City of Richmond Homelessness Policies and Initiatives

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**Introduction**

On October 24, 2017, the City of Richmond Homeless Task Force created by the City Council in April 2017, provided a [presentation you can view here](#).

The presentation concluded that there is an urgent need for the City of Richmond to address homelessness issues and identified three priorities:

1. Support and augment mobile homeless services.
2. Create a City of Richmond Homeless Fund.
3. Establish a “Safe Park” community.

All involve advocating that the City of Richmond spend more money to provide services for the homeless.

Without diminishing any of the compassion that the Task Force or anyone else in Richmond has about the plight of the homeless, I want to provide some important context that the Homeless Task Force failed to present.

**The City of Richmond is Already Contra Costa County’s Predominant Location for Homeless Shelter Beds**

Contra Costa County has a population of 1,127,000, and Richmond has a population of about 110,000, or about 9.7% of the total. There are 561 Emergency beds for homeless people in programs across Contra Costa County, 311 of which are in Richmond, making Richmond a 9.7% contributor to Contra Costa County population and a 55.4% contributor to Contra Costa County homeless shelter beds.

Furthermore, a large number of shelter beds in Richmond are occupied by homeless persons referred from communities other than Richmond. The result is that Richmond is challenged to care for the homeless population that originates in Richmond because available beds are taken up by others.

The Contra Costa [2017 Point in Time count](#), showed that on the night of January 25, 2017, 1,607 homeless individuals were identified living in emergency or transitional shelters or in uninhabitable locations in Contra Costa County. Fifty-seven percent (911) of the 1,607 homeless individuals were unsheltered, living in encampments, cars, parks, or abandoned buildings. The remaining 696 individuals were in emergency shelter or transitional housing.

Of the unsheltered homeless counted on January 25 2017, 75.7 percent were in Central or East Contra Costa, yet Richmond shelters house 55.4% of the County’s homeless.
The fact is that Richmond is doing far more than the entire remainder of Contra Costa County to serve the homeless. It is time to demand that the other cities in Contra Costa County step up to do their share, and it is time for the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors to insure that Richmond gets the bulk of the millions of dollars the County spends annually on homeless services.

The more homeless facilities and programs we provide in Richmond, the more the rest of Contra Costa County will use Richmond as a destination for their own homeless populations. This makes no sense, and it is not fair. Except for San Pablo, Richmond is the poorest city in Contra Costa County and the least fiscally prepared to take on an expensive burden the rest of Contra Costa County should be sharing.

Richmond’s initiatives to reduce homelessness already vastly outstrip the rest of Contra Costa County:

- Richmond is the only city in Contra Costa County to adopt Rent Control and Just Cause. Whatever you think of the effectiveness of this ordinance, the advocates cited preventing homelessness as one of the driving motivations.
- Richmond has adopted aggressive Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) and Junior Accessory Dwelling Unit (JADU) ordinances designed to create affordable rentals.
- Richmond has adopted an ordinance that allows a limited number of Tiny Houses on Wheels as a pilot project, only the second city in California to do so and the only one in Contra Costa County.
- Richmond maintains one of the largest and oldest public housing programs in the County, with some 1,500 Section 8 vouchers and 1,000 units of public housing.
- Richmond has 2,687 Assisted Rental Housing Units, exclusive of public housing.
- Richmond non-profit Saffron Strand sponsors an annual conference in Richmond on homelessness.
- Richmond remains among the least expensive communities in Contra Costa County. Median home prices are less than half that even in neighboring El Cerrito, and rentals are 2/3 those in El Cerrito.
- Richmond hosts GRIP, the Greater Richmond Interfaith Council, which is leading Contra Costa County in providing homeless services. See https://www.facebook.com/RichmondStandard/videos/1456996431003965/.
- Richmond is in negotiations with Contra Costa County as a location for a 51-unit Micropad project to provide full-service units to previously homeless persons at an affordable rent.

The January 2017 Point in Time (PIT) Count, conducted by Contra Costa Health Services and community partners, estimated that 109 people were living unsheltered within the City of Richmond. However, estimates from city officials including police and abatement teams are much higher. Richmond Police Department RPD) estimates that numbers of homeless and homeless encampments are much higher than what is represented in PIT count - upwards of 800 individuals and 76 encampments. The Richmond Department of Infrastructure Maintenance
and Operations (DIMO) abatement crews cleared 246 homeless encampments in 2015 and removed 53.55 tons of trash from open areas. In 2016, the number of encampments cleared totaled 162.

