

Agenda Report

December 14, 2020

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council
FROM: Department of Housing
SUBJECT: **STATUS OF THE BAD WEATHER SHELTER AND ALTERNATIVE SHELTER AND COLD WEATHER HOMELESS SERVICES**

RECOMMENDATION:

The following report is for information only; no City Council action is required.

BACKGROUND:

In March 2020, the City of Pasadena Department of Housing (the "Department") issued a Request for Applications (RFA) announcing the availability of federal Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program funding to provide specific homeless services activities, including emergency shelter, street outreach and homelessness prevention. This funding opportunity was open to units of local government, private non-profits and for-profit organizations that provide direct services to people experiencing homelessness. After undergoing a competitive evaluation and review process, The FID Group, dba Friends In Deed was selected as the highest scoring applicant and was awarded \$25,000 in funding to operate the Bad Weather Shelter during the 2020-2021 winter season. Friends In Deed was the only applicant that applied for funding to operate the Bad Weather Shelter while Union Station Homeless Services applied for funding to administer additional motel vouchers. Council approved the use of ESG funds for the Bad Weather Shelter on July 20, 2020 and the Department successfully executed a contract with Friends In Deed to operate the program starting December 1, 2020 through March of 2021. Unfortunately, the Bad Weather Shelter will not be operating during this winter season due to safety concerns, staffing issues and location issues arising from the operation of this program in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed in further detail in the balance of this report.

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE BAD WEATHER SHELTER

Over the summer, Friends In Deed informed the Department that after three decades of serving as the host congregation, Pasadena Covenant Church will discontinue hosting the Bad Weather Shelter this winter season. In response, Friends In Deed worked for several months to find a suitable alternative location and reached out to numerous potential sites, all of which were not interested in considering an overnight shelter during COVID-19. Progress was made when the Department referred Friends In Deed to a

local church that had a physical space conducive to operating a drop-in program as in past years and that was willing to host the shelter. Beginning in September, the Department and Friends In Deed worked together via weekly meetings to address the foreseen challenges that would accompany operating a congregate, night-by-night shelter during a pandemic. The Department and Friends In Deed also scheduled meetings with Public Health staff to discuss protocols and procedures that would be required to run the shelter safely. Through these efforts, a potential food vendor was identified to provide hot meals as an alternative to relying on volunteers as in years past, for which the implementation and enforcement of COVID-related safety protocols would have been difficult. Other issues that were considered to ensure the safety and well-being of both clients and staff while operating a congregate shelter included significantly reduced shelter capacity to accommodate physical distancing protocols, enhanced cleaning regimens in frequency and intensity, installation of Plexiglas barriers to allow proper sanitization and infection control, procurement of both medical grade and non-medical grade personal protective equipment for staff and participants, and additional staff to implement and enforce safety protocols.

During this time, Friends In Deed visited the Basset Park winter shelter operated by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) in the San Gabriel Valley to gather information on best practices for operating a winter shelter safely during the pandemic. In contrast to the Bad Weather Shelter's model of operation, all of the LAHSA-funded winter shelters operating across the County have moved to a 24 hour-a-day operation plan and have transformed their spaces to meet COVID-19 related guidelines, including limited coming and going. This shift in operations was deemed necessary in an effort to keep all clients accessing this service healthy and safe indoors, as staff are able to conduct daily temperature checks, COVID-19 screening questionnaires and testing, closely monitor exposure risks, and move quickly to lock down and quarantine the whole site for a minimum of 14 days if necessary pending a positive test result or cluster outbreak. Additionally, this model reduces the amount of new people who are potentially accessing the site on any given day, essentially create a cohort of participants, and thus reduces transmission risk. Allowing a shelter to operate on a drop-in basis without consistent monitoring of overnight guests for potential exposure during the daytime hours would introduce increased health risks for both clients and staff due to the roster of clients continually rotating and the inconsistent capacity to implement proactive COVID-19 related precautions.

