



October 25, 2020

Dear City of Spokane Council President Breean Beggs

Council Members Kate Burke, Michael Cathcart, Betsy Wilkerson, Lori Kinnear, Candace Mumm, and Karen Stratton,

As you are establishing your budget priorities, the League of Women Voters of the Spokane Area (LWVSA) recommends increased assistance to individuals experiencing homelessness.

“Persons who are unable to work, whose incomes are inadequate, or for whom jobs are not available, should be assured of public assistance and services sufficient to meet their needs for food, shelter and health care.” (LWV Washington Program in Action 2019-2021, page 43)

Based on the state League’s position and our year-long review of the current conditions in Spokane, LWV of the Spokane Area strongly recommends that the city:

- 1) Secure sufficient low-barrier 24/7 shelter beds, including meals, for unsheltered individuals.
- 2) Provide places for unsheltered individuals to go during the day that is warm and dry.
- 3) Provide sanctioned public places with trash disposal, restrooms, and handwashing facilities, where those experiencing homelessness can set up tents and/or park their vehicles.

Everyone agrees that the Spokane area has an ongoing matter of great concern regarding the unsheltered people in our community.

In January 2020, the City of Spokane Community, Housing and Human Services Department organized and led the HUD required annual Point in Time (PIT) Count of homeless individuals. The PIT count is recognized as an undercount due to a variety of different reasons including that some people experiencing homelessness are sheltering in low-visibility locations. The resulting count was 1,559 individuals experiencing homelessness.

The Spokane Police Department (SPD) has been tasked with seeking out encampments of unsheltered individuals on public land to impel them to relocate and engage with services. This action is commonly known as “sweeping.” Individuals who are consistently forced to relocate, with or without a citation, are repeatedly traumatized by this experience. The SPD may issue a citation, if they believe that there are available shelter beds, to refer individuals to services at community court. Failure to comply may lead to a criminal misdemeanor, which could impact their future housing and employment prospects.

There is a common misconception that there are currently 648 beds available; however, only 237* of them are low-barrier beds that are available for individuals without minor children (barriers may include gender, state of sobriety, fee, age, religion, family make-up, etc.).

Shelter Bed Counts used by SPD for citations/referrals to community court:

Shelter	Serves...	# of Beds	Barriers, if any
House of Charity	Men	100*	
Family Promise	Families	60	Adults with minor children
House of Charity	Women	35*	
Truth Ministries	Men	35	Sobriety, \$2 per night
G Prep Catholic Charities	Families	60	Adults with minor children
Salvation Army 55 Mission	Mixed	102*	

We recognize that the city added 100 low-barrier shelter beds to its capacity in 2019. The Cannon Street Warming Shelter was opened November 2019, serving approximately 100 unhoused individuals, and closed April 2020 for improvements. When Cannon Street was closed, that capacity was taken over by the library, then the Arena and then the Salvation Army 55 Mission low-barrier shelter which opened in August 2020.

The Salvation Army shelter is currently providing 102 socially distanced beds to both men and women. After November 1, the Salvation Army shelter will transition to a referral-only bridge shelter and its 102 low-barrier beds will again return to the Cannon Street Warming Shelter. As of April 1, 2021, Cannon Street will transition to a drop-in day center with services.

In addition, a partnership between the Spokane Valley and Spokane County plans to open a young adult shelter, for 18 to 24-year-olds, as of December 1. And on October 5, the city announced that in June 2021 it will open a diversion facility which will treat 46 individuals with mental health or substance abuse disorders who are arrested for low-level crimes.

We commend the city for its continued work, to add capacity to house individuals experiencing homelessness.

However, as of October 2020, the city has capacity for 237 single individuals without minor children within low-barrier shelters at the Men’s and Women’s House of Charity shelters as well as at the Salvation Army 55 Mission facility. This is simply not enough. **As of the January 2020 Point in Time count, there were at least 1,559 people in Spokane experiencing homelessness vs. 237 low-barrier shelter beds, a deficit of 1,322 beds**

We recognize there are additional shelters with barriers such as UGM which has religious, sobriety and work requirements and Truth Ministries which requires sobriety and a \$2/night fee. As a city, Spokane must do better in providing more low-barrier beds. Further, unsheltered individuals need places to go during the day when many of the shelters are closed. This creates an impossibility of existence where simply living and being may be criminalized. We traumatize people who are experiencing homelessness for essentially just existing in public, when they have no alternatives.

In fact, recent court rulings may have an effect on the legality of sweeping and how it is done in Spokane:

In 2018 The Ninth Circuit Court found in the case of Martin v. City of Boise that cities cannot make it illegal for people to sleep or rest outside without providing sufficient indoor alternatives. The Boise case was based in part on the Eighth Amendment -- that arresting homeless people for simply being homeless is cruel and unusual punishment. The case was appealed to the U.S Supreme Court, which denied the petition and thus allowed the decision to stand.

Then, in July 2020, in Blake v. The City of Grants Pass, a federal judge issued an opinion in the class-action lawsuit homeless residents brought against the southern Oregon town of Grants Pass, finding the town's use of violations and fines to punish people for sleeping outside is unconstitutional, using Martin v. City of Boise as precedent.

Further, the CDC has issued guidance regarding sweeps of encampments:

- If individual housing options are not available, allow people who are living unsheltered or in encampments to remain where they are.
 - Clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers. This increases the potential for infectious disease spread.
- Ensure nearby restroom facilities have functional water taps, are stocked with hand hygiene materials (soap, drying materials) and bath tissue, and remain open to people experiencing homelessness 24 hours per day.
- If toilets or handwashing facilities are not available nearby, assist with providing access to portable latrines with handwashing facilities for encampments of more than 10 people. These facilities should be equipped with hand sanitizer (containing at least 60% alcohol).

Based on the current economic crisis, it can be extrapolated from the National Council of State Housing Agencies data that 13,000-21,000 renter households in Spokane County will be unable to pay rent and are at risk for eviction as of January 1, 2021 potentially resulting in a dramatic increase in the homeless population. A recent UW study, conducted during the COVID pandemic, found when homeless individuals are provided with shelter with wrap-around services, they have higher exits to permanent housing and engagement with service providers.

A reasonable conclusion can be drawn that the Spokane area does not have the ability to provide for the needs of unsheltered people at the present time, and is not prepared to handle the inevitable increase

in the numbers that will occur as the weather becomes colder and the consequences of the economics of the pandemic begin to emerge.

In conclusion, League of Women Voters of the Spokane Area recommends more low-barrier shelter beds, more daytime shelters and sanctioned public places for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Thank you for your attention to this matter as our community is quickly moving into winter months. We are looking forward to your response to our recommendations and we will be contacting you to follow-up.

Sincerely,

Ann M. Murphy

Ann M. Murphy

LWVSA Co-President

Sylvia Oliver

Sylvia Oliver

LWVSA Co-President