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Community Engagement Report: Housing Stability

Overview

The COVID -19 pandemic created the conditions for an increase in homelessness across the region, including in Ramsey County. In October 2020, Ramsey County was housing hundreds of people in hotel shelters, but there were still hundreds of residents in need of shelter. As winter approached and the second wave of COVID-19 began crashing down on Minnesota, the need for more shelter beds became urgent, and staff had to solidify plans for additional shelter sites to increase capacity to meet the immediate needs of our community.

The Bethesda hospital site was one of the first locations identified and secured to help meet the needs, and later, Luther Seminary and other sites were added. Soon after, Ramsey County began engaging key stakeholders with the hope of sharing their plans to improve stability for people experiencing homelessness through the opening of temporary expanded shelter sites. These efforts are rooted in Ramsey County's Residents First priority. This priority compels us to consider and actively pursue the many perspectives of the people impacted by the County's actions. The key stakeholders of this housing stability initiative include:

- People experiencing homelessness
- Conversation with the Commissioners
- Neighborhood groups and business organizations
- Community members representing various constituencies
- Homeless outreach and housing service providers
- Policy makers

To do this, County staff created various opportunities for dialogue between the County and the community on the plans. Stakeholders were engaged in the following ways:

- Virtual townhall meetings (4)
- Online questionnaire
- In-person surveys with people experiencing homelessness
- One-on-one and small group meetings
- Focused conversations with outreach workers and service providers
- Webpage dedicated to documenting conversations and sharing information with the public about the initiative (www.ramseycounty.us/Bethesda)

These intentional connections with stakeholders also offered space for their feedback and ideas for the sites. This report brings these community engagement efforts together and summarizes the key findings and recommendations.

Findings

It is essential in any comprehensive or strategic planning effort to consider the perspective of individuals most affected by changes in their community. These residents can feel ignored and overlooked due to speed and the often-pragmatic approaches organizations favor. Ramsey County launched a series of community engagement sessions in late Fall 2020 to help build consensus around the preferred future and use of the old Bethesda

Hospital and Luther Seminary. The feedback from the community was collected and analyzed. The findings from the community engagement efforts around housing stability were organized by key stakeholder groups listed below, and engagement with neighborhood groups, concerned residents, business organizations, and policy makers were combined. While each group differed in how and why they came to participate in the conversations, there was significant overlap when all the data was analyzed together, and significant priorities emerged:

- Ensure sustained efforts to maintain safety and security for shelter residents and the surrounding neighborhood.
- Create an on-going dialogue between Ramsey County and stakeholders living in or near shelter sites.
- Develop relationships between Ramsey County and stakeholders that are based on mutual respect and accountability. This will build a better understanding of the lived experience of residents and build trust.
- Provide wrap-around services at shelter sites that meet the needs of the current residents.

Engaging community members, neighborhood groups, business organizations, and policy makers

Community members and neighborhood groups were engaged using four key methods: townhall forums, online questionnaires, small group and one-on-one meetings with County employees. This approach provided multiple entry points for all residents in the Bethesda communities, and later the neighborhoods surrounding Luther Seminary, and the business sector, to participate and present plausible future scenarios of what these shelters could look like. The forums were also opportunities to garner feedback on how to enhance the proposed projects as housing shelters for Ramsey County's homeless.

Stakeholders who had a vested interest in the future of Bethesda Hospital were able to participate by attending one of two conversations held between October 29th and November 4th, 2020. Approximately 160 key stakeholders/community members attended the community engagement sessions and 67 residents completed the online version of the survey hosted on Survey Monkey. Community members living in areas surrounding Luther Seminary had the opportunity to participate in a conversation held on November 17th, 2020. The participants who attended these sessions represent a cross-section of organizations, interests' groups, previously homeless individuals, and residents from the surrounding neighborhoods.

Respondents from the townhalls and surveys fall into two key categories. those supporting the County's proposed plan to utilize Bethesda as a shelter for Ramsey County's homeless residents and those who vehemently oppose to having a homeless shelter in their neighborhood. Most of the residents have lived in the neighboring community of the Bethesda Hospital for years and has a measured openness to change. However, the consensus formed among the numerous respondents who participated in the process is a sense of ambivalence towards having a shelter "in their backyard". Below are some recommendations and ongoing concerns.

