

Montgomery County Homelessness Task Force Meeting Notes

DATE: 5/26/2023 TIME: 1:30 – 3:00 PM VIA: ZOOM

Attendees: Dr. Tamra Williams, Laura York, Andrea Galambos, Kristen Fisher, Kayleigh Silver, Lora Gonzalez, Anna-Marie Silvinski, Anthony Stevenson, ASL Interpreter Megan for Neil McDevit, Beth Sturman, Casey Molitor Christina Cozart, Dave Zellers, Dottie Miler, Buck Jones for Greg Scott, Gregory Scott, Holly Parker, Joel Johnson, John Ernst, Ken Lawrence, Keith Truymen, Kim Krauter, Kristin Frederick-Leonard, Lisa Walter, Lori Schreiber, Mark Boorse, Marlene Wood, Matt McCarry, Mike McKenna, Neil McDevit, Noah Marlier, Patrice Patterson, Sandy Sharma, Sarah R. Ennis, Shawn Kraemer, State Rep Joe Ciresi, Thomas Lepera

Agenda Items:

1. Introductions
2. Chairperson Statements
3. Restatement of Purpose
4. Housekeeping and meeting rules
5. Recap of 1st Meeting and Breakout Results
6. Overview of priority themes (survey results)
7. Discussion: Projects and Initiatives
8. Next Steps
9. Adjourn

Date/Time of next meeting: 6/30/23 – 12:00 – 1:30

Key Discussion Points

Restatement of Purpose

The structure of this task force is to have monthly meetings and an operational work group that will meet on the implementation plan between the task force meetings. The work group is scheduled to start next month.

This task force is made up of over 40 members with representation from providers, those with lived experiences, municipalities, Faith-Based leaders, County leadership, School District staff and State Officials. The goal is to bring together people with expertise to get an understanding of the current landscape of homelessness in Montgomery County and obtain knowledge of existing resources, programs and outcomes of existing programs. Also, with the information, identify additional innovative strategies or evidence-based practices and then identify and prioritize solutions, implement the solutions, monitor outcomes and make adjustments as needed. In its completion of these meetings and work groups, we want to have a plan for a successful intervention.

We recognize that there is plenty of work happening (and will continue to happen) outside of this Task Force to address homelessness. Much of this work is occurring in the organizations of those who serve on the Task Force. The task force is scheduled to conclude by the end November so we would like to get as much done as possible and make the most of this group.

Recap of 1st Meeting and Breakout Results

Two questions were asked in the last meeting with four breakout groups:

1. What are the priorities or priority areas this task force should address in its work on homelessness in Montgomery County?
2. Are there specific projects or initiatives this task force can complete that would address homelessness issues in Montgomery County?

As a result of these questions, there were 52 priorities generated through the breakout discussions and 7 themes identified along with examples. The 7 areas/themes identified were:

- Prevention
- Localizing Homeless Response

These meeting notes provide a clear picture of what was discussed throughout the meeting as well as what next steps are expected.

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DATE: 5/26/2023 TIME: 1:30 – 3:00 PM VIA: ZOOM

- Multi-Focus Wraparound Programs
- Single Focus-Affordable Housing Availability
- Building Partnerships and Models of Success
- Awareness & Public Perception
- Population Specific Approaches

The 7 themes identified generated a survey that was sent out to task force members to complete but we will focus on the top 3 for now.

The top 3 areas that received the most support were:

- Prevention Programs – focused on those who are risk of homelessness & prevents from occurring
- Localizing Homeless Response – bringing resources to people where they are located
- Multi-Focus Wraparound Programs – targets housing, employment & treatment

During the discussion while focusing on projects and initiatives, we want to focus on recommendations that are actionable for the projects.

In the meeting, polls were used to determine which projects the task force can and should move forward with. The task force members were asked to determine the ranking of projects using a high, medium and low rating based on:

- Barriers
- Cost Expectation
- Overall Efficacy/Likelihood of Success

We can quickly red light or green light projects based on the impact ranking.

