

LOWELL

Advocates address needs of unhoused population

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LOWELL >> The population of single adult homeless in Lowell, estimated at roughly 300 people, is a common concern expressed to City Manager Tom Golden and the City Council by both businesses and housed and unhoused residents.

But it's not an issue unique to the city. Nationwide, homelessness is a growing demographic.

According to the state Department of Housing of Urban Development, almost 600,000 people nationwide experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2022 — a 0.34% increase, according to its annual point-in-time count.

COVID-19 exacerbated the existing unhoused conditions in Lowell and elsewhere — loss of jobs, housing, health care, social supports, among some of the many impacts — which were somewhat ameliorated by state and federal emergency funding that provided more shelter and hotel beds throughout the Greater Lowell community.

Now that funding is ending. And if stresses to the system were present during the pandemic, what will the city's landscape look like after the pandemic money ends?

Community Teamwork, Inc. isn't waiting to find out. Among its many forms of outreach, the Lowell-based nonprofit community action agency provides outplacement housing for unhoused adults. COVID-era funding through the state, and winter protocol funding through the city, enabled CTI to house close to 80 individuals in hotels during the past two years.

Through a combination of resources and partnerships, CTI said it was close to securing housing for those people despite the funding cuts at the end of March.

“Our case workers have supported these individuals for many, many months, and worked around the clock to ensure that no one is without a place to stay on April 1,” Chief Program Officer Carl Howell said. “We will provide continued support to those individuals who remain at the hotel and for those who move to other locations.”

CTI will keep 25 hotel rooms to house homeless individuals, which will provide housing for 50 people who choose to stay at the hotel, two to a room. Additionally, the agency has worked with area providers to find permanent supportive housing,

other shelter settings and other safe housing options for the remaining individuals.

“We are pleased that the March 31 deadline will not be as dire as originally thought,” Howell said.

Not far from CTI’s Dutton Street location, the staff at Lowell Transition Living Center is also gearing up for people to both rotate into and out of the emergency shelter building located on Middlesex Street just off the city’s central business district.

LTLC typically provides nightly shelter for up to 60 people; winter protocol brought that count to more than 100. The client-centered emergency shelter has provided shelter and care to unhoused adults for 35 years.

The city’s winter protocol typically goes into effect during periods of extreme cold weather or heavy snowfall with the aim of ensuring a warm, safe bed for unhoused individuals. That local program ended the same day as the DHCD program funding on March 31.

In January, LTLC Managing Director Isaiah Stephens said that housing is a “big need in the city. Everyone sees the increasing number of homeless people outside.”

The agency owns a dozen or so single-occupancy apartments, 55 below-market, single-room occupancy units, and six units of housing for chronically homeless individuals. In January, they offered a public tour of 126 Westford St., the latest facility to help address the shelter crisis in the city. Sometime soon, 21 unhoused individuals will become housed residents.

The Westford Street housing will be followed by an eight-bed LTLC property on Andover Street, for a total of almost 30 beds — eventually.

Still, the need seems less to ebb and flow than to grow, and the warmer weather will make the need more obvious.

A public petition being circulated online by Solidarity Lowell specifically asks the City Council to address the issue of homeless encampments, the cleaning out of which it states the city administration carried out in a way that was “inconsistent with the values of a city.”

Encampments are an unsanctioned form of outdoor housing typically on public land. The volunteer-based group of community members who work on social justice issues, will present a petition to the City Council at its April 11 meeting requesting changes to Lowell’s unhoused persons protocol. The group was vocal against the so-called “encampment sweeps” the city undertook earlier this year.

The 16-point petition asks the city “to reconsider aspects of its treatment of our population of unhoused individuals.”

The requests include that “our community always has enough emergency shelter beds equal to the average number of unhoused individuals our City sees year to year and increase or decrease needs as they arise.”

City Council meetings are open to the public. The body meets on Tuesdays in the second-floor chambers of City Hall, 375 Merrimack St. at 6:30 p.m. To speak at a meeting, contact City Clerk Michael Geary before 4 p.m. the day of the meeting at 978-674-4161 or mgeary@lowellma.gov.