Recommendations

- Provide wrap around services and job training to the homeless
- Continue to engage neighbors to allay fears and concerns

On-going Concerns

- Community is concerned that the county is not listening to them
- Neighborhoods are not supported
- Shelters may devalue home
- Shelters may make them less safe and increase in criminal activity in the community
- County continues to inflict harm on communities of color/"not walking in their shoes"
- Will there be support services available for the homeless; and what does that look like

- Better define low barrier
- Who gets referred and what is the selection criteria for entering into shelter

The response from the community to the location of both shelters were markedly different. The concerns and recommendations from the community regarding the Bethesda Hospital suggested that there was a desire for better outcomes for the homeless. This was evident in letters of support provided to the board of commissioners; one resident expressed and acknowledged the need that though they were “saddened and dismayed” they did not want to be “shut out” of the process and applauded the county for “prioritizing this and including them.”

There exists much uncertainty as to what changes should occur to make Bethesda into a safe and productive shelter. Some would prefer businesses to a homeless shelter in the community, because they feel they have spending power to help businesses survive. The notable difference in members of the group is that many still want to ensure the County is investing in the people who will be housed at Bethesda- job skills, wrap around services; support on trauma, health issues and it not being another short term fix or just a response to the current crisis.

The Saint Anthony Park neighborhood where Luther Seminary is housed will serve as a shelter for women and couples. This conversation had a distinctly different tone with 200 residents in attendance with almost all being in support of this proposal and the County’s priority. The neighborhood is anxious to get involve and support this. Churches and other community organizations offered services for their residents and enquired about “how they could help”. There was an increased level of hope and humanitarianism with getting “70 people off the streets”. The biggest concern that emerged from this was for the LGBTQ community and if they were being prioritized and included in the plan.

“Shelters are not the solution....develop a plan for more affordable housing.”

An overarching theme persisted throughout these conversations. Focus groups engaged around the housing and homelessness priority wondered if this was a “band-aid” but housing for the homeless is promising and may have some positive outcomes when additional services are provided. There was consensus among stakeholders and the county that shelters are not the long term solution. A notable quote from one of the focus groups conducted sums it up; “we want the County to have an understanding of how people do life...”

Engaging people experiencing homelessness

Ramsey County staff developed a survey tool to better understand the needs of people experiencing homelessness and the ways in which a shelter program can best support them. The survey questions were informed by recent research, namely the Heading Home Ramsey Needs Assessment and the survey conducted in May 2020 by the People Inc. and Radius Health outreach teams. The community engagement survey focused on participant needs while in shelter, focusing on safety and services, while also seeking to understand if other elements were missing.

County staff and outreach workers engaged a convenience sample of 161 adults experiencing sheltered or unsheltered homelessness in early November. Outreach workers surveyed 49 people living in encampments throughout St. Paul. Ramsey County staff surveyed 112 people at five shelters in St Paul. Catholic Charities Higher Ground did not respond to a request to participate. Individuals were offered a ten dollar gift card for their participation. Clients were surveyed at the following shelter locations:

- Union Gospel Mission
- Safe Space
- Mary Hall
- Best Western Como Hotel
- Best Western Capitol Ridge Hotel

