



ARAPAHOE COUNTY
COLORADO'S FIRST

BOARD SUMMARY REPORT

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To: Board of County Commissioners

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Subject: Study Session No. 1: Discussion of Homelessness in Arapahoe County

Request and Recommendation

This is one of two study sessions to discuss homelessness in Arapahoe County. The purpose of today's study session is to share information and gain a baseline understanding of the problem, existing resources, county activities to date, and potential opportunities.

The team also hopes to identify any outstanding questions or information needs from the Board to inform study session number two, which will focus on obtaining clarity and direction from the BOCC regarding their desired role for the county (short-term/long-term) regarding this issue and associated investment of resources.

Background

Arapahoe County has been responding to concerns around the issue of homelessness since 2015. Much of the county's efforts have been reactive within specific departments and work groups. The County's Human Services and Community Resources Departments provide programmatic support to individuals experiencing homelessness or impacted by poverty through rental and mortgage assistance programs, utility assistance, TANF emergency assistance, population-specific navigators, medical assistance, hotel/motel vouchers, as well as federal and general fund grants to nonprofit providers. County staff also participate in the annual count of literal homeless by the Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative and attend community meetings such as Change the Trend to share county-specific information.

The County established an ad-hoc working committee, embarking on a few initiatives, narrowly tailored to specific outcomes:

GOALS Project (2015 – 2020)

Arapahoe County established a partnership with Family Tree to create the Generational Opportunities to Achieve Long-term Success (GOALS) Project, to further its 2Gen approach commitment to economic independence and housing stability. Leveraging multiple funding

streams and community partners, the facility – the first of its kind in the nation – opened Sept. 14, 2020 with five families. The project will have the capacity to serve up to 20 families (post COVID) and will be formally evaluated by the Center on Policy Research. .

October 2018 Homeless Summit

Open Spaces convened a countywide homeless summit in an effort to bring together state and local open spaces and parks professionals to discuss the problem and to seek out practices that will enable the county to address the issue. One of the results of the summit was to provide county staff with trauma informed training, including resources and practical tools, which was completed in August 2019. Another outcome was to support the Tri-Cities Homelessness Policy Committee, which included funding a DU study with human services dollars. The summit also provided the opportunity to learn what other jurisdictions were doing and to develop additional networking opportunities.

Arapahoe County Justice Coordinating Committee (ACJCC) Behavioral Health Subcommittee (2018)

The associated focus of the ACJCC Behavioral Health Subcommittee with homelessness identified the need for a broader effort in the county to address homelessness. To address this need, representatives from agencies that provide services to the homeless, such as Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative, Aurora Mental Health, All Health, Colorado Division of Housing, STRIDE, Ready to Work, Aurora Housing Authority, and Tri-County Health, began to meet to discuss options.

Over the course of approximately two years, with Commissioner Jackson coordinating efforts to address the problem, a number of meetings were held with this group of interested parties. As the meetings progressed, it became clear that funding would be necessary in order for there to be progress in addressing the homeless problem. Understanding that the county does not have funding specifically allocated to addressing this need, an initial focus was to explore funding mechanisms, such as the use of Social Impact Bonds (SIBs), to raise funding to address the problem. The City and County of Denver has realized success in addressing a similar problem using SIBs. However, the success of the Denver SIB, to a large extent, was attributable to the work of a number of City and County of Denver staff who worked extensively in conjunction with agency partners on that project. Arapahoe County staff have limited bandwidth to dedicate significant time to such a project.

SAFER Initiative (2019)

Members of the ACJCC Behavioral Health Subcommittee as well as staff from South Metro Fire District and the Arapahoe County Detention Center recognized a service gap existed with the overnight release of justice-involved homeless individuals without transportation/housing access – especially during cold weather months. The subcommittee approached the Arapahoe County Foundation to receive tax deductible contributions from donors and in turn, disburses payment to participating hotels/motels to house justice-involved individuals as part of their release from the detention center.

ACJCC Visioning Summit (2020)

In an effort to refocus the work of the ACJCC, the county held a strategic planning process with more than 100 participants around the justice system to identify problems, develop solutions,

determine barriers and create action recommendations for ACJCC consideration. One of the proposals called for the establishment of a countywide homelessness coordinating committee, bringing together agencies from across the jurisdiction impacted by or formed as a service provider for those experiencing homelessness.

The report suggested the committee could “enable data sharing and resource sharing, while coordinating to provide for those experiencing homelessness: mental health and substance use treatment, job training, family reunification, physical healthcare and insurance, social trust and pro-social acquaintanceship, and a range of housing options ranging from emergency shelters, to transitional, to long-term supportive housing. The committee will also work on funding solutions using existing federal and state streams and pursue corporate sponsorship. For the community as a whole, the committee will work on inclusionary zoning, public education, staff training, and resource sharing to help individual agencies better deal with the ancillary problems caused by homelessness. The first step for the JCC to undertake, if it chooses to move in this direction, is to restructure existing homelessness committees, organized by the County and/or municipalities, into the group recommended here: to wit: the Tri-Cities Homelessness Group (Englewood, Littleton, and Sheridan), Commissioner Jackson’s Social Impact Bond Homelessness Group, the ad hoc Cold Weather Reentry Group, and any number of efforts organized by the City of Aurora.”

