced as part of homelessness - i.e. access to transportation, ability to maintain a schedule, lack of internet access, etc.

Temporary shelter offers privacy, security, stability, and access to basic amenities such that expected social norms can be reasonably achieved (personal hygiene, timeliness, etc)

The system is able to work on an individual level to ensure that needs are being met and progress is possible.

Partnership between state aid agencies and private sector opportunities allows for a coordinated and well articulated transition into stability - i.e. medical care; housing, employment, and transportation; other supportive services.

Defining and developing a plan to transition to the future state is premature - both states are poorly defined and any resultant plan will fail. Creating a plan is a project in and of itself that will require time - which is a luxury the homeless don't have.