

Getting to the HEART of the Matter

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For many years, it wasn't too difficult to find an encampment of people without a permanent home – if you cared to actually look. They were there. Very few of us went to the effort. Then - seemingly overnight- homeless people and homeless camps were everywhere, even in our more rural towns and regions. What happened?

None of this, of course, was a sudden occurrence unless you napped away the last few decades. But, the sheer number of people on the streets or in the woods has increased everywhere. The dollar cost of maintaining a residence has skyrocketed and is still climbing. Publicly funded residential facilities for those with mental health issues all closed long ago. Homeless advocacy is now a *growth industry*. Oregon's housing supply is a looming disaster. Homelessness stories are mainline media leads. Our national homeless population has become concentrated on the west coast. And now, this unfunded complex of difficult problems has become our responsibility as city and regional government managers and stewards.

When some of our homeless folks decided to camp out in front of Sutherlin main street businesses and hide camps in back yards, it was time to do something. But what? Most of the immediate “*solutions*” volunteered were clearly illegal and inhumane. Doing some serious research and consulting with the city attorney revealed that there were really only two options: do nothing or create a camp that conformed to federal court rulings and soon-to-be Oregon lawⁱ.

Since doing nothing seemed certain to allow conditions to further deteriorate, we quickly reviewed available city properties and sited a temporary emergency homeless camp. Then came the outcry.



It isn't that criticism was not expected; it was that the vitriol and anger were so extreme. The emergency location wasn't the greatest. Neither were the suggestions from the neighbors and the "drive-by" non-neighbors. We found a better location and moved the camp. The *Not-In-My-Backyarders* didn't disappear but they were fewer in number and we were able to more fully explain the conditions the city was required to work under to behave both legally and responsibly.

A review of pending state and current federal law tells us that our homeless population has rights we ignore at our own peril.ⁱⁱ If we were not already predisposed to behave humanely, reasonably and sensitively, we quickly learned that heavy-handed treatment would likely turn costly and was,

generally speaking, illegal. Ultimately, from a human-caring viewpoint, setting aside court-ordered requirements, we felt compelled to create and foster a system of care that would lead to healthy independent living.

We quickly formed a working group to make our low-barrier camp the best it could be for both the campers and the neighbors. By engaging city staff, fire, police, public works, a key homelessness service provider and local churches, an unused lot a few blocks off the main arterial has become workable as a temporary tent camping solution. It was a good step forward.

What quickly became clear as we tried to understand what might be next on a path back from homelessness - it seemed to us - was that no one was actually **doing anything** in rural Oregon to help us and other small rural cities, towns and counties. Resources and financing were more plentiful and more available in population centers for an array of homeless advocacy programs. Larger cities received direct federal and state funding that *they* managed. It still doesn't seem like their problems were being solved yet they have very significant funding. Our rural cities and

counties did not and do not. We are now the “responsible parties”, yet remain unsupported and on our own.

Watching and attempting to analyze what is happening in Douglas County did not prove fruitful. Each city is on its own in terms of addressing camping on our city lands and it seems like we all were reacting to one encampment after the next.

Our working group decided to cut to the heart-of-the-matter and make a genuine effort to get people and families the help they need to get back into a home and be able to live a fruitful and productive life.



In our ongoing look at other communities, we found no other camps to compare or consider in rural areas similar to ours. There were and are a significant number of agencies and organizations that serve and address some of the needs for emergency housing and ancillary support. They are also the recipients and dispensers of state and federal funding targeted for homelessness response. Unfortunately, they are not organized to provide a place for a homeless person to camp. And there is no on-site provision for holistic care, and support, which, referenced above, we continue to believe is the key to making any comprehensive service center successful.

Our camp - given that it is currently no more than that - is functioning well. We have created an address so service providers can know where to contact campers. Basic shelters, food, water, clothing, showers, transportation are all available on both a regular and irregular schedule. Clearly, even for the few dozen folks we are working with, this is not enough. A much more complete solution is needed.

Using our small camp, we've had time to work with our community, agencies and the campers themselves. We learned very early on when we eliminated the free-range camping on city lands and instead offered only one location to set up a tent in our designated location, the campers not only complied, but we soon saw a calmness and new demeanor from most.

We began with 15 campers and immediately brought them together to get to know them, their individual needs, and provide comfort knowing that they would not be forced to move again anytime soon. This generated a gradual change in attitude and behavior for most of those living here. They transitioned from a state of constant fear and crisis to looking forward a few days and weeks.

We then introduced the idea of some self-generated rules for the camp and they themselves appointed three leaders to serve as camp spokesperson, maintenance-person and meal-preparer. These three were the first to agree to enter into a Program of Care (PoC).

There are three environments we manage on the site that will be mirrored on our new site, only larger in scale as described below:

Tent: Everyone who comes onto the grounds is immediately awarded individual space for a tent. We also, recently purchased metal open covers for making harsh weather more manageable. This is as prescribed by law "low-barrier."

