



HOMELESSNESS TASK FORCE

MINUTES

THURSDAY, MARCH 2, 2023

6:00 P.M.

SARATOGA SPRINGS CITY HALL, THIRD FLOOR MUSIC HALL

CALL TO ORDER:

PRESENT:

Rev. Kate Forer (Co-Chair), Tom Roohan (Co-Chair), Andrea Love Smith, Stephen Towne, Kate Halliday, Maggie Fronk, Hannah Hurley, Sherie Grinter, Lindsey Connors

STAFF: Anthony J, Izzo, Aneisha Samuels

Welcome & Introductions

Mayor Ron Kim opened the meeting with a general discussion about the role of the Task Force and thanked the members. The Task Force members each introduced themselves.

The Task Force discussed the rules that the Task Force will follow:

- Listen to each other without interruption.
- Evaluate the need for a low barrier shelter set up for Saratoga with the collaboration of non-profits.
- Respect for other peoples perspectives.
- Community and public involvement with clear and transparent communication.
- Educate themselves, and explain clearly for others.
- Will not reinvent the wheel and will look to other work that has already been done in the shelter process.

Our Three-Step Plan (need, location, agency)

The Task Force discussed the three step that it will be addressing:

1. Talk about what a low barrier shelter is? Explore whether Saratoga needs this.
2. If it is decided that Saratoga needs this shelter, where is the best location?
3. What agency should be responsible for the shelter?

Understanding the Work of the COC

Maggie Fronk and Lindsey Connors discussed the Continuum of Care (COC), a group of people in a region evaluating community needs for homelessness, what the gaps are, and what the needs are. The Saratoga Springs COC started in about 2000 to receive HUD funding to help unhoused, or housing unstable individuals. It has grown geographically to include Warren, Washington, and Hamilton County. Many of the community support agencies like Wellspring, Shelters of

Saratoga, Captain, and RISE get together to look at the numbers of people, what services we have, what services we are lacking, and apply for funding across that region from HUD. By working together they are aware of each other's programs, and can cross refer, etc. They look at the unhoused, and how long it takes to get someone into permanent housing. The COC process allows seeking federal funding to cover these needs. One part of the HUD requirements is the Coordinated Entry System, which allows someone who needs services to be fed into a centralized system. They can then be triaged to the agency best suited to help them. The Saratoga County Alliance to End Homelessness is a subset of the COC. This smaller group meets more frequently.

The COC has committees, for example the Data and Goals committee (looks at what the needs are, how many people we are serving, and how the agencies are doing meeting HUD's requirements), the Coordinated Entry committee (looks at whose coming in for housing, what agencies are helping them, and how quickly they are able to get help), and the Strategic Planning committee (looks at what the gaps are, what programming that is needed for 5-10 years out, and what kind of innovative solutions can address these issues).

The COC has brought a lot of permanent housing beds to the area. A lot of the planning works around HUD funds, but it is not enough to fulfill that need. The COC has looked at many different models, like a tiny home model. Much of the COC was built around HUD and HUD has specific definitions. The COC does an annual point in time count, per the HUD definition, which is very strict, and it's on a certain date that HUD chooses in the winter.

Lindsey Connors stated her perspective—a low barrier shelter is a shelter that does not have requirements in any type of programming in order to access the services. You are not required to be sober, you are not required to be working, and you are not required to do anything but be safe around other people.

Sherie Grinter mentioned that Shelters of Saratoga does have restrictions—it's more of a high barrier, where someone is on a different part of their transition. Then they can go over to RISE and transition to permanent housing. What we are missing in this community is that low barrier, that very first step for so many that can't take that next step. That is why we need the low barrier—it is the bottom tier to get started.

Hannah Hurley shared her belief that there shouldn't be qualifications or goals to meet to have a place to sleep safely. There has been some concerns about violence. Those are legal issues and that should be taking in the hands of a public safety group. A low barrier shelter is not related to those issues that we see, and it does not create a host for anything bad to happen.

Lindsey Connors reported that individuals who need to reside in a low barrier shelter even for one night do not negate any court order to be 1000 feet or more from a school. That is still in place. For any individual looking for shelter in that vicinity would be referred to DSS, and bussed to a more appropriate location. The court mandates still stand.

Maggie Fronk added that a low barrier shelter comes from the Housing First Model, which starts with getting people housed first so that they can feel safe and stable to sleep at night. There are

no expectations or treatment plans. The idea is when someone is housed they can get to a place of stability, and they can enter into trusting relationships with providers, that then might make them amenable to health care, mental health care, trying a job, etc.