Overview of 7 priority themes (survey results)

Prevention Projects:

- Rental subsidy program – provides emergency rent or utility cash assistance to eligible households based on their eminent risk of homelessness; meaning they are about two weeks away from sleeping outside or in an emergency shelter.
- Expanding eviction prevention programs – when assistance is targeted within eviction court or prior to an eviction court hearing happens to provide legal & financial assistance as well as social services to those facing evictions.

Prevention – Kayleigh Silver provided some info on eviction court & referenced a report done in 2018 by YWH partners around these programs which is called “**Unlocking Doors around Homelessness Prevention**”.

A discussion was then held regarding barriers, cost & the overall efficacy of these two programs.

Discussion Points:

The consensus was the financing & average rental is high in Montgomery County with a waiting list for vouchers being spent over \$10,000/year under the HUD contract to provide certain subsidy.

Q. – We need to find the dollars to keep people where they are. Are there County funds or County tax revenues we can tap into:

A. - It doesn't require identification of building new housing which has its own set of challenges and barriers but we can discuss pulling funds together which may be easier to do than building new houses.

Q. – What are the differences between the two programs?

A. – They are not exclusive but please look at the report mentioned earlier. Targeted rental subsidies is a risk factor & population-based approach which targets rental assistance based on those at risk for homelessness based on risk factors. Eviction prevention is focused on households going through the formal eviction process.

Q. – Are we looking at a completely different funding stream?

A. - With those in this task force group, we can come together by getting creative

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DATE: 5/26/2023 TIME: 1:30 – 3:00 PM VIA: ZOOM

Poll Results

Increase rental subsidy program
Barriers – medium
Cost – high
Likelihood of success – medium

Localizing Homeless Response:

Bringing services to where people are so they can remain in their community and distribute resources across municipalities within the County rather than focusing on centralizing in one or two communities.

Projects are::

- Strategically place facilities/shelters throughout the county in their community

Poll Results

Barriers - high
Cost - medium
Likelihood of Success – medium

- Create a “fair share” formula to determine the number of beds/housing units & programs needed in each municipality

Poll Results

Barriers - high
Cost - medium
Likelihood of Success – medium

Discussion Points

Q. – Why focus on other municipalities? The perception is that most of homeless people are from Norristown & Pottstown?

A. – Many are not from Pottstown or Norristown but the services are in these 2 areas so people come to where the services are.

- Also, people move around and are not necessarily from the area they go to. They go from area to area and move to where their needs will be met. People come from all over.
- People who are homeless in Norristown & Pottstown are not all from these areas but tend to come to these two locations where they can get services, interact & shower.
- We also need localized and different levels of responses depending upon people’s needs, eg homeless shelter vs apartment or other supportive services so they can be serviced where they are.
- Hidden homelessness, those in cars/vehicles where they can go and move around.
- Agreement with the concept of a fair share formula indicating thins need to be spread out among the municipalities, however, could be challenging to develop since we don’t have the data. School district numbers could indicate and show where homeless families are.

We need to look at where the money is coming from? What puts us in the position as the place to come? It puts Montgomery County people in the position to pay for those coming from Reading, Bucks County, etc. If we place facilities, how do we determine who goes into those facilities in those particular areas? It’s not going to be easy to determine that.

At what point is it just Norristown & Pottstown’s problem? The cost of what we have adds up astronomically. WE have been a dumping ground for social services & County properties for generations and it’s not just a Montgomery County thing but they do it in black & brown communities historically throughout this Country. They dump the services in these areas because rich white people don’t want it in their areas. We can’t argue over cost but figure out a solution to spread it out & make smart decisions because Norristown is done carrying this out alone.

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DATE: 5/26/2023 TIME: 1:30 – 3:00 PM VIA: ZOOM

Multi-Focus Wraparound Programs:

Develop programs that address supporting those who are homeless. Including housing, employment, social services & treatment.

