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**INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM**

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**TO:** BANGOR CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** RINDY FOGLER, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

**SUBJECT:** HOMELESS

**DATE:** APRIL 9, 2021

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**Background**

Over the past few years, the city of Bangor has experienced increases in the number of individuals experiencing homelessness and living unsheltered in parks, open space and downtown. Two years ago, the City hired a homeless coordinator and Community Health and Counseling hired 5 homeless outreach workers (PATH). At the onset of the pandemic, the city had approximately 20-25 individuals that were living outside and taking advantage of services provided by the city, Path Team, the Brick Church and the shelters. As spring turned to summer, the number rose to well over 100 and stayed there until cold weather returned. More people were willing to accept shelter beds as the temperatures dropped, and others likely found alternative solutions like “couch surfing” with friends or relatives. We fully expect the numbers to rise again as the days get warmer.

At the start of the pandemic, there was significant public health concern for populations living in congregate settings. As a result, PCHC, the Shaw House and the Bangor Area Homeless Shelter created new protocols and distancing requirements which resulted in a reduction of the number of individuals receiving direct services in shelters.

At the same time, the state provided significant resources to acquire hotel rooms for shelters for social distancing. Specifically, the State issued contracts to shelters for hotel beds that also provided for limited services and meals. However, many of the challenges with the unhoused population in Bangor stems from untreated mental health or substance use disorder. Many of the individuals that suffer from these disorders, although they may have income, have disease progression such that they are unable to sustain housing, even in shelters.

At present, the Bangor Area Homeless Shelter and Shaw House have available beds, and the Hope House is at capacity at both their shelter and the Ramada. The warming centers at the BAHS, Brick Church and Mansion Church have kept guests safe throughout the winter months but have ceased operation for the year. Combined, the warming centers hosted 40-50 people each night who now will need to look for other options. Approximately a dozen individuals have been outside all winter, choosing not to take advantage of either shelter or warming center options.

As has been the case for the past year, daily meals are being served by the BAHS, the Brick Church, the Salvation Army and the Hope House. Hope House meals are open to their guests only, but the three other sites serve all comers. Thanks to CDBG funding, the Brick Church is now fully sprinkled and houses an indoor shower for use by anyone in need. We expect the portable outdoor shower trailer located in the Brick Church parking lot will return once the weather gets warmer. This past winter, the Parks and Rec Department installed needle boxes in four locations across the City.

The City's Homeless Outreach Caseworker continues to work daily with shelter guests and unsheltered individuals willing to engage in the process of seeking permanent housing. The City's Shelter Plus Care program plays a significant role in helping to secure housing for these individuals. In addition, we continue to purchase bus tickets for people experiencing homelessness who have an established housing plan in another state. Despite the housing and relocation, our overall number of people experiencing homelessness has declined very little as more people continue to come to Bangor from both in and out of state.

### **Challenges**

- A core of about 20-40 individuals experiencing homelessness are difficult to house. They typically live outside year-round. They are unable or unwilling to obtain a shelter bed or permanent housing due to diagnosed/undiagnosed mental health disorder or substance use disorder.
- The incidence of substance use disorder and severe, untreated mental illness among our sheltered and unsheltered homeless population appears to be growing. This makes engaging them in any sort of housing-related service difficult. The City's Homeless Outreach Caseworker along with those from the CHCS PATH team and PCHC/Hope House are finding it increasingly difficult to not only find landlords willing to take this population but also to get the individuals to take the necessary steps to obtain secure housing.
- The behavior of some of these individuals due to mental health/substance use is the source of substantial number of complaints from residents and business. Often the behaviors make folks uncomfortable and sometimes residents/businesses are reporting criminal and aggressive behaviors towards themselves or customers.

- Campsites have begun to appear in various areas of the City. In all likelihood, unsheltered individuals will once again migrate toward the waterfront, public parks, the Kenduskeag Stream, the pines, Bass Park, and other more remote areas.
- Many of the campsites will be in areas designed for the enjoyment of the broader community (i.e. the waterfront).
- Other communities continue to send and at times transport homeless individuals to Bangor. This may be due in part to a statewide General Assistance program that is inconsistent and puts a greater burden on service center communities.
- Loosely organized community organizations are providing meals in public places like Pickering Park and the waterfront. Additionally, they are distributing tents and sleeping bags which makes camping a more attractive option.
- Needle waste was a significant issue last summer. During the pandemic the state did away with one for one needle exchange which may have contributed to the proliferation of needles around the city. Additionally, the state has approved a new needle exchange and there is some concern that the problem may grow. The city installed needle boxes and we will monitor for their effectiveness.
- Downtown businesses continue to voice concern over the number of homeless individuals loitering in the area. Some has expressed concern that their staff members don't feel comfortable walking to the parking garage.
- Police officers are spending an inordinate amount of time responding to people experiencing homelessness, to the point where it is impacting the department's ability to retain staff.
- The lack of public restroom facilities continues to be a concern. Local groups including the Peace and Justice Center are pressuring the City to provide restrooms for those experiencing homelessness as well as visitors to the downtown and waterfront areas. This certainly makes sense from a public health perspective. Portable toilets have been provided in the past, but significant damage to the units and altercations with vendor staff led to their removal. Restrooms in the Harbormaster building have also been opened and saw many of the same issues as the portable units downtown.

## **Options**

### Short Term

- Create “points of service” where individuals experiencing homelessness can get shelter (if available); outreach services from our staff, PATH, and PCHC; food; bathroom facilities (portable toilets), showers, needle boxes etc. The logical service points are BAHS, the Brick Church, Hope House, and the Salvation Army.

- Limit the provision of food or other items, particularly camping gear, to these points of service.
- Prohibit camping along the waterfront and in City parks to ensure they are available for the enjoyment of all residents and visitors.
- Engage HEAL, Wabanaki, and Maine Access Points to help with issues around needle waste. Distribute needles at point of access.
- Reopen the Harbormaster restrooms and site portable toilets at the points of service noted above and possibly Pickering Square or a location nearby.
- Demonstration project to work with the Greater Bangor Homeless Coalition/volunteers to monitor the restrooms.

### Longer Term

- Working with Community Health Leadership Board and a broad-based group to develop a comprehensive plan for addressing homelessness.
- Enlist the business community/private developers to help find solutions, particularly to the shortage of housing.
- Increase housing stock either through creating low income units or building workforce housing to free up existing stock.
- Explore options for a 24/7 response model to free up the Police Department. The HOME model used by Portland is one option. Another is the Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic. Legislation introduced by Rep. Supica is looking at legislation to address this.
- Work on a state level to improve the delivery of General Assistance and ensure all towns are responding to their residents as required by law.