**MAINE STATEWIDE HOMELESS COUNCIL**

**November 14, 2023**

**Member Meeting Minutes**

**Attendance:** Shawn Yardley, Alice Preble, Donna Yellen, Cheryl Harkins, Tracey Hair, Emily Flinkstrom, Cullen Ryan, Kim Carson, Lauren Bustard, Ginny Dill, David McCluskey, Katie Spencer White, Donna Kelley, and Scott Tibbitts

Minutes:Scott Tibbitts

Shawn started today’s meeting by asking for a moment of silence for all those who have died while experiencing homelessness, as well as for the victims of the tragedy in Lewiston.

Much later, a motion to approve the minutes from the October 2023 meeting was put forth by Cullen and seconded by Cheryl. There was one correction requested by Lauren – QAP stands for “Qualified Allocation Plan”. The Minutes were unanimously approved as amended.

Media- Shawn spoke with Robbie Feinberg of Maine Public Broadcasting about a series on homelessness across the state, not just urban areas. This led to a discussion of media relations.

-The head of Portland Parks and Rec misrepresented the recent statement put out by this body to say the SHC was in support of sweeping homeless encampments. A correction was later issued, but it did not get the same attention as the original statement.

-Anything we say or put in writing can be edited and taken out of context.

-It was suggested that SHC create a Communications Committee to prepare any Press Releases, cultivate relationships with members of the press/media, and have materials ready that people can present to local papers, city/town councils, or other groups. It would also clarify when people are speaking on behalf of SHC or speaking for their own agency, or personally.

-Cullen, Emily, Katie, and Shawn will form the Committee to get things started.

-Cheryl mentioned that Donna Alger has put out a Maine Homeless Resources Guide on Facebook that has already had several hundred visits. We don't want to stop such individual efforts, but we should make sure they have the most accurate info available.

Shelter in Place –Was there any effort to help those who were Unsheltered in Lewiston during the recent "Shelter in Place Order"? Shawn will address this with Greg to bring to the Governor's attention - any future natural disaster or emergency situation in any community that requires such a Shelter in Place order must include a way to accommodate those who are unsheltered. FEMA/MEMA plans might address this but they might not be the go-to-plan is all situations.

-We should have a Call List with phone numbers, not just emails, of all SHC members so we can stay in touch and share info in an emergency.

State Legislative update - There were several Bills related to homelessness that did not get approval to move forward - some are being appealed. One of them was specifically to increase funding for Low-Barrier Shelters. There are only 6 such shelters statewide; 3 in Portland, 2 in Bangor, and 1 in Waterville. It cost significantly more to operate a low-barrier shelter and this needs to be addressed. In their efforts to reduce barriers, Mid Maine Homeless Shelter allows animals - assuming they are all 'service animals' who are just missing their documentation. They also allow couples to stay together. The Rule states there must be separate accommodations for males and females - and they have those - but the rule does not say those are the only types of accommodations allowed. LD-2767 could be an opportunity to increase funding for ALL shelters. There was a MOTION by Katie, 2nd by Cullen, that SHC issue a statement in support of this for Rep. Madigan to use in her appeal. Passed unanimously. (The appeals were successful before the letter was prepared, so these proposals are back in play.)

Encampments - There are currently about 215 tents in Portland (2 caught fire last night), about 100 people in Lewiston, 184 in Sanford and another 200 in Biddeford according to local PD, 20+ in the Ellsworth area, more than 100 people outside in Waterville, and 60 behind Hope House.

-PATH numbers are not reliable. There are too few workers, each trying to cover too large an area, to get an accurate, real time count. Also, once they encounter someone, that person stays on their list until there is some new info - but there can be weeks, months between contacts.

-Can we get unsheltered numbers from Hub Coordinators? Eventually, but we need to standardize the methodology to collect, track, and report numbers to ensure they are consistent and valid. All of this is being developed.

-Four years ago, only about 2% of Maine’s homeless population was reported as Unsheltered. Now it is about 15%. Portland has temporarily expanded the Homeless Service Center by 50 beds, and a new 130 bed shelter for Asylum seekers will be opening soon. These should allow for many who are currently outside to enter shelter.

