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Sonja K. Berndt
Pasadena, California
(Sonja.berndt19@gmail.com)

January 8, 2021

Mayor Victor Gordo
Vice Mayor Andy Wilson
Members of the Pasadena City Council
Pasadena City Hall
100 N. Garfield Ave.
Pasadena, California 91101

By Email

Re: City Council Meeting 1/11/2021—Agenda Item 6: Authorization to Allocate Additional Funding for Weather-Activated Motel Vouchers to Serve People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness

Dear Honorable Mayor Gordo, Vice Mayor Wilson, and Members of the Pasadena City Council:

Thank you for placing on the agenda for the January 11, 2021 Council meeting the urgent matter of authorizing funding for motel room support for our unsheltered residents during bad weather this winter given that Pasadena has no Bad Weather Shelter this year. I also want to especially thank Pasadena's Department of Housing, Bill Huang and his staff, for all the work they have done, on an urgent basis, to put forward an alternative plan and also for meeting with Pasadena residents deeply concerned about protecting our unsheltered residents from bitter cold and rain this winter.

A. Background

The topic of no Bad Weather Shelter in Pasadena this winter was discussed at the December 14, 2021 Council meeting. At the meeting, over 50 residents expressed their deep concern for our unsheltered residents and urged the City to adopt various measures. At that meeting, conflicting statements were made about which of our unsheltered residents would receive a motel room in the event of night temperatures below 40 degrees or a forecasted chance of rain greater than 40%.

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This motel support was termed a motel “voucher” program, although it does not involve paper vouchers.

The January 2020 pre-COVID homeless count for Pasadena reported 527 unhoused residents with 295 of those persons unsheltered. While it is not clear how many motel “vouchers” will ultimately be provided this winter, the staff report mentions the number of persons who used the Bad Weather Shelter last year (with 55 persons sheltered on its busiest night). This is, of course, a small fraction of our unsheltered residents.

It is important to note at the outset that many of our unsheltered do not use a congregate bad weather shelter for a number of reasons. First, generally only a small amount of belongings can be brought into a weather-activated shelter (*see* discussion below). Second, some unsheltered residents are fearful that the belongings they bring, which are needed to survive on the street, will be stolen at a congregate shelter. Third, some unsheltered residents have medical issues or mental illness that precludes them from sheltering in a congregate shelter. I am sure there are other reasons as well.

Pasadena’s Department of Housing confirmed that funding for motel rooms in bad weather this winter is not the problem. Rather, the lack of outreach workers to be able to operate the program is the primary problem. It is clear to many, that the resources of both the Housing Department and Union Station have been stretched thin this year. Going forward, as stated by then-mayoral candidate Victor Gordo, “we must ensure effective intervention programs and case management efforts, such as rapid rehousing, the HOPE and PORT teams, and shelter are appropriately staffed and resourced.” (V. Gordo written statement for GPAHG Candidate Forum 1/21/2020.) While the City has made strides toward achieving our long-term goal of providing sufficient affordable and permanent supportive housing, that housing will take many months/years to come on line. Our City needs to provide decent, humane transitional shelter in the meantime.

B. Our Unsheltered Residents Face Enormous Health Risks and Death

The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) reports that people experiencing homelessness have a much higher risk than the general population of developing exposure-related conditions such as frostbite and hypothermia. These conditions can be immediately life threatening or can have long-term effects. (NCH, *Bringing*

Our Neighbors in from the Cold, September 2010.) Moreover, earlier this month, the *LA Times* reported that Los Angeles County is struggling to respond to the sudden surge of COVID-19 throughout the homeless shelter system. (“COVID Surge Catches Up to Area Homeless Shelters,” 1/3/2021.) Our unsheltered residents are currently facing enormous health risks.

C. The Alternative Plan for Our Unsheltered Residents this Winter

According to the staff report, the Department of Housing is partnering with three organizations to meet the cold weather needs of our unsheltered residents this Winter: Friends In Deed, Union Station Homeless Services (in collaboration with the HOPE team), and the Pasadena Public Health Department (in collaboration with the PORT Team).

1. Weather-Activated Motel “Vouchers.”

Union Station will receive “a limited number” of motel vouchers for persons “who are currently engaged in services” provided by Union Station and prioritized based on factors that place individuals at higher risk for developing hypothermia and COVID-19. It is unclear how many vouchers Union Station will receive or what it means to be “currently engaged in” Union Station’s services. Pasadena Public Health Department will also receive an unspecified number of motel “vouchers” for vulnerable persons enrolled in the GEM Link, TAY Link and PORT programs.

Friends In Deed will provide motel vouchers to persons who are engaged by their street outreach team and prioritized based on risk of developing hypothermia, serious illness or death from COVID-19. So this sector of residents appears to be all of those unsheltered who are not in a program with one of the aforementioned service providers and are not being followed by anyone. The plan to reach these unsheltered persons is that Friends In Deed’s mobile outreach unit will be deployed from 5-9 p.m. on cold/rainy nights to distribute cold weather supplies and provide motel support to the most vulnerable.

