

City Taking Steps to Address Homelessness

I wanted to respond to your recent editorial, “Stepping up,” where you say the City’s homelessness efforts are addressing “a mere sliver of the overall problem.” Let me give my perspective on what the City is doing to address homelessness in the Midlands. First, the City operates the winter shelter that houses well over 200 of our fellow citizens from November to March. The annual operating costs run close to \$500,000. The Homeless Transition Center proposed by the Midlands Housing Alliance will not include a winter emergency shelter. The City has been asked to continue this service. A safe and effective winter shelter is a critical component to any homelessness solution.

Secondly, earlier this year, the City conducted a request for proposals for a Housing First Pilot Program. The Housing First model emphasizes immediate placement of the chronically homeless in permanent housing, where they have access to services, on site, necessary to stabilize the individuals and keep them housed. This new strategy is a radical departure from the old model of bringing all the homeless to one site in the evening then dumping them back on the street the next morning. The University of South Carolina Department of Medicine’s Office of Supportive Housing Services and the Columbia Housing Authority were selected to provide housing and supportive services. USC is providing the case management and other services for the program, and the Columbia Housing Authority is providing the housing. Supportive services, known as the Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) team, are a crucial component of Housing First. The ACT team is composed of persons with expertise and skills in employment placement; alcohol and drug abuse counseling; permanent housing; social security and other government benefits; mental illness counseling; transportation; law; and other important needs of those who have been homeless. Serving the needs of participants in the program seven days a week, 24 hours a day, the members of the ACT team make sure that those who are housed remain on their medications, help them find employment and address other pressing needs. Housing First has shown that providing stable housing as quickly as possible can result in higher levels of success and cost effectiveness in addressing the core issues that cause homelessness. This program will serve 25 chronically homeless individuals, and if successful would be expanded to include more. The cost of the first year which includes costs associated with initial

start up of the program is approximately \$259,866. The amounts budgeted for the second and third year are \$465,952 and \$471,788 respectively. CDBG funding has been allocated for Housing First and is a potential future funding source for the three-year period of the program. The Homeless Transition Center will not provide permanent housing for the homeless, and the City has been asked to continue our Housing First initiative. If our Housing First pilot program proves to be successful here in Columbia, as it has been across the nation, then it can easily be expanded to include more of the chronically street homeless in our community. Housing First, in my opinion, is the most effective and cost efficient way of actually reducing the number of homeless on our streets.

Additionally, the City is working with the Cottontown, Elmwood, and Earlewood neighborhoods to review and respond to the legitimate issues that the Homeless Transition Center and the Christ Central Ministry may pose to those neighborhoods. Additionally, we will be presented by the Midlands Housing Alliance, along with other local governments, with a request to fund \$5 million of capital costs for the Homeless Transition Center. The City will work with the Alliance and the neighborhoods to seek common ground.

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