



County of Santa Clara
Board of Supervisors
Supervisory District 5
Supervisor S. Joseph Simitian

86681

DATE: June 6, 2017
TO: Board of Supervisors
FROM: S. Joseph Simitian, Supervisor
Mike Wasserman, Supervisor
SUBJECT: Cold Weather Shelter

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Direct Administration to report to the Board in August 2017 regarding expansion of the Cold Weather Shelter Program, providing a budget and the operational plans necessary to extend the cold weather shelter season so it is consistent with the maximum provided in state law (October 15-April 15), and use all or part of the currently unused portion of the 999 Hamlin property in Sunnyvale to provide interim housing for persons participating in the County's permanent supportive housing programs that are a part of the countywide coordinated entry system. (Simitian/Wasserman)

Fiscal Implications

Fiscal implications will be identified and reported on by staff.

Reasons for Recommendation

There is an opportunity to better serve Santa Clara County's homeless, as well as those who are looking for stable housing and are part of the County's Coordinated Care Project, by more completely utilizing the existing cold weather shelter program.

Background

For more than 20 years, the County has funded its cold weather shelters from the first Monday after Thanksgiving through the end of March. While that timing covers a good portion of the cold weather season, it is shorter than state law allows; and it is inevitable that there are inclement weather episodes that fall outside the roughly December through March operating dates.

In the 2013-2014 cold weather season, for example, there were four deaths from cold weather exposure in the days just before the shelters opened for the season. In the 2016-2017 cold weather season, there was more rain in April than in either December or March.

Increased volatility of weather exacerbates the problem. For our region that means longer and more severe droughts, but it also means that the “atmospheric river” and “pineapple express” events we hear about on the nightly news could become more frequent and more severe.

The unnecessary human suffering caused by weather-related events that occur earlier or later in the season are only one justification for extending the cold weather shelter season. Another reason to consider doing so is improved outcomes for shelter residents.

Beginning with the 2015-2016 cold weather season, County staff changed from a first-come, first-served system to a referral system at the cold weather shelters and essentially allowed clients to reserve a bed throughout the entire season.

The increased stability was good for shelter neighbors, and it was good for shelter residents. In two of the three cold weather shelters that operated in the 2016-2017 season, performance goals for exiting clients into stable housing were exceeded. In Sunnyvale almost 10% of clients exited into stable housing and at the Ochoa Center, over 50% did. Only at the Gilroy shelter was the 5% goal not achieved. The Sunnyvale and Ochoa results show that cold weather shelter can be more than just a band-aid, it can provide sufficient stabilization for some clients to find the housing they need.

To that end, expanding the Sunnyvale shelter capacity by integrating the other half of the property (or some portion thereof) with the existing shelter would provide the County an opportunity to offer interim housing to individuals participating in the permanent housing programs that are a part of the countywide coordinated entry system. These folks participate in case management services regularly and have housing vouchers or subsidies, but are faced with long waits to identify and secure a housing unit.

While they struggle to find housing, many of these people are in the ranks of the unsheltered homeless. Taking away the burden of looking for a safe place to rest every night, frees precious time and energy to be redirected to finding housing.

Staff should use their best professional judgment to recommend a program structure that will maximize the desired goal of assisting individuals to obtain stable housing.

Senior Impact

Many seniors are homeless and may directly benefit from an expansion of services. According to a May 31, 2016, story in the New York Times, people over the age of 50 now make up 31 percent of the nation's homeless population.

Child Impact

Families use these shelters; providing a more stable environment for homeless children while their parents focus on identifying housing opportunities is good for kids.

Consequences of Negative Action

Homeless persons who are interested in cold weather shelter will be deprived of an additional two months of shelter and persons participating in our Coordinated Care Project will remain unsheltered while seeking an opportunity to use their housing vouchers or subsidies.