

March 26, 2019
Update on Homelessness in Whittier

The City Council and staff share the same strong feelings as many of our residents that have called, emailed, and come in person to express their concerns regarding the visible state of homelessness in Whittier. In actuality our City and partnering homeless services providers assist many that are experiencing homelessness – many of whom are not seen by the general public including families, single moms, veterans, and many others that are at risk of becoming homeless. However, we do have some individuals that are much more visible to the general public and they appear to be a growing population that is living in our public open spaces. As we have shared previously the City can no longer move these individuals out of our public spaces unless we have a shelter bed to offer them due to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals' decision in the Boise case. This greatly limits our ability to address the impacts of homelessness – which can be detrimental to the quality of life in our community. Similarly, while we are greatly concerned with the conditions that exist in several of our parks and open spaces, we find it even more disturbing that there are individuals for whom we as a society cannot provide the basic dignity of shelter - living on the streets is not healthy and is not acceptable in our community.

During the past week we have taken a number of steps to address our encampments. First, the County Sheriff Department's Homelessness Outreach Services Team, known as "HOST", has begun working with the individuals in Parnell Park by bringing a variety of social service, mental health and housing resources. The primary outreach effort has been led by LAHSA and it will continue for the coming weeks until we have relocated individuals out of the park. LAHSA has tremendous resources to assist in encouraging those living in the park to accept resources and obtain housing, so it is our hope that the situation will be substantially improved in the next several weeks.

Secondly, we have also focused efforts to address the encampment along Whittier Blvd. by reaching out to Caltrans and have them join our efforts as we believe they share in the responsibility to address the unsafe condition of having persons living within the state highway right-of-way. We are meeting with Caltrans officials this week along with representatives of our State legislators as the State can play a partnership role in helping to solve this encampment.

Additionally, our Police Department's Problem-Oriented Detail has been on-site regularly to assure laws are complied with. Arrests have been made for outstanding warrants and possession of drug paraphernalia. Our City staff have also worked with Athens Disposal and our homeless services providers to coordinate trash removal and these efforts will continue.

Some have suggested that the City also needs to move individuals out of our public parks and open spaces during daytime hours. However, if any other member of the

public has the right to be in a public space during those hours then we cannot deny access to individuals just because they may lack housing.

We are also aware that there have been issues with outside groups coming in and providing food and other services to those encamped in our city. Not all of these forms of assistance by well-meaning volunteers are beneficial as they can actually result in perpetuating homelessness. As such, we are working to bring a well-received training program to our community to assist our faith-based groups and other volunteers on how best to assist those experiencing homeless by providing a path to services and housing rather than supporting continued life on the street.

Whittier is one of 40 cities out of 88 in LA County that has an adopted homeless plan that strives to maximize resources, put in place policies to address and prevent homelessness, and coordinate services. We are working on a long term response to homelessness by actively working on the creation of additional shelter beds. We are working with the County on this effort as well as part of the Gateway Cities Council of Governments' Homelessness Technical Advisory Committee. The creation of additional shelter beds will require identification of a suitable site, construction of needed improvements, and could be accomplished in the next 4-6 months if we are able to identify and convert an existing building into shelter space. However, if we need to construct a new shelter facility it could take up to 2-3 years. Our goal is to rapidly find a solution that meets the needs of those experiencing homelessness and our community as a whole.

In the meantime, at Parnell Park we will work jointly with the HOST team and LAHSA to move those living in the park into housing. Likewise, on the Whittier Blvd. greenbelt area we will continue to work with Caltrans and our homeless service providers to move individuals off Whittier Blvd. to a more safe location. At the same time our Police Department will continue to patrol and enforce laws. We will be posting both areas for regular maintenance which will require the encampments to temporarily move while we mow and clean the areas. Our staff will be working with Whittier's First Day and PATH to regularly address trash, debris and sanitation issues at the Whittier Blvd. greenbelt. Concurrently we will continue to work with other agencies toward the goal of creating additional shelter beds to that will allow us to once again begin enforcing our anti-camping ordinance. Coupled with these efforts, the City Council will be acting to 1) form a Homelessness Ad Hoc Committee, 2) explore a campaign to address veteran homelessness, and 3) consider a shelter crisis declaration.