If Richmond homeless are severely undercounted, it is fair to assume that the rest of Contra Costa is undercounted.

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**Figure 1 - List of Assisted Rental Housing Projects in Richmond**
Richmond Police Department and Homeless Services

The Richmond Police Department is frequently called on to serve homeless populations. Officers Michael Sagan and Jesse Sousa have attended numerous Homelessness Task Force meetings to provide input and connect the group to resources from Contra Costa County and the Richmond Police Department.

Officer Sousa serves West Contra Costa County with the Mental Health Evaluation Team. His job is to follow up on calls for service referrals, and frequently visits homeless encampments to offer connections to temporary shelter, mental health services, and other needs assessments. He is frequently accompanied by a social worker from Contra Costa County and serves all of West County. Officer Sousa also works in concert with the County CORE outreach team. There are concerns from within RPD regarding the County Hospital procedures for dealing with mental health cases.

Captain Tirona is considering a proposal to hire a full time homelessness officer. RPD is looking into the feasibility of this, and is strongly considering it as an option due to the enormity of the issue within the city of Richmond. They are hopeful that there will be enough resources to support this full time position sometime next year. In the meantime, they will continue to focus on the issue and support efforts as effectively as possible.

Officer Sagan has been a critical component for connecting the Mayor’s Office and the Homelessness Task Force to encampments and RPD data concerning homelessness. There are concerns from within RPD regarding how to deal with the Task Force who they perceive as anti-law enforcement. There are additional concerns regarding best practices for approaching individuals, how to make good referrals, and how to transport individuals to appointments (which are often in Martinez). Additional training for officers is being considered to better prepare them for dealing with vulnerable populations.

It is estimated that there are approximately 27 encampments in the Southern District of Richmond, 33 in the Central District and 17 in the Northern District. Homeless encampments vary greatly in size and establishment depending on their location. Encampments located within BNSF or Caltrans jurisdictions generally take longer to get abated.

Richmond Fire Department and Homeless Services

The Richmond Fire Department (RFD) has a more limited role in working with homeless populations in comparison to the Richmond Police Department. When dealing with a medical emergency, their protocol consists of transporting the individuals and securing their belongings. According to Chief Sheppard, Stations 67 and 62 receive the greatest volume of calls regarding homeless populations. The Richmond Fire Department is also called to fires within homeless encampments. At the 7th street encampment, there have been 15 fires so far in 2017 (at the time of this writing). Fires and fire prevention are a great concern to the community at large. According to Chief Sheppard, Stations 67 and 62 receive the greatest volume of calls regarding homeless populations.

If a homeless individual needs mental health care, the Fire Department will call upon RPD to assess and support the case. The RFD relies on partner agencies to provide services outside of their purview; however, they can assist in determining if homeless encampments are safe or at risk for fire and health concerns.
Hepatitis A and Homeless Populations

Of great concern at the moment is the Hepatitis A outbreak that has occurred in San Diego and Santa Cruz. Governor Brown has declared a statewide emergency in response to the outbreak. In other parts of the state 19 people have died, 395 have been hospitalized and more than 600 cases have been reported.

The Governor has proclaimed that EMS personnel in affected areas can administer Hep-A vaccines, but because there has not yet been a local outbreak, the Contra Costa County Public Health department has yet to implement this policy. Because frequent handwashing with soap and water after using the bathroom and before eating can prevent Hep-A from spreading, the lack of sanitary restrooms and clean water sources in encampments throughout Richmond is a growing concern. Additionally, the virus cannot be killed by using alcohol based hand sanitizers, and proper restroom facilities are one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of the disease. All firefighters and first responders are encouraged by the California Department of Public Health to obtain a Hepatitis A vaccine and to implement precautionary measures to avoid exposure when working with vulnerable populations.

City of Richmond Office of Emergency Services and Homeless Services

The City of Richmond Office of Emergency Services is working on developing a comprehensive plan for sheltering and evacuating homeless populations in times of emergency.

City of Richmond Department of Infrastructure and Maintenance Operations and Homeless Services

The Department of Infrastructure and Maintenance Operations is the City entity responsible for abating homeless encampments. Since 2015, the number of abatements has increased greatly from approximately 5 to 11 cleanups per month. Currently, there are six staff members dedicated to abatement, but the director would like to hire more. He would also like to have at least two staff members trained and working specifically with homeless populations.