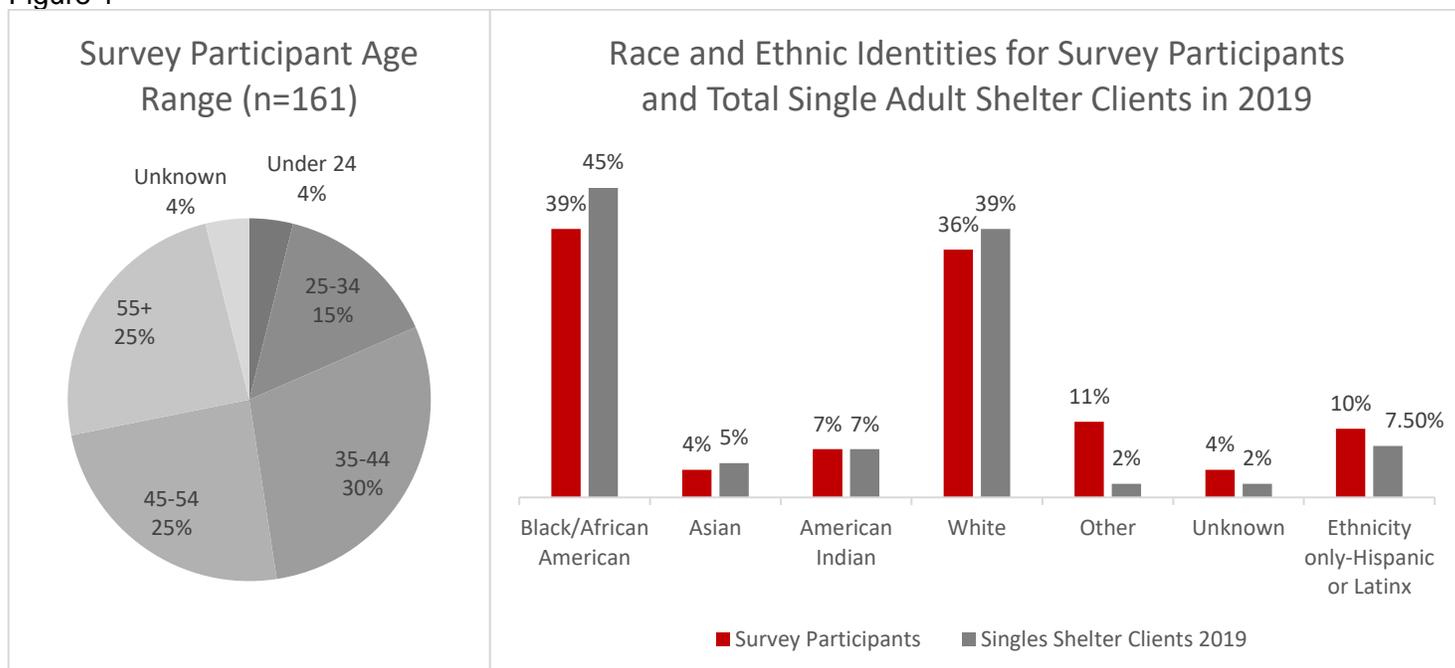
You should have programs to recruit [us]. An opportunity for people to work at Ramsey County and learn social work.

-Client in hotel shelter

Demographic information was shared by most participants. The survey requested that they share their age, race, ethnicity, and gender identity. Similar to the overall age range of the homeless population, about two-thirds of clients are between 25 and 54 years old (see figure 1 for specifics). People identifying as female were oversampled, at 37 percent of the total participants, males were 57 percent, and people identifying as trans or other were four percent of the total sample. Nearly four percent of the surveys did not indicate a gender identity.

The 2019 demographics of single adults using shelter were use in figure 2 to understand how well our sample represents the race and ethnicity of the overall homeless population. In the graph below, some slight over and under sampling of race and ethnic groups did occur in this survey. Both people who identify as Black/African American (39 percent in the survey but are 45 percent of the overall homeless population) and White (36 percent in the survey and 39 percent of the overall population) were under sampled. It should be noted that the percent of people who did not share their racial identity is much higher than the overall population, at 11 percent and two percent, respectively.

Figure 1



Local research has established why people avoid shelters, namely, they lack independence or control in those spaces, mental or chemical health challenges, a previous bad experience, and more recently, a fear of contracting COVID-19. The community engagement survey was composed of both quantitative and qualitative questions that focused on understanding how shelters can be improved to be a better option for people. One of the first questions asked them about how safe they feel at shelters. Participants indicated that they felt relatively safe, with 51 percent saying they feel somewhat safe, 20 percent feel very safe, and 16 percent do not feel safe at all in shelters (13 percent have never stayed in a shelter).

