



CITY OF CONCORD

New Hampshire's Main Street™

Public Safety Advisory Board Homelessness Sub-Committee Meeting

DRAFT Minutes

May 21, 2021

Call to Order

Councilor Amanda Grady Sexton called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

Board Members Present: Councilor Amanda Grady-Sexton (**chair**), Mayor James Bouley, Councilor Candace Bouchard, Councilor Erle Pierce, and Councilor Zandra Rice-Hawkins.

City Employees Present: Deputy Police Chief Gregory Taylor and, Deputy Police Chief Steven Smagula

Discussion

Councilor Amanda Grady-Sexton began the meeting with an overview of the sub committee's purpose to address the homelessness issue and the impact on public safety.

Councilor Candace Bouchard added that this doesn't just affect businesses downtown, and that there are issues in other areas of the City that are affected as well. She said that there appears to be an increase in the population recently.

Deputy Chief Gregory Taylor said that there are many more camps that are spread out throughout the city, and that they are more prevalent and scattered.

Mayor James Bouley asked the Deputy Chief if he could give a status of how services are impacted, where people are located, what type of interactions have been occurring, and how this has impacted policing.

Deputy Chief Taylor said that there are a lot of trespassing calls for service because the homeless population are sometimes located on private properties. He said that there is also criminal activity that occurs on these sites such as assaults, thefts, and other various criminal activities. He noted that there are other petty crimes in those areas that happen as well. He said that there are a lot of factors involved, many stakeholders involved, and services that need to be involved. He said that there is limited housing availability.

Mayor Bouley asked how many camps the city currently has.

Deputy Chief Steve Smagula estimated that the city has well over 200 homeless persons. He said that there are several encampments, he estimated between 20 and 30 encampments total. He stated that some of the

encampments consist of a single person/tent, while others are larger and can encompass 15-20 people or more.

Mayor Bouley asked if the encampments were spread throughout the city.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that they are spread out. He said that when complaints are received from private land owners, the police department will go out to the sites and attempt to navigate the situation and give them an opportunity to move. He stated that the goal is to not traumatize them and to allow them to move on their own without the police department having to confiscate any of their belongings.

Mayor Bouley asked if officer interactions give any indication of where the homeless population is coming from; if they are from Concord, previous inmates from the jail, or from other surrounding areas.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that some are from the State Prison and State Hospital. He said that he also believes that people view Concord as an area that has a lot of resources, so people come to Concord with that belief. He said that homelessness is a delicate matter as many of the homeless population suffers from mental illness, addiction, or other factors.

Councilor Grady Sexton asked if there are juveniles living in the encampments.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that there are juveniles living in the encampments. He stated that it is infrequent but it does happen. He said that when children are found in the encampments that they are put in contact with social services and given resources to help. He said that there are sometimes very challenging cases, as sometimes even when housing is provided they end up getting evicted shortly thereafter.

Councilor Candace Bouchard asked the Deputy Chief if there is a specific age group that appears to be growing more than other age groups.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that it doesn't appear to be a specific age range.

Councilor Bouchard asked if Deputy Chief Smagula has any thoughts on how to lessen some of the homeless problems.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that the police often get called to out of control situations. He said that private land owners often call due to trash issues or thefts that are related to the homeless. He said that often times the police department is looked at as the solution, but that the department is the solution to the criminal component of homelessness. He also spoke about the financial aspect of the cleanup of the encampments and whether restitution was an option. He said that restitution is difficult as the population doesn't have the means. He said that they have asked local churches who supply tents to give out trash bags along with the tents in order to help curb the trash problem. He said that he doesn't think that the answer to Councilor Bouchard's question is easy as the situations are complex.

Councilor Grady Sexton asked Deputy Chief Smagula if he has the impression that these people have housing options but are choosing to live in the encampments, if they are difficult to house, or if they would like to be in some type of long term and stable housing.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that he believes that many of them would like to be housed. He said that there is a percentage that has been homeless for many years. He said that there are some that do not want to be housed and others that get the housing but then ultimately get evicted due to poor behaviors.

Mayor Bouley asked about police interactions and area businesses regarding homeless issues.