Evaluating the Homeless Task Force Recommendations

1. Support and augment mobile homeless services

This essentially recommends developing a “Richmond Core Team with County, City, and Community services that can serve Richmond Homeless.” Contra Costa already has a Coordinated Outreach Referral and Engagement (CORE) team that is funded and staffed. Creating a “Richmond Core Team” would be redundant and duplication of resources. What we need to do instead is insist that Richmond receive its fair share of Contra Costa County Services and make sure that Contra Costa County’s CORE services are coordinated with the City of Richmond, particularly the RPD, RFD and DIMO.

The Contra Costa Grand Jury report “More Shelter Beds Needed for the Homeless in Contra Costa County” (June 15, 2017), concluded:
The homeless situation in Contra Costa County is large enough to justify the effort to find additional funds to provide more shelter beds for the homeless. By closely examining the current County budget, with an eye toward pooling together enough money to establish an East County shelter and CARE center, the County could realize a financial benefit of reduced Health Service costs for the homeless that would be sufficient to cover the cost of investment.

It appears that the County has been slow to react and has not taken sufficient steps to deal with the homeless problem. The County does enough to maintain the programs funded by HUD, but needs to do more to ensure that there are adequate services, shelters, and beds for all. Providing 418 beds for 1,607 homeless people is inadequate. With an increase in the number of complaints and visibility of the homeless, which can occupy a great deal of a police officers’ time, some local police department chiefs are finding money in their budgets to create homeless outreach teams that help direct the homeless to the shelters and care centers.

Costa Contra County is apparently planning to expand its West County homeless services, advertising an RFP on November 3, 2017. “Contra Costa Coordinated Entry Project”:

Contra Costa Health, Housing, and Homeless Services H3 or “the County”) is seeking proposals from suitably qualified County and/or community-based providers to participate as contractors for the Contra Costa Coordinated Entry Expansion Project. This Request for Proposal (RFP) will befor our second phase of implementation of supportive services, including centralized diversion; housing location and housing search; and a West County CARE Center.

2. Create a City of Richmond Homeless Fund

This recommendation includes, without being precise about objectives, building a fund from some combination of grants, the general fund, community benefits agreements, exactions on new development and other unspecified sources.

What it doesn’t include is what the fund would be used for and who decides, which is likely to be a controversial subject.

The recommendation begins with the statement, “Address that there are currently no specific funds allocated to homeless support in the City.” There is a good reason for this, and that is that Contra Costa County is the designated service provider for homeless issues and has both staff and funding to do so. Similarly, the City of Richmond has no specific funds allocated for public health, animal control, agriculture, courts, or veterans services – all provided and funded by Contra Costa County.

A better way to approach this would be to explore collaboration with Contra Costa County to augment County homeless services, but only after insuring that Richmond and West County is getting our fair share of existing County resources.
The easiest way to proceed would be to set up a “Homeless Fund” within the City overall finance scheme, perhaps better to partner with a non-profit such as the Richmond Community Foundation, which is already in the affordable housing business. The fund would simply be a repository where any civic-minded donor could make a deposit and be assured it would go for a good, homelessness-related cause.

The City of Richmond, like some other cities, could provide an in-kind contribution, such as surplus land for something like the CitySpaces MicroPad, shown below. Contra Costa County already has funding for a 51-unit MicroPad project that could be located in Richmond if a suitable free site is designated. A sample of a Micropad unit was on display in the Civic Center the week of November 13, 2017. For a video, see http://kron4.com/2017/11/14/video-micro-homes-could-help-richmond-homeless-find-places-to-live/.

Figure 2 - Micropad demonstration unit at Richmond Civic Center
Figure 3 - Micropad summary
This is a very popular concept that is very difficult to implement and has a history of failure. The concept includes providing a site for tents, trailers, garden sheds, RVs, tiny homes or other supposedly low cost and/or temporary shelters with some level of services, including sanitary facilities, kitchen or food service facilities, security, health, substance abuse and mental health treatment, and transitional services.

All of the services listed above are already provided to some extent by Contra Costa County, but the County has avoided getting into the “village” business, perhaps for good reasons.

The theory is, that no matter how primitive, a homeless “village” is superior to any unsupervised and un-serviced ad hoc encampment under a bridge or along a railroad right-of-way.