Since it is unclear how Friends In Deed will be able to find and prioritize the most vulnerable unsheltered persons on cold and rainy nights between 5-9 p.m., members of the community have been distributing flyers through direct outreach and through nonprofit organizations advising our unsheltered residents to connect with Friends In Deed when its representatives are at the Thursday/Sunday supplies/food program at Pasadena Presbyterian Church. The flyer tells them to tell Friends In Deed staff that they are in need of shelter in bad weather. This way,

hopefully, they can be evaluated and prioritized ahead of bad weather and the Friends In Deed mobile unit will know where to find them to arrange motel support and distribute supplies.

2. Bad Weather Supplies

The plan this winter includes Friends In Deed's distribution of cold weather supplies (ponchos, warm clothing and blankets) to unsheltered who come to Pasadena Presbyterian Church on Sundays and/or Thursdays.

3. LAHSA Shelters

LAHSA is operating congregate shelters this winter during bad weather, partnering with a number of service providers. There are three shelters in the entire San Gabriel Valley: (1) Loma Alta Park at the far north end of Lincoln Avenue in Altadena (47 beds, coed); (2) Hacienda Heights (15 beds, women only); La Puente (75 beds, coed). These beds are available to residents of cities in Los Angeles County, including Pasadena.

D. Urgent Actions Requested

To address the needs of our unsheltered residents this winter, given our unique circumstances, the Council should consider taking the following actions:

- Authorize as Much Special Fund and General Fund Funding to Provide Motel Vouchers for as Many of Our Unsheltered Residents as Possible

The December staff report from the Housing Department noted that the Housing Department recently allocated a million dollars of funding from HUD to utilize for emergency shelter **over the next year**. The entire \$1 million should be expended over the winter months as necessary in order to house as many unsheltered residents as possible in motel rooms, recognizing the limitation of outreach resources to support the program. If needed, the Council should approve additional funds from the General Fund for this purpose as well, which is consistent with the Council's other approved, COVID-19-related General Fund expenditures this year.

- Ensure that there is Transportation to and from LAHSA Shelters and Explore Ways that Our Unsheltered Residents Can Secure Their Belongings

The closest LAHSA shelter is at the far north end of Lincoln, at the base of the mountains in Altadena. Gratefully, the Housing Department will assist with actively publicizing information about the Loma Alta Park shelter and reports that, if needed, outreach teams will assist with transportation via ride share companies and Dial-a-Ride subject to program eligibility criteria. Members of the community are also distributing flyers through direct outreach and through nonprofit organizations in the City advising our unsheltered residents about the LAHSA bad weather shelters and food/meal programs being conducted in our City throughout the week. If we hope to have many of our unsheltered residents seek shelter at LAHSA shelters, we must ensure that all are provided transportation to and from the shelter, including those who have no access to cellphones.

Significantly, LAHSA's 2020-2021 Winter Shelter Program notes that all shelters have a two-bag maximum allowance for belongings. I have been engaged in direct outreach with our unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness for many months. I have encountered very few with two bags or less. Our unsheltered residents have sleeping bags, blankets, food, water, clothes, etc. These supplies take months or longer to accumulate and help them survive on the streets. It is patently unreasonable to require these persons to choose between leaving their things behind, unsecured, or foregoing shelter on bitter cold and rainy nights. Respectfully, the City needs to explore whether the restrictions can be lifted and/or explore ways the belongings of unsheltered persons can be secured while they shelter at a LAHSA shelter (*e.g.*, lockers).

- Approve Shelter in the FEMA Trailers the City Received from the State

As you know, Pasadena received 50 trailers from the State that were parked for many months at the Rose Bowl. At the December 14, 2020 Council meeting, City Manager Mermell stated that the number of trailers has been "drawn down" to 33 and that 20 of those were moved to Rosemont Pavilion and disconnected from utilities. According to Mr. Mermell, they are in a "storage type of arrangement" and "we don't feel that we are equipped to utilize that area to support homeless persons and their attendant needs." The exclusion of the FEMA trailers as one option to provide transitional housing for our unhoused remains a mystery to the public and a clear example of lack of transparency in our City's governance.

- Suspend Ordinances re: Loitering and Overnight Parking to Allow Our Unsheltered Residents to Shelter in Vehicles and City-Owned Structures

This year, the Council suspended various parking restrictions to assist businesses during the pandemic. Under Pasadena Municipal Code section 10.44.010, there is no parking on City streets during the hours of 2:00-6:00 a.m. The Council should suspend all applicable ordinances and allow unhoused persons with vehicles to sleep in their vehicles on City streets overnight this winter. Likewise, the Council should suspend ordinances covering overnight loitering on City property this winter to allow our unsheltered residents to shelter from cold and rain (*see, e.g.*, PMC §3.24.110(a)(23)).

E. Conclusion

In conclusion, I urge the Council to ensure that all of our unsheltered residents receive shelter in bad weather this winter through the measures stated in this letter. This will avoid needless suffering and possible death simply because our unsheltered residents were left out in the cold and rain. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

/s/

Sonja K. Berndt, R.N. (inactive), J.D.

Cc: correspondence@cityofpasadena.net
William Huang, Director of Housing