

MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TASK FORCE, IN REGULAR MEETING OF MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2023 AT 5:30 PM, MUNICIPAL CENTER I, TOWER ROOM 146, 50 E CIVIC CENTER DRIVE, GILBERT, ARIZONA

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Sean Warren; Members Iya Affo, Chris Curley, Suzanne Lunt, Alexandra Rodriguez, and Heather Watts

MEMBERS ABSENT: Javier Rodriguez

STAFF PRESENT: Staff Liaison/Volunteer and Community Resources Manager Melanie Dykstra, Vice Mayor Kathy Tilque, and Deputy Town Clerk Judy Martinez

GUESTS PRESENT: Susan Cadena with Gilbert Public Schools, Melissa Garland with Higley Unified School District, Tyler Babilonia with Community Bridges, Anna Jenkins with Copper Springs Behavioral Health, and Gilbert resident Doralise Machado -Liddell

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Warren called the meeting to order at 5:36 p.m.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Chair Warren led the Pledge of Allegiance.

ROLL CALL

Volunteer and Community Resources Manager Dykstra called roll and declared a quorum present.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The guests and presenters introduced themselves.

AGENDA ITEMS

1. Selection of Vice Chair (Discussion and possible action)

A MOTION was made by Member Curley, seconded by Member A. Rodriguez, to appoint Suzanne Lunt as Vice Chair. *Motion carried 6-0.*

2. Consider approval of the minutes of the October 2, 2023, meeting (Discussion and possible action)

A MOTION was made by Member Lunt, seconded by Member Curley, to approve the minutes of the October 2, 2023 meeting. *Motion carried 6-0.*

3. Gilbert Public Schools Homelessness Presentation (*Discussion only*)

Susan Cadena from Gilbert Public Schools provided a 2023-2024 Homeless Education Data Overview. She stated a determining factor for students was typically those lacking a nighttime residence and then provided numbers reported for students in the categories of sheltered, unsheltered, hotel/motel, doubled up, and unaccompanied minor. The District has identified 145 students as homeless, and she said the youngest child they were aware of that was experiencing homelessness in their district was a third grader. Susan then discussed how some children were orphaned due to the impact of COVID and did not have a guardian to take them in. She discussed scenarios when some students had wanted to stay in the community so other families had agreed to take them in, but then discussed common problems that arose and led to changes in the household and ultimately homelessness. She summarized challenges including high mobility, poor health, fatigue, hunger, emotional crisis/mental health concerns, academic instability, and accessibility to resources. She noted health challenges, lack of financial resources, and transportation issues.

Member Affo asked who funded the transportation. Susan Cadena stated Title 1 mostly, but there were also grants and donations such as gift cards for gas. Member Affo asked if they had enough funding. Susan Cadena stated funding was not typically the problem.

Chair Warren discussed how it should be answered when someone said that Gilbert did not have a problem with homelessness. Susan Cadena responded that it should not be looked at as a problem but an opportunity to help children have their basic needs met. Chair Warren reiterated that some believed it was not a problem in Gilbert even though they were hearing otherwise. Susan Cadena discussed the need for awareness and how many did not see it until it became personal.

Member A. Rodriguez discussed the weight on teachers and how many of them kept food and other supplies at their desks.

Vice Chair Lunt asked if teachers were informed of such matters or if it was confidential. Susan Cadena said much of the information was confidential except for counselors and principals, but the teachers were informed of certain things.

4. Higley Public Schools Homelessness Presentation (*Discussion only*)

Melissa Garland of Higley Public Schools stated they faced similar challenges as Gilbert Public Schools despite only having 13 schools in total. She said their total known homeless population was 70 currently and the vast majority of them resided in The House of Refuge. She said they may have decreased in number but their needs had become greater. She said Higley partnered with Homeless Youth Connection and Matthew's Crossing, then discussed other resources including an open purchase order for food, household items, and other needs. She discussed working with students who were close to graduating who would have nowhere to go after. She said last year her main challenge was transportation, noting the school district had outsourced transportation needs at a cost of about \$100 per day, per student. She said transportation was okay for now, but they always had to be ready to pivot. She discussed having limited resources with hotels and also connections with churches, noting she wished there was a setup of a hotel for those experiencing homelessness like Mesa developed. She discussed funding and entitlement grants for homeless after the COVID-19 pandemic, but said once those ran out, the funds would become competitive. She said they did rely on the Title 1 Grant and were mandated to spend some on homeless education as well. She also discussed students with special needs and how it took extra resources and manpower.

Chair Warren asked out of 70 students, how many lived at House of Refuge. Melissa Garland stated 25 of the 70 were not with House of Refuge.

Member Watts asked about the ages of the children experiencing homeless. Melissa Garland replied there were some students in preschool and the rest were across the board from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Member Affo discussed the possible inaccuracy of those numbers, stating that she had taken in boys her sons ages and she knew of many who were homeless and ended up moving from homes to homes. Melissa Garland agreed that those instances were common, then discussed how they tried to train their registrars what to look for and how to listen for key things. Member Affo stated that it typically worsened for older students as the school year progressed. Melissa Garland agreed

that it was often harder for young men and that Homeless Youth Connection was very helpful in those instances.

Members A. Rodriguez and Watts discussed how children were in those situations and not in foster care. Melissa Garland said in her experience, sometimes parents had given some permission to let their kids live with others for location, sports, etc., but then when the season ended the kids had nowhere to go. She also spoke of how some parents provided documents turning over their parental rights.

