

Homelessness is a Shared Community Responsibility

Across the country, communities are facing the challenge of an increasing number of people experiencing homelessness. Wheat Ridge, as well as our neighboring cities, are feeling the impact of this national concern. While many believe police departments have the primary responsibility for responding to complaints about illegal camping, trash and panhandling, managing all of the impacts of people experiencing homelessness is a shared community responsibility and cannot be addressed with just one approach.

There are many misperceptions regarding how law enforcement can respond to homelessness issues. It isn't illegal to be homeless nor is it illegal to panhandle unless the person is obstructing or interfering with traffic flow. Those experiencing homelessness have the same rights as everyone else as long as they are not committing any crimes. Homelessness is a complex issue and it is important to keep in mind that not everyone who is homeless chooses to be; however, some do. While not everyone who is homeless is addicted to drugs or alcohol or is suffering from one or more mental health conditions, many are. Homelessness also impacts families with children who make up a large segment of those who are homeless, further complicating this difficult issue.

The City is addressing homelessness with a coordinated, comprehensive approach including the Police, Public Works, and Parks Departments. Some of the specific approaches include regular clean up and trash removal in locations where people experiencing homelessness gather; street sweeping in these areas on a weekly basis; regular cleaning of City-owned bus shelters by a specially-trained and equipped service contractor, and removal of graffiti on City-owned property. Large homeless camps are occasionally reported to the police department and staff work together to determine the best approach for clean-up. Camps often contain human waste, hypodermic needles, soiled materials, and often harbor pests so training and the right protective equipment are critical. In these cases of potential bio-hazards, a contracted clean-up crew is called in to manage the work.

Wheat Ridge Police officers serve an important role when responding to calls regarding those experiencing homelessness. Patrols are conducted during each shift in areas often frequented by those experiencing homelessness. During contact, officers provide resources such as referrals for mental health services, housing, food banks, and job placement services. A new collaboration with businesses is being introduced this fall to help deter loitering and trespassing on private property. Effective approaches discussed with businesses including lighting, landscaping, trash clean up, and no trespassing signage to help deter the impacts on businesses caused by homelessness.

The City is also collaborating with Jefferson County and other county municipalities to build regional partnerships in order to assist an ever-increasing number of people experiencing homelessness. Jefferson County has created a Co-Responder program under the leadership of the Jefferson Center, and in partnership with local police agencies, to embed mental health professionals with law enforcement. Licensed mental health clinicians respond to dispatched calls alongside police officers, as needed, to connect individuals with appropriate resources. Co-Responders are trained to quickly recognize mental health issues and help officers de-escalate situations. Clinicians follow up with individualized plans to address long-term behavioral health needs. Co-Responders also connect family and friends who are present at the scene to appropriate resources.

Jefferson County has also developed a Homeless Navigator Program in partnership with several cities. Homeless Navigators work with individuals experiencing homelessness to create goals and a plan of action to exit homelessness, as well as facilitate and support efforts to obtain resources and services. Wheat Ridge is partnering with Edgewater and Golden to hire a Homeless Navigator who will respond with direct services to individuals and families experiencing homelessness on behalf of all three communities.

Wheat Ridge and other communities also rely on the following agencies who focus their services on those experiencing homelessness or those who may be in danger of becoming homeless:

- Family Tree works alongside people affected by child abuse, domestic violence and homelessness throughout their journey to safety and economic independence, providing emergency residential services, case management and advocacy, therapeutic services, outreach support, housing search and placement, education and employment support, among many other services.
- The Jefferson County Action Center provides an immediate and compassionate response by offering the resources and services needed to stabilize lives and promote pathways to lasting change.
- The PorchLight Family Justice Center (FJC) provides comprehensive legal, emotional and critical supportive services for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, at-risk adult abuse, elder abuse, and human trafficking.
- Heading Home is helping create a systemic response in Jefferson County that prevents and ends homelessness whenever possible, and when it cannot be prevented, ensures it is a rare, brief and one-time experience.
- Severe Weather Shelter Network helps those without shelter on nights when the temperature dips dangerously low by providing a place of refuge in a number of locations.

A question often asked is what can businesses and residents do in response to this emerging crisis in the community?

Here are a few suggestions:

- Instead of giving cash to someone panhandling, donate to local agencies who have specially-trained personnel to assist with providing goods and services.
- Volunteer for local agencies that serve the homeless.
- Donate nonperishable items to local foodbanks and don't provide food or goods on someone else's property.
- Participate in the business outreach program with WRPD to discuss solutions.
- Install motion detection lights and surveillance cameras.
- Cut back shrubbery/trees to prevent opportunities for unauthorized loitering and/or camping.
- Remove graffiti quickly.
- Keep parking lots and areas around businesses clean and free of trash.

While solutions to this complex issue are not simple, they also don't rest solely in the hands of one agency or organization. This is a shared community responsibility and the most effective response is one in which municipalities, police departments, social service agencies, businesses, and community members will only reach by working together.