Deputy Chief Smagula answered that when a business calls with the issues the department is responsive. He said that sometimes they do not think that the police are doing enough or are unresponsive, but that they do not always understand the complexities that are involved. He said that homelessness in itself is not criminal activity. He said that the department works with the business in order to prevent crimes, and keep homeless off of their property.

Mayor Bouley said that there has recently been a lot of turnover in the police department due to retirements, etc. He noted that the department is now younger. He said that in the past he felt that the police department had good relationships with the homeless community and asked if the department still has good relationships despite the department having so many newer officers on staff.

Deputy Chief Smagula explained that the department has worked hard to replace those that left due to retirements and other reasons. He noted that the new employees are learning, and that the last year has been challenging. He said that he does feel that the relationships are not as strong but that the department is committed to building positive relationships with the homeless population.

Councilor Grady Sexton asked what kind of work the department is conducting with other agencies in order to prevent homelessness and intervene to get support. She asked specifically what was done prior to encampments being cleaned up.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that he attends meetings with the Homeless Coalition. The Coalition works with the department when they need assistance. He said that the department works to build relationships with different agencies in order to find ways to help alleviate the homeless problem. The department also partners with the Crisis Center.

Councilor Grady Sexton asked what supports were provided prior to the recent efforts to clean up the encampments.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that the most recent clean up near the Capital Shopping Center was planned throughout the winter. He said that they worked to keep city resources out of that planning. He said different agencies were involved, and that they didn't want it to appear that they were criminalizing homelessness, he emphasized that that was not the department's goal, and that they wanted to handle it with an empathetic view and to work on solutions. He said that when the plan was in place, volunteers were requested. He said that he was very impressed with how the community members came together in an effort to clean up the area. There was 31 tons of trash that were removed from this area. He said that the coalition and the railroad police went to each encampment at least 10 days previous to the cleanup and told them they would have to move and provided them with resources. He noted that some got housing, others did not.

Councilor Rice Hawkins asked if the 31 tons of trash that was removed included brush.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that the 31 tons was trash that went into dumpsters and was hauled away. He said that the brush that was separated was taken by Dirt Doctor. He said that there is still a combination of trash and brush that still needs to be cleared out. He also clarified that the police department was not who was in charge of this effort.

Councilor Grady Sexton asked what task forces or city committees the police department was involved with that address the issues of homelessness.

Deputy Chief Smagula answered that the department was only involved with the subcommittee that was just formed and the relationships that he had formed with the Coalition and Resource Centers. He said that if there are more that the department should be involved in, he would listen and consider them.

Councilor Grady Sexton asked if anyone knew that Councilor Byron Champlain was involved in a homelessness task force.

Mayor Bouley answered that many years ago he had put together a task force to end homelessness. He said that other cities also did similar. He said that the task force involved community members and that Councilor Champlain was the Chair of that committee. He stated that they meet quarterly at the Chamber.

Mayor Bouley said that he recently attended a neighborhood meeting on Washington Street. He said that the topic was the winter Homeless Shelter that is located in that area. He stated that there were a lot of concerns about thefts, property damage and other issues. He asked Deputy Chief Smagula to talk about the relationship the department had with the winter shelter and some of the relationships that has occurred.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that from a police perspective, when police come across someone during the winter months and they have a concern for their welfare, they call the area shelters and other resources in order to try to get them housed. He stated that COVID-19 did create a capacity problem. He said that he was aware that the neighborhood was displeased about the location of the shelter. He reiterated that this is a community problem, but that many community members get upset when a shelter is placed in their neighborhoods. He said that the department's options are limited but that they work to do what they can in order to help the homeless subject get out of the cold. He also noted that he knows of several members within the department who have purchased a hotel room for a homeless community member so that they would not stay out in the cold.

Fire Chief Sean Brown said that the Fire Departments experiences are similar to the Police Department. He said that they do the best that they are able to do when they encounter similar situations. He noted that sometimes they are able to work with Riverbend and Project First. He noted that there is no perfect option for the department when they encounter these people. He said that they do work to find solutions.

Mayor Bouley asked if they had a rough estimate of how much time police and fire spend on these type of issues.