Committee on Impacting Homelessness (2020)

While the established ad-hoc group from the ACJCC subcommittee noted that pursuit of a SIB remained a viable option to address the problem, this group continues to meet under the name, Arapahoe County Committee on Impacting Homelessness. This group is distinct from the Behavioral Health Subcommittee of the ACJCC. The “toolkit” group is a subset of the “Impacting Homelessness” group.

Permanent Supportive Housing Toolkit (2020)

In June 2020, participation in a permanent supportive housing toolkit process began for Commissioner Jackson and for the county’s criminal justice planning coordinators. Sponsored by the Colorado Department of Local Affairs’ Housing Division and the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority, the toolkit takes local teams through a process to facilitate the development of permanent supportive housing, from project inception to various stages of planning to include target population, location and building design, funding opportunities (mostly state and federal housing vouchers and tax credits), onboarding developer and property manager partners, resident regulations, trauma-informed design, and harm-reduction principles.

The Arapahoe County team’s plan that has evolved from the toolkit is to serve, to the maximum extent possible, clients being supervised by justice programs, namely, problem solving courts, probation, pretrial mental health program (Navigator), and “releases” who completed the Jail Based Behavioral Services program in the jail through a supportive housing facility. This addresses a clear need, as identified by the experts who serve this population.

The referenced report-out discussed negotiations with the South Metro Fire District for the right to develop, on land owned by the fire district, a facility with roughly 100 single-occupancy units to serve the identified homeless population. The property is a five-acre parcel located in Centennial adjacent to the north side of the Arapahoe County Lima Plaza campus. The team is seeking to secure a project sponsor to begin the search for a developer to work with the group to develop the property.

During the Sept. 21, 2020 study session, the Board of County Commissioners was supportive of the concept and continuing to use county staff to research the project. The Board acknowledged the need to establish check in milestones for the toolkit process and a clear link/prioritization of the project within the broader discussion and context of the county's approach to homelessness.

COVID-19 Pandemic Support (2020)

The County has supported vulnerable populations in a variety of ways throughout the pandemic, such as using CARES funds to support a respite care hotel facility (Aurora), nonprofit health care services, food assistance, hotel/motel vouchers, and rent/mortgage assistance.

National Context

[The National Alliance to End Homelessness](#) estimates the average cost to taxpayers of a chronically homeless person is \$35,578/yearly. [Green Doors](#) found people struggling with homelessness are often frequent users of emergency services, on average visiting emergency rooms five times per year, with the highest users visiting weekly. [Downtown Streets Team](#) found substantial impacts on the criminal justice system, specifically due to overnight stays in jail and social costs related to quality of life and accessibility to public space.

Data Points & Demographics

Point in Time Survey

Arapahoe County recorded 245 individuals experiencing literal homelessness in 2020, according to the [Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative's Point in Time survey](#), a 7% increase from 2019. Within metropolitan Denver, 6,104 individuals experienced literal homelessness, an increase of 6% from 2019. The [annual Point in Time Count](#) helps raise public awareness and seven county collaboration to determine the scope of homelessness on a single night in January. The count does not include persons at risk of becoming homeless (such as those staying with friends/family or paying to stay in a motel).

Of the 245 individuals identified within Arapahoe County

- 25 identified as families, for a total of 84 individuals
- 27 were actively fleeing domestic or interpersonal violence
- 19 identified as veterans
- 11 were unaccompanied youth

Eighty-seven of these individuals were unsheltered, while 105 stayed in an emergency shelter while 53 were located in transitional housing. More than 50% identified as White, while nearly 30 percent of individuals identified as Black or African American.

Staff knows this to be a substantial undercount of the actual homeless in Arapahoe County based on other information such as the numbers of homeless students being reported by school districts (but school districts have not been allowed to report info for the PIT) and the simple fact that it is impossible to scour the entire county and find everyone who is homeless on any given night. The count primarily collects data on those homeless people in areas they are known to frequent.

Tri-Cities Homelessness Policy Group

Arapahoe County financially contributed to a study being conducted by the [University of Denver's Center for Housing and Homelessness Research \(CHHR\)](#). The project includes

interviewing adults experiencing homelessness and assessing family homelessness. A [final report](#) is expected in 2020 with the goal of better understanding the current situation and needs.

Detention Center Population

In 2018, the average percent of the jail population identified as homeless was 15%, with 1,976 total individuals reporting no address. From a demographic standpoint, white (64.4%) males (70%) are the predominant characteristics of the population, with an average age of 37.4 (average age of all releases during the same time period is 30.5).

Twenty-nine percent of homeless releases from August to November 2018 received psychotropic medications, with a higher than average stay of 27.9 days compared to 22.4 days for all inmates. Homeless inmates were 58% more likely to return to jail over four years compared to 39.7% for all inmates. Of the jail's homeless population, 14% received assistance through Human Services programs primarily in the areas of food and medical assistance.

