

General News

As homeless plan deadline nears, housing is limited, shelters are full and camps are closing

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As the deadline nears for the Dallas Commission on Homelessness to present a solution to the city's homeless problem and city officials move to shutter another large encampment, a big problem looms: The city's affordable housing supply is tight.

The 39-member commission has met twice and hosted three community forums on issues facing the homeless community in Dallas. The group hosted a forum on mental health Tuesday night at the Dallas Public Library.

The commission is also conducting a survey to garner feedback and suggestions from Dallas residents. The group is expected to submit a proposal by Aug. 2 to the City Council's housing committee, and eventually to the City Council.

The solution is likely to include expanding the affordable housing supply in Dallas. But that won't be easy.

Last month, nearly 120 homeless families were told their landlords would no longer accept their housing vouchers. The families receive help through the nonprofit Family Gateway, which is working to find other apartment complexes to take the vouchers.

It's a common problem in Dallas these days as the city — and most of North Texas — experiences a housing boom.

"Homeless people are in a much more difficult situation when the real estate market is really good," said Family Gateway board chair Anne Johnson.

The dilemma the Family Gateway families are facing highlights some of the problems the homeless commission is fighting to fix.

Though unsheltered homelessness has garnered a lot of attention in recent months as the city has grappled with several homeless encampments, Johnson said there are many other examples of homelessness in Dallas.

Many of the children Family Gateway serves are under 5.

"We have a homeless crisis going on, and it's going to get worse," Johnson said. "Everyone's focused on Tent City, Tent City, Tent City. Our families are being kicked out of apartment complexes and other housing."

New Tent City to close

City officials plan to shutter a shantytown under Interstate 45 at Coombs Street later this month, less than two miles from the largest homeless encampment ever seen in Dallas. That encampment, best known as Tent City, was shut down in May.

When it closed, many Tent City residents simply dragged their belongings down the road and moved into the space at Coombs. Initially about 60 people lived there, but officials say that number has grown to about 120.

City crews have put up "No Trespassing" signs at the homeless village and will close the entire area by July 19.

City officials are facing some of the same issues they had when closing Tent City: Shelter space is limited, and many landlords aren't taking housing vouchers.

Landlords are more likely to take tenants with a steady income and without the hassle of housing voucher paperwork, said Dallas Housing Authority senior vice president Troy Broussard.

Housing-first model

One term keeps coming up at the homeless commission meetings and community forums: housing first.

"When you're homeless, one of the things you need first is a home," said Ron Stretcher, director of the Dallas County criminal justice department.

"We do not have housing" in Dallas, he said.

The theory behind "housing first" is simple: put a homeless person in housing and then help that person deal with the root causes of their homelessness. That could be mental health, addiction, bad physical health or lack of employment.

"If you see homelessness as an emergency situation similar to a heart attack, then there's no question" you follow a housing first model, said Ikenna Mogbo, housing outpatient operations manager for Metrocare Services.

But some commission members question how realistic that model is. At Tuesday night's forum, some attendees asked what happens when a formerly homeless person violates his or her lease agreement and ends up back on the street.

Mogbo said if a person is kicked out of housing, it is up to that person's caseworker to find a new place for him or her to live.

And Stretcher emphasized that housing first works only if there are services, including mental health treatment, provided to that person.

Homeless children and families

The next community forum will cover youth homelessness.

It's an issue that is often overlooked in Dallas, said Johnson with Family Gateway.

The organization estimates there are about 5,000 homeless children in the city, many moving from place to place or staying with their parents in cars.

"Children who are living on the street. Children living in cars. That's disgraceful as a city," Johnson said.

Though it's unlikely any of the 120 families who were told their apartments would no longer accept vouchers will end up on the street, the organization is finding fewer and fewer landlords willing to accept tenants receiving government assistance.

Johnson, who serves on the homeless commission, hopes the group is able to offer up solutions. And those solutions will come down to more than simply throwing money at the problem. There needs to be an attitude change in the city, she said.

"We have got to have the political will."