Very few experiments in such villages have been successful. Those that claim some success are typically run by religious or charitable organizations, not local governments. One such example is Mobile Loaves & Fishes that operates Community First in Austin, TX. It took $7 million in funding for the infrastructure and the campaign for millions of dollars and volunteers goes on.

**Sonoma County’s “Safe Parking Program”** had to be downsized from “eight sites offering 76 spots to three sites offering 40 spots, due largely to a state funding reduction that prompted Catholic Charities, which administers the effort, to request county officials shift money away from the program in order to prevent cuts at its Family Support Center.”

The idea of “tiny homes” for homeless villages is extremely popular but not very practical. So called tiny homes are not cheap to build, costing as much as $25,000 to $75,000 to build, depending on size and whether or not they include kitchen and bathroom facilities.

Again, I would urge caution for Richmond to consider getting into the “safe park” or “homeless village” business unilaterally. Once you are in it, it’s difficult, if not impossible, to extract from it. It’s like the Pottery Public admonition, “You break it; you buy it.”

Just this week, the City of Berkeley, which unlike Richmond but like Contra Costa County, has its own health services department, was ordered by a judge, after evicting a homeless camp, to “submit a practical plan for sheltering its homeless population during the coming winter.”

“Do not simply recite the programs the City purports to offer, for they are admittedly insufficient,” a notice by U.S. District Court Judge William Alsup, issued Wednesday, reads in part. “Submit a plan that will shelter substantially all of Berkeley’s homeless.” The city is supposed to submit the plan by noon Nov. 28.
What Can You Do?

1. Call 211. Contact Health, Housing & Homeless Services, 2400 Bisso Lane, Suite D, 2nd Floor, Concord, CA 94520 [Map & Directions], Telephone: 925-608-6700, Fax: 925-608-6741

HOMLESS?
LOSING YOUR HOUSING?

CALL 211 or Text 898-211
FREE CONFIDENTIAL SERVICE 24/7
Callers will be matched and referred to appropriate programs

OR

WALK INTO A CARE CENTER
Coordinated Assessment Referral and Engagement (CARE) Centers can provide help with:
- Showers
- Food
- Laundry
- Case management
- Benefits enrollment
- Health care services
- Mental health services
- Substance use disorder services
- Housing search assistance
- Screening and referral for housing/utility assistance

NOTE: Not all services will be available at all sites.

CONCORD
(Antioch, next to Concord Adult Shelter)
2047-A Arnold Industrial Way
M-F, 8 am-5 pm

SAN PABLO
(Antioch)
1515 Market Street
M-F, 8 am-5 pm

CONCORD
"Specializing in Families and Seniors" (Monument Crisis Center)
1550 Market Street
Walk-in hours M-Th, 9 am-Noon & Tu, 8 pm-7 pm

WALNUT CREEK
(Triality Center)
1624 Trinity Avenue
M-F, 8 am-5 pm

2. Support organizations in Richmond that provide services to the homeless:

   a. GRIP, the Greater Richmond Interfaith Program Address: 165 22nd St, Richmond, CA 94801, Phone: (510) 233-2141.


   c. Saffron Strand, 147 West Richmond Avenue, Suite C Point Richmond, CA 94801, (510) 778-9492, info@saffronstrand.org.
Conclusion

The City of Richmond should concentrate on insuring that it receives its fair share of Contra Costa County managed and funding homelessness services and look for ways to collaborate with Contra Costa County rather than establishing a City of Richmond directed homeless program.

Individuals can help by donating money or services to one of the non-profits serving the homeless population in Richmond.
CONTRA COSTA COUNCIL ON HOMELESSNESS & CITY OF RICHMOND PRESENT

RICHMOND HOMELESSNESS AWARENESS MONTH ACTIVITIES

Week of November 13th

COME SEE A MICROPAD!

Tuesday, November 14, 2017
9 a.m.—6 p.m.
2 p.m.—Speakers
Mayor Tom Butt & Supervisor John Gioia

Wednesday, November 15, 2017
9 a.m.—7 p.m.
Richmond Civic Center
FREE

MicroPADs are an innovative way of creating permanent supportive housing.

STORIED STREETS:
Reframing the Way You See Homelessness

Wednesday, November 15, 2017
6:30—8:30 p.m.
Nevin Community Center,
598 Nevin Avenue, Richmond
FREE

Join us for the film, snacks and a discussion about homelessness in Contra Costa