Existing Policies

There are several existing policies that address life safety concerns within public properties and rights of way. Arapahoe County, for example, has established hours of operation for its parks, open spaces and trail head facilities, closing these areas from dusk to dawn. South Suburban Parks and Recreation District (SSPRD)'s rules and regulations prohibit camping in all park, trail and open space areas, except when it is approved through a permitting process.

SSPRD and Arapahoe Parks & Recreation District have similar overnight curfews on parks, trails, and open spaces to the County. The Mile High Flood District and the City of Englewood have prohibited tents and makeshift structures within drainageways, stormwater and floodplain areas. The City of Centennial prohibits camping on city-owned roads, sidewalks, trails, parks and city buildings or other city property. Other cities within the county have implemented right-of-way restrictions to prevent loitering – especially within roadways.

Existing Resources

There are numerous resources across the county that provide support to people experiencing homelessness, whether it be from an immediate need or root cause perspective. Please see the attached spreadsheet and links to the [City of Aurora](#) and [Bemis Library Resource Guides](#) as well as [ArapaSOURCE](#).

Existing County Property/Facility Impacts

The impact of transients and people experiencing homelessness is evident on county properties and facilities. Within the open spaces department, staff has reported impacts to our natural and built environments, which costs time and money to remedy/repair. The open spaces department has seen the costly impacts of trash and biohazards on the natural and built environment, including vandalism to electrical boxes and restroom facilities. Residents and guests who visit our amenities have a negative experience when safety or cleanliness is an issue. There is also a risk for staff who are dealing with trash, drug paraphernalia and potentially unstable visitors who are using facilities for overnight parking, sleeping in vehicles and makeshift camping sites.

Within the public works and development department, staff has had limited interactions/requests, mostly within the 4 Square Mile area. These include the recent Iliff and Cherry Creek Bridge with Cherry Creek Trail modification project, which eliminated the ability to camp between the

bridge abutment and substructure; and camping in the county's unbuilt Asbury right of way west of Quebec as well as private vacant property on Mississippi Avenue.

When staff encounters people experiencing homelessness or life safety issues within county property, we work with the sheriff's office and third-party abatement companies to remove debris and other items.

Discussion

Based on the above information, staff has identified a few opportunities for BOCC consideration and discussion.

Clear BOCC Expectations & Outcomes

The county's efforts have been reactive within specific departments and work groups; the issue has not been a historical priority of the collective BOCC. In the last 18 months, the issue of homelessness has reached critical mass/become more visible. Staff believes the county is at a place that requires a coordinated countywide formal effort vs. one-offs. This also creates an opportunity to better define the county's role to address this topic both within the organization and externally.

Role of the Committee on Impacting Homelessness

The BOCC may want to establish the Committee on Impacting Homelessness as a formal advisory committee to the entire Board, consistent with the recommendations from the ACJCC Visioning Summit. The BOCC could establish the committee's governance, membership, and specific outcomes, establishing clear expectations for the county's approach and community engagement.

Policy Updates

While there are statutory limitations to the county's authority, staff has identified potential opportunities to address safety concerns within drainage areas not under the control of the Southeast Metropolitan Stormwater Authority or the Mile High Flood District as well as loitering/panhandling in public rights-of-way. Another opportunity is to strengthen enforcement of existing policies (such as overnight park closures) adding additional signage and coordinating more closely with the sheriff's office. The BOCC also may want to consider future land development code/zoning changes to address the impacts of long-term camping on private property where there are no permanent buildings/permits.

Formalize Internal Response

Based on input from our county departments regarding on-the-ground interactions, staff is recommending improving implementation of the trauma-informed training launched last year to ensure compliance and awareness for all staff, including resource referral materials.

When life safety issues are present on county property, staff recommends formalizing internal response protocols, which includes engaging a third-party vendor to reduce staff risk, establishing a communication protocol with affected prior to abatement, and coordinating with the sheriff's office to implement the process.

Service/Program Gaps

Based on available data and service provider information, staff has initially identified some opportunities for future focus and discussion. For example:

- Supportive housing programs and facilities. Outside of those involved in the criminal justice system, there is need for family, mental health, and older adult programs throughout the county.
- Sanitation. Shower and laundry facilities for people experiencing homelessness are not readily available across the county.
- Detox. There is not a detox facility outside of Aurora.
- Transitional & Congregate Housing. There are limited congregate and transitional housing options within the county outside of Aurora.
- Storage Lockers. Places where people experiencing homelessness can put their belongings while job interviewing or seeking medical care.
- Western & Central Arapahoe County. The western and central portions of the county have gaps in providing nighttime shelters and daytime centers & supportive services. Giving Heart, for example, is only open two days a week while Comitis is not accessible to homeless people in the western area of the county.

Alternatives

Based on BOCC discussion, staff will present more detailed options during study session number two, which will focus on obtaining clarity and direction from the BOCC regarding their desired role for the county (short-term/long-term) and associated investment of resources.

Fiscal Impact

Staff will present fiscal options for BOCC consideration during the Oct. 23, 2020 study session.