Projects are

- Mobilized services for individual currently living outside

Poll Results

Barriers - medium

Cost - medium

Likelihood of Success – medium

- Programs that service people currently living outside: housing, job training, health services, social services & education

Poll Results

Barriers – medium

Cost – medium

Likelihood of Success – medium

Barriers to getting services are manifold when a person is living outside. The intake process does not work well for those who can only be seen outside. We need to bring services to the people, help them use the services and have a warm handoff. The street medicine program partnered with Community Health & Dental which is a clinic in the area that involved them in the healthcare clinic. The clinic changed the way it did intake for people involved in the street medicine program and worked differently than people who were housed in the area and utilized that service. By changing their process, the clinic became a much more effective provider of primary care. The statistic for moving people from homelessness into primary care age good but they had to provide mobile services. It can work but it has to be very strategic and began on the outside.

Discussion Points

Q. - What mobile services are already available in the County and are there enough? Also, what services are not mobile yet that need to become mobile.

A. - We will be voting on an expansion of mobile services that already exist. It will also help with the direction of the single focus programs.

Q. - What does an expansion of mobilized services mean?

A. - To go wherever services are needed in the County

Dr. Williams noted we reviewed the top three areas/themes and in the interest of time, asked the task force members if they would like to vote on the bottom 4 themes which is Single-Focus Affordable Housing; Building Partnerships & Models of Success; Building Awareness of Public Perception and Population Specific Approaches now or have a form emailed to them to cast their votes?

A suggestion was made to send out a form for the task force to vote on the bottom three giving attention to each theme.

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Challenges are putting in the infrastructure to support the tiny houses. We will also have to convince the municipalities to allow something like this to exist within their zoning structure. Kim stated they start the process of looking into infrastructure around Montgomery County during COVID and also looked at the time it took to get all the approvals and found it took quite some time to get what we needed.

The benefit of tiny houses provides another layer of alternatives to what already exist, but you still have to deal with municipal zonings. It is worth looking at the barriers and how we can work on this collaboratively.

There are a lot of vacant spaces in strip malls so the buildings will already be equipped with heat, a/c, water, etc. The availability within these areas would be useful and not sitting totally empty.

If we want municipalities to change their zoning, to promote affordable housing and to come up with ways to directly address issues that may arrive, we need to help support municipal governing boards to make the cases to their residents.

The County Planning Commission have contracts with several municipalities to some level of support from their comprehensive plan and their zoning re-write. They can provide an overview of what things municipalities have already done, who may be waiting to do things and what some of the changes have been that allows for some of the different uses and address the housing affordable issues.

Q. – Do we need to address zoning issues if we wanted to move forward with tiny houses & pallet Shelters?

A. - We definitely need zoning for tiny houses, pallet shelters, etc. It is absolutely a zoning issue.

We can't do what we want on County land. We are looking at the Correctional facility and have to work with where it resides.

Some Municipalities are interested in having conversations about alternative housing.

Is there power of a few municipalities to make zoning changes in a coordinated way with the County to increase participation? There's power in numbers.

When we're voting and taking the survey, please keep in mind talks about doing do a pilot with 2 or 3 municipalities around zoning issues and alternative housing and that if successful, it can be replicated.

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NEXT STEPS

- Jim will send a poll for the remaining 4 priority themes which are: Single-Focus Programs, Building partnerships, Awareness & Public Perception, Population Specific Approaches
- If you're interested in being in the workgroup, please send your information to Jim Walters

Additional information

There are currently 30 eviction courts within Montgomery County. Your Way Home Program called EPIC (Eviction Prevention & Intervention Coalition) is in eight of those courts.

For more information around the differences between the two programs, please refer to the report done in 2018 by YWH partners around these programs which is called "**Unlocking Doors around Homelessness Prevention**".