Chair Warren asked about The Homeless Youth Connection. Melissa Garland stated she believed it was a nonprofit but they had coaches and did check-ins to try to keep older kids on track and could also offer resources for college and continued education.

5. Community Bridges Homelessness Presentation (Discussion only)

Tyler Babilonia of Community Bridges discussed the programs they offered for housing and community integration, noting that he oversaw grant programs. He discussed Project Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH), noting the target population was individuals who were homeless or at-risk of homelessness and had a serious mental illness or co-occurring disorder. He said they provided case management services and had 729 active and 3,567 yearly total cases. He said the cases were all in Maricopa County and there was ongoing coordination of services both internally and with partner agencies who meet people anywhere, even on the streets. He discussed a program called DESYOU because it was funded through the Department of Economic Security (DES) and was county-wide. He said this program had 38 active cases and 187 yearly total with two lead case managers, one health care case manager, and one navigator. He said they worked directly with individuals 18-24 years of age who were experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk. He said they worked with the United Methodist Outreach Ministries and A New Leaf, as well as with The Native American Connection (NAC) and HomeBase. Lastly, he spoke of the Maricopa County Outreach (Hand-in-Hand) Program which received referrals from citizens, schools, park rangers, police departments, etc. and worked with County "FlexFunds". He said this program referred clients to MAR-RRH (Rapid Rehousing) and had two lead case managers and six navigators, with 69 current cases and 471 yearly total. He noted their assessment was difficult for some as they asked if homelessness was due to factors with sexuality, religious differences, abuse, etc.

Member A. Rodriguez spoke in appreciation of the Hand-in-Hand program.

Doralise Machado -Liddell, Gilbert resident, asked how they handled people who went through the process but refused services. Tyler Babilonia said if someone was of sound body and sound mind, there was not much you can do. He discussed the process to show someone was incapable of caring for themselves and said the last resort was a petition, unless they were putting their own life or someone else's at risk.

6. Town of Gilbert Homelessness Presentation (Discussion only)

Volunteer and Community Resources Manager Dykstra noted that homelessness was highlighted in a prior needs' assessment, adding it went from number 5 of 9 priorities in 2014 to number 4 in 2019. She discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic changed things. She said Gilbert had \$10.9 million allocated to homeless prevention services and shelters, with an emphasis on helping residents not get evicted. She provided numbers on evictions and discussed the assistance provided for housing with deposits and other fees. She noted the Highland Justice Court did also cover Mesa and described how redaction laws made it difficult to gather information. She said when pulled by zip code in 2019 there were 1,595 evictions in Gilbert but from January -October 2023, there were 2,679 evictions with an average amount of \$3,211. She discussed current efforts including interdepartmental quarterly meetings that included departments like Parks and Recreation, Public Works, and Public Safety. She noted other efforts including the Point in Time (PIT) Count done every January, using data from the Fire Department, new navigation services that started in 2021-2022, and the heat relief effort. She noted the Town did work with Community Bridges Inc. (CBI), then she highlighted a heat map from the Fire Department where they were mostly responding to services. She discussed the number of calls received, noting how some of the same individuals called multiple times. She said that Chandler had seven navigators employed who would go out directly in response to fire service calls, which helps the public safety response. She also noted enforcement issues and challenges with shelter/housing with family and pet accommodations and lack of beds, then discussed issues with panhandling and those pretending to be homeless. There was also discussion regarding FlexFunds and their importance.

Chair Warren asked about common denominators in the areas with higher concentration from the heat map. Manager Dykstra stated it was typically near hospitals or behavioral health centers, such as Mercy Gilbert Medical Center.

Doralise Machado -Liddell, Gilbert resident, noted the statistics provided by the Fire Department and asked about the Police Department. Manager Dykstra discussed how their codes were very specific to law enforcement and said homelessness was not a crime. Doralise Machado-Liddell stated she was happy to see the quarterly meetings to help the neighborhoods live safely without homelessness; she described

instances with fighting of homeless individuals near her home. Manager Dykstra stated the Town was exploring code changes that would offer different tools. Doralise Machado-Liddell discussed concerns around the railroad tracks but noted it was a different jurisdiction.

7. Review and discussion of priority area of Homelessness (*Discussion only*)

Volunteer and Community Resources Manager Dykstra asked the Task Force members to take five minutes to make some notes for ideas that she could gather. The group submitted their ideas.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM CITIZENS

Doralise Machado -Liddell spoke during Items 5 and 6.

FUTURE MEETING SCHEDULE AND TOPICS

There was no discussion.

COMMUNICATIONS

Report from Council Liaison on current events.

Council Liaison/Vice Mayor Tilque discussed the Town's Fall Council Retreat and then said the Family Advocacy Center and wrap-around services were a priority for her. She stated she served on the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) Domestic Violence Council and they offered a teen date violence workshop that she shared with Mayor Peterson for the Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee (MYAC). She also noted she found it interesting that Gilbert was one of the few cities that had a domestic violence court, adding she would be meeting to share best practices with other communities. She discussed how some domestic violence could escalate into felony matters which would go to a different court, then discussed how some victims were re-victimized.

Report from Staff Liaisons on task force assignments and current events.

Staff Liaison Dykstra reviewed the assignments and upcoming events provided in the members' packets.

Report from Task Force Members on current events.

None.

ADJOURN

Chair Warren adjourned the meeting at