Upon learning of Friends In Deed's tremendously difficult decision after months of dedication and strategic planning, the Department moved quickly to schedule a meeting with Union Station Homeless Services, the leading provider of homelessness services in Pasadena and the San Gabriel Valley, to discuss the possibility of the agency temporarily taking on the Bad Weather Shelter this season. While it was already mid-November with the program scheduled to begin operations in early December, staff remained committed to exploring an alternative path forward. After initial discussions, Union Station presented concerns that were central to Friends In Deed's decision, including management capacity for hiring, onboarding and oversight of staff, increased exposure and quarantine risk for key management staff (whose time in quarantine if exposed could have significant impact on the ability to keep critical existing programs functioning), increased health risks for clients and staff, and the handling of an outbreak

and related quarantine procedures. Union Station, which has safely operated two congregate shelters throughout the pandemic, ultimately agreed that it would be unsafe to operate the Bad Weather Shelter safely under its typical format and that it was not feasible given time and resource constraints to adjust the model. Although Union Station was unable to commit to being the service provider to the lower density, traditional Bad Weather Shelter model this season, they remain committed to collaborating with the City and Friends In Deed to support the needs of our unsheltered neighbors experiencing homelessness.

While there would have been many challenges to overcome and run the Bad Weather Shelter safely this winter season, there were also significant staffing capacity concerns. After sending out an agency-wide poll, Friends In Deed found that almost 95% of their shelter staff had indicated that they were unable or unwilling to work this season due to various reasons, such as age, presence of an underlying health condition, or living with and caring for a relative that is high-risk for contracting COVID-19. Similarly, it is not practical nor prudent to rely on volunteers absent an experienced service provider to carry out these operations. Finally, a large majority of the population served by the Bad Weather Shelter is highly vulnerable to serious illness and death from COVID-19 due to age and the presence of chronic health conditions. A congregate shelter, even with the implementation of mask wearing and social distancing, still carries a heightened risk of transmission of COVID-19 for participants, as well as staff. Overall there are lower COVID-19 positivity rates among people experiencing homelessness compared to the general public. If operation of the Bad Weather Shelter were to move forward this season at a time when the City is experiencing a significant surge in daily cases, there exists the potential of putting overnight guests, who are already particularly vulnerable to severe illness or death if they were to contract the virus, in a situation that introduces higher risk rather than promotes health and well-being. Currently congregate shelter in converted spaces such as churches is not considered a best practice by HUD, which instead recommends non-congregate shelter in motel rooms as a best practice.

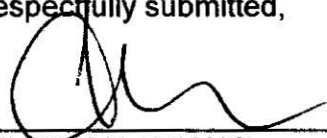
While the Department and Friends In Deed made great progress in identifying a new location and meeting with the Public Health Department to create a viable operation plan, the weather-activated, night-by-night, low-barrier model would prevent the implementation of the many safety measures necessary for safe operations during the pandemic crisis this season and, therefore, is not viable. It is worth noting that the East San Gabriel Valley Coalition for the Homeless' rotating winter shelter is also unable to move forward with operating this year due to the pandemic and related safety concerns.

In light of the similar consensus across agencies, the Department is responding by finding alternative ways to address the needs of the community's unhoused neighbors this winter. Staff have continued weekly meetings with Friends In Deed, which has expanded to include Union Station's executive leadership, to plan a multi-pronged response. In collaboration with these partner agencies, the Department is planning to utilize the previously approved Bad Weather Shelter funding and other available funding sources for increased motel vouchers, which are safer during the pandemic compared to congregate shelter, distributing meals and cold weather supplies such as ponchos,

socks and blankets on-site at Friends In Deed and through their street outreach team, and partnering with existing meal programs such as those held at churches to distribute cold weather supplies. Staff are also discussing ways to assist clients with accessing County administered winter shelters that will continue to operate outside of Pasadena. Further, the Department recently allocated a million dollars of ESG-CARES funding from HUD to utilize for emergency shelter, which will primarily be spent on motel vouchers over the next year and we anticipate will be utilized more heavily during the winter.

With the suspension of Bad Weather Services this winter season, the Department recognizes the challenge this decision poses to people experiencing homelessness. The Department is working hard to mitigate these challenges as safely and strategically as possible with the City's collaborative partners.

Respectfully submitted,


for WILLIAM K. HUANG
Director of Housing

Reviewed by:


JENNIFER O'REILLY-JONES
Program Coordinator II

Approved by:


STEVE MERMELL
City Manager