-Do we want to say that Maine should be a Right to Shelter state? It sounds good in theory, but we do not have enough spaces currently available to house/shelter everyone who needs it, so what would that even look like? It would be a call to action for communities to adapt and create capacity, even if only temporary. That cannot happen without funding. Portland’s Right to Shelter policy worked reasonably well for many years, but it took the commitment of many agencies to create overflow space. Even then, not everyone came inside. When GA rules changed, it was no longer sustainable, and the overflow is no longer available. “Right to Shelter” might sound like an entitlement to some, maybe we need some other language.

-GA reform will need to be a big part of any new approach to addressing homelessness, along with Case Management and other Services. Some towns use GA for shelter stays, some for Hotels, but usually only for short periods, and only as a last resort.

-How many people in shelters go to work every day? How many in encampments go to Day Labor jobs every day? We need some data on this. Many in encampments want to work, but do not dare to leave their few belongings behind, even for a few hours, and come back to nothing.

- We would never say that it was ok for victims of an earthquake or a flood to live in tents all winter long in this climate – why is homelessness not treated as an emergency? Every community is supposed to have a “Disaster” plan – maybe we can work to have those plans address homelessness? Those are typically very short term in response to a specific event – and count on reimbursement from Fed funds - they could not sustain months of sheltering people. Local GAs might be able to do some diversion – but current policies make that difficult.

-We keep talking about municipalities – as the controllers of GA – but we don’t have any here at the table. How do we connect? Do we reach out to MMA? Go to their meeting? Invite them here? Maybe GA Administrators meetings? MMA has a Board and a Legislative Council – Shawn will reach out to them – and perhaps to Mike Brennan - to start the conversation. There would likely be a more positive response if there were new resources available – so they don’t have to raise local taxes to cover new costs. Do we know if all towns are in favor of the 90/10 proposal?

-Younger people don’t remember a time without homelessness, before the 1980’s when the Reagan administration gutted HUD and emptied out mental health institutions.

-Could MaineHousing administer GA Housing funds more effectively? Could the CAP’s? The GA budget is basically a blank check – expanding to meet the need - and MaineHousing could literally go bankrupt trying to sustain that. Let’s see what the GA Reform Proposal looks like.

Funding discussion -Big solutions usually need big money, and that is not likely to happen. What can we do on a smaller scale – a pilot or demonstration project – to test new ideas and see what works, then share to get others on board. Are there any foundations or other philanthropic groups that we could reach out to for such efforts?

-No updates yet on proposed changes to Section 13 (TCM) or Section 17. Rates for Section 91 will be re-adjusted at some point.

-Lauren said the Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP) will be out in Jan. and will include more funding for Supportive Housing, with a preference for Veterans. The Draft proposes creating Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units, but feedback from the members today indicated that there is greater need for 1 BR and 3 BR units. SROs require more staffing and oversite than other types.

- State HOME funds will be cut by about $10M this year. Homeless Initiatives used these funds for a number of programs in the past, as they are relatively flexible, so this is a big loss.

New language regarding SHC meetings – Katie drafted a statement to summarize our new meeting structure. It was also suggested we incorporate the statement at the bottom of the SHC agenda. With input from the members, Lauren developed the following statement:

*The Statewide Homeless Council serves as an advisory committee to the Governor, the Legislature, the Maine State Housing Authority, the Maine Department of Health and Human Services, the Maine Department of Corrections and the Maine Bureau of Veteran’s Affairs on homeless matters and oversees the Maine Plan to End and Prevent Homelessness.  The Council meets monthly, as well as offering a quarterly meeting that is open to all through a virtual format.  The Council encourages providers and community members to participate at the local level through the nine Homeless Service Hubs and/or three Regional Homeless Councils.*

This statement was shared via email and approved electronically after the meeting.

Our Next meeting will be December 12, 2023. Members only from 9:30 to 10:30. Public, via Zoom, from 10:30 to 12:30.