Deputy Chief Smagula said that was a difficult question to answer. He said he believes that it is pretty significant.

Councilor Rice Hawkins noted that she believes that adding a flag so that the departments can track homelessness calls for service would be helpful.

Chief Brown said that he looked at their records management system. He said that they were able to create a “homemade” solution in order to attempt to track homelessness. He noted that it has been created but has not been rolled out to staff yet. He also said that the homelessness problem stems beyond the railroad tracks and abandoned building in the City. He said that they are working on setting up parameters but that it will take some time to develop and introduce them.

Councilor Grady Sexton noted that homelessness is everyone’s issue to address. She said that she would like to see tracking so that the city is able to identify the scope of the problem and to be able to address the issue with the state in order to receive adequate supports to address this issue.

Mayor Bouley said that data collection is important because there is money that is in the system, and he feels that it is important to track how that money is spent. He asked if either department had relationships with some of the resources that the city has allocated money to.

Deputy Chief Smagula stated that they do have relationships with those resources.

Mayor Bouley talked about grants that were given to the homeless coalition. He also noted that the State collects a lot of data that doesn’t seem to be shared with municipalities.

Deputy Chief Smagula noted that there are many non-profit organizations that receive financial help, but it doesn’t appear that there is anything that ties the departments together. He said that although everyone is working on the same problem, it seems separate.

Councilor Grady Sexton said that there are plenty of state-wide entities that are “pulling people together”, however there is no communication on whether the correct funding and programs are being implemented in the Concord Community.

She asked if the other organizations need to pull together in order to address the issue further.

Mayor Bouley said that many of the organizations are part of the task force. He said that he believes that an individual approach may need to be evaluated. He noted that the homeless population has increased significantly in a short period of time.

Mayor Bouley said that he has been asked on several occasions about the conditions of rooming houses. He asked if the police and fire department has run into situations where people are living in horrible conditions.

Chief Brown stated that in general if the houses are inspected then they do not run into that issue. He said that on a day to day basis they run into those conditions in private homes. He said that the department does try to address those issues when they run into them.

Councilor Rice Hawkins noted that the City and the State are going to get money from the American Rescue Plan. She asked if there have been conversations about how to use those funds to address affordable housing and homelessness in the city.

Mayor Bouley said that the administration has been following closely in order to find what the money can be utilized for. He said that it is split over two years. He said that on a State level their Welfare Administration has met in order to discuss the funds. He said that he doesn't have a specific answer however he knows that they have been communicating.

Councilor Rice Hawkins said that due to the location of Concord and the housing of the State Prison and the State Hospital that the State and City should be working together.

Mayor Bouley stated that he believes that the Public Safety Advisory Committee wants to be helpful. He noted that the homelessness issue has a big impact on both the Fire Department and the Police Department. He suggested reporting back to the Public Safety Advisory Board. He also spoke about teaming up with the homeless task force in order to brainstorm.

Councilor Erle Pierce said that he was amazed by the numbers. He noted that he was last aware that there were approximately 125 chronically homeless people in Concord. He said that he would like to work further to figure out what the city can do, case by case.

Councilor Bouchard said that she would like to try to get some connectivity with these different groups. She noted that all the groups have the same goal and that working together will be more effective.

Mayor Bouley will give an overview of what the subcommittee talked about at the next Public Safety Advisory Committee meeting.

Mayor Bouley asked the subcommittee if they felt that it would be more beneficial to go towards a "county approach". He noted that other communities in Merrimack County have smaller budgets, and wondered if the cities within a county should have to "shoulder" the burden for the entire county. He said that at some point he would like to see how others feel regarding that.

Councilor Bouchard asked if the smaller towns would look at Concord to do more if a regional approach was taken.

Mayor Bouley said that the smaller towns would be required to add funds and share the burden.

Councilor Rice Hawkins noted that she would have to understand more about how federal aid is broken down and given to smaller communities. She noted that Concord has the services available and that people come from other communities to utilize those services. She noted that it could be challenging because of the funds that some of the smaller communities may have available.

Mayor Bouley noted that he is aware that some of the other communities are referring people to Concord, which is why he wondered if more of shared burden would be helpful.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:11 a.m.