While survey administrators at the five shelter sites did not solicit feedback on the decision to increase the number of shelter beds, nearly all the participants willingly offered that they were supportive of this action. There was also consensus among survey participants of the four main elements of a high-quality shelter program. The thread running through each of these elements was the importance of well-trained and compassionate staff at shelter sites. The elements participants identified are:

- Shelter staff that are knowledgeable, supportive, and skilled in:
 - Navigating the barriers to employment, including people with criminal records
 - Navigating housing, including people with criminal records
 - Ensuring compassionate and equitable treatment of clients
- Support for mental and chemical health challenges, including:
 - Onsite help for people in crisis (this is a personal and a safety issue for participants)
 - Private rooms for meeting with case worker
 - Support groups
- Safety and security with respect for privacy and independence
 - Increased security including guards, cameras, locked doors, and tighter security rules
 - Individual rooms and secure locker
 - Practice de-escalation techniques, separate people experiencing challenges with mental health or substance use
 - Staff should listen and be more assertive, be trained on safety and medical needs, and take threats seriously
- Environment that supports health, growth, and community
 - GED, job skill training/certification, in-shelter/work-from-home, volunteer in community.
 - Classes on social skills, independent living skills, job searching
 - Access to computers and Wi-Fi
 - Physical activities
 - Social activities -cards, games, crafts, movie nights
 - Facilities are clean and in good working condition, with access to flavorful food and comfortable beds.

Engaging outreach workers and housing service providers

Homeless service providers are an important component of any housing stability planning efforts. They have the everyday experiences of running services and are familiar with the successes and challenges of those interventions. To capture this expertise and understand the realities of the shelter expansion plan, Ramsey County staff conducted focused conversations with external and internal service providers. These participants represent work with unsheltered and sheltered homeless, Veterans services, housing and benefits navigation,

and medical staff. In analyzing the notes from these conversations, staff have identified the following seven themes to help shape new shelter sites:

- Cultural responsiveness is essential for shelter staff and any external medical (e.g. MHealth Fairview) or social services staff serving the homeless population.
- Equitable access to shelter for people living unsheltered (tents, encampment site, vehicles, public transportation, etc.).
- Clear communication between the county and providers on prioritization and referral process.
- Communication in the shelter should include:
 - Verbal and non-verbal communication to promote a safe and welcoming environment.
 - Wayfinding: signage that provides directions for clients within the facility.
- Menu of services that is aligned with the needs of clients staying at shelter during the time.
- Low barrier shelter where staff are trained in de-escalation and creative problem solving.
- Safety and security should be a priority within the facility.

Conclusion

There is a strong need for to ensure stability for people experiencing homelessness. With hundreds of people living without shelter, Ramsey County and its partners have a mandate to act. This community engagement process has highlighted ways to strengthen the shelter model, but also shown variable levels of community support for these efforts. People experiencing homelessness see it as an acknowledgement of their humanity. Policy makers and businesses also support this and see it as an investment in the long-term success of St Paul residents and communities. While residents near the proposed sites are supportive of sheltering people in general, they have concerns about centering a shelter in their neighborhood. The community engagement efforts have revealed fears about safety, property values, and the changing character of the neighborhood.

As Ramsey County moves aggressively towards its goal of providing shelter space for everyone experiencing homelessness, there is evidence that these decisions are being shaped by community feedback. Leaders have pursued additional funding for small shelter sites that meet the needs of single adults, couples, and families experiencing homelessness. They have established partnerships with the City of St. Paul and non-profit providers to quickly expand the number of emergency shelter beds. Weekly email alerts and website are live to educate and connect with the community. Also, there are plans to host periodic briefings with the stakeholders to keep them updated and engaged as plans develop and changes emerge. In the coming months, it will be important for the County to address the priorities identified earlier in this report:

- Ensure sustained efforts to maintain safety and security for shelter residents and the surrounding neighborhood.
- Create an on-going dialogue between Ramsey County and stakeholders living in or near shelter sites.
- Develop relationships between Ramsey County and stakeholders that are based on mutual respect and accountability. This will build a better understanding of the lived experience of residents and build trust.
- Provide wrap-around services at shelter sites that meet the needs of the current residents.

Moving forward, Ramsey County will be responsible for balancing concerns with its priority to ensure housing stability for all residents. The findings in this report should be a starting point for the County in its commitment to being responsive to these concerns, but the engagement with all stakeholders, especially residents experiencing homelessness, needs to continue as we address this whole-community challenge.