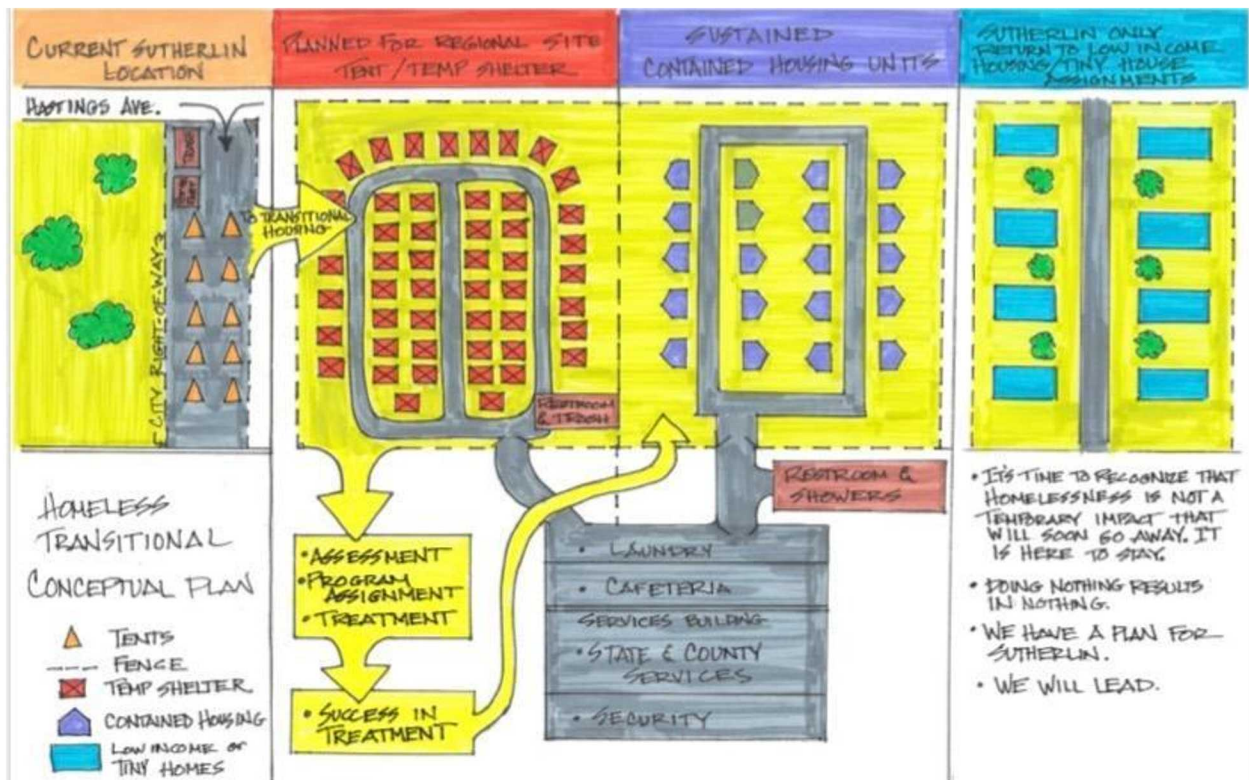
Contained Housing Unit (CHU): For those in the camp who look at the second environment will see campers in a small enclosed shed with solar and heat. These are awarded to campers who decide to want help and willingly enter into a Program of Care (PoC) designed for their specific needs. There are other facilities and services available to those actively working in their (PoC).

Personal Residence: A tiny home village/apartment complex or other residence is under construction nearby where those that have successfully completed their PoC will be awarded a new living situation and a fresh new, safe start.

A collaboration between the City of Sutherlin and a key service person to our homeless camp has resulted in creation of a new non-profit to drive and manage this

project: **Umpqua HEART**.ⁱⁱⁱ We formulated a more global plan and began conversations with every provider of services to our homeless people as well as the police and emergency responder teams in the county. We assembled a list of key personnel to bring into the conversation from every city in the county. We have enlisted engineering and accounting professionals to create cost estimates and model budgets. Our U.S. Senators and their staffs were asked to weigh in and help identify sources for help and funding. The result: a request for funding was submitted through them for discretionary senatorial funding in this budget cycle.

An offer has now been extended to the land owner of a property of sufficient size and suitable location to meet the threefold camp and village **Umpqua HEART** envisions: a low-barrier camp, a small module home development, and a tiny home village. These property negotiations continue as we appraise other location options.



We also continue to improve our planning, and are engaging a handful of significant partners for perfecting our plan and getting it funded. With the assistance of key consultant partners, we will more fully understand the needs of all of the county homeless populations, address others concerns and reservations, and, as soon as possible, secure sufficient funding to hire key staff, purchase the best property available that meets our needs, and launch the first phase of **Umpqua HEART Village**.

Solving the basic problem set associated with a significant population of homeless individuals is an enormously complex puzzle. If this were all easier, simpler, and less expensive, it would already be a *solved* problem. The tough reality is, in rural communities especially, no single entity, city or town has the resources necessary to effectively put solutions in place. Doing so *will not* take a village. It will take **all** of the cities, **all** of the towns, and **all** of the resource agencies working together to build this village and the constructive pathways out. Our fervent hope is that **Umpqua HEART** will create a way for most of our homeless folks to discover a way back to a productive, healthier life.



ⁱ ROBERT MARTIN V. CITY OF BOISE, No. 15-35845 (9th Cir. 2019),

also Oregon’s Enrolled House Bill 3115.

ⁱⁱ See the Chico settlement with their homeless population: BOBBY WARREN, et al., Plaintiffs, v. CITY OF CHICO, et al., Defendants.

ⁱⁱⁱ HEART: Housing, Equality, Access, Response, Transition