Tom Roohan shared that it seems that housing first allows other things to happen. If you don't give people a chance to keep their belongings safe, their medication safe, then we really can't expect them to have a long term solution. Code Blue is a weather solution, not a solution for people that are in need. Where does the money come from for Code Blue?

Lindsey Connor stated that Code Blue funding comes through the County with State money.

Andrea Love Smith shared her personal experience having been unhoused during the pandemic summer in Saratoga Springs. There's a lot of concern about winter weather, but May is terrible, and August is deadly on the street. Without a good night's sleep, people cannot begin to repair their mental health. Without having control over their own personal space and feeling safe, they are not truly resting and are not in recovery.

Hannah Hurley stated there is definitely a need for low barrier, especially numbers wise. Code Blue has been the only low barrier shelter operating in the entire county.

Stephen Towne asked about other alternatives to low barrier that perhaps might be deemed more acceptable, or less fearful, and might impact the number 2 item, location.

Maggie Fronk shared that she would like to take these questions to the COC and ask, looking at our data, what do you think we need. Also, what kind of things have they seen in other places that have you worked? She would do a request for an information dump and bring it back to this Task Force.

Sherrie Grinter stated that a low barrier shelter is not a 30 day program. We are talking about people who have been on the streets for 10, 20, 30 years.

Maggie Fronk stated that there are probably 40 agencies involved in the COC across Saratoga, Washington, Warren, and Hamilton Counties—mental health, recovery, housing, veteran, and youth services.

Lindsey Connors stated that the COC is the Saratoga North Country Continuum of Care. The Saratoga County Alliance to End Homelessness' website (Endhomelessnesssaratoga.org) has all of the agencies listed.

Rev. Kate Forer suggested that the Task Force turn to some experts on the COC, who have been wrestling with this question for years, to learn about innovative models tried by other cities.

Tom Roohan stated that at the Changing the Lens of Homeless meeting, which was a discussion of mental health and homelessness in Saratoga County, it was reported that there were 199 unique visits to our Code Blue shelter so far. That is pretty shocking number for a place that only has 60 beds.

Sherie Grinter stated that our first year with Code Blue had approximately 25. The numbers are growing. The other agencies are doing the very best with what they have. We don't have apartments available for 200 people that are affordable in Saratoga.

Lindsey Connors stated we can't build affordable housing fast enough. Of the 120 Rise is building in Saratoga County right now, 48 of those are reserved for those experiencing homelessness.

The Task Force discussed having meetings every other Thursday at 6:00 pm until the recommendations are given by July 8th. The next meeting will be March 16 at 6pm.

Rev. Kate Forer opened the floor to public comments.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

A community member shared that she recently interacted with a blind elderly person, who needed to get to Code Blue, but the bus doesn't go that far. She called Code Blue, but no one answered. When they arrived at Code Blue, they were told he was from Schenectady our Code Blue had already hit the level. She talked them into letting him stay. She was shocked they were just going to give this blind homeless man a ticket back to Schenectady. She stated there is no help for people who really need it; a bus ticket isn't enough.

Barbara Thomas stated that she is convinced we need a low barrier shelter. We need to look at how many shelters, and what's an ideal population for a shelter. She doesn't think we want 75 people in one place.

Andrew Beatty commented that he likes the three step plan, but wants to suggest a fourth—a plan to sell the community on this. He has volunteered at Code Blue. We say that people are unsafe to have around a certain facility, or we need to control what they are doing, but what is our solution to that? Our health care system isn't going to provide them what they need. We need a low barrier shelter, because some of these people are put into situations where they don't have any choices.

Victor believes that we should spend on a camp. The problem with 75 people being in one area would be gone. You could have 6 people to a cottage. It would be a lot less expensive than trying to build a high tech building.

Peg Mangano stated that number 4 should be community education and involvement. Maybe if people found out who the homeless are, they might not mind having them in their backyard.

Sherry Gray reported that in California they are purchasing finished vans and giving them to homeless people, and encouraged the Task Force to think of different ideas, not just think a building.

Jen Dunn stressed that it's really important to remember the homeless are people. She offered that one agreement can be around language, and describing people in a homeless situation as not these people or them.

Aneisha Samuels added that from a quantitative perspective there is clearly a need for a low barrier shelter. An analysis needs to be done to understand what the needs are, how can we address these needs, and also think about the residents and their needs and what they can accommodate.

Rev. Kate Forer adjourned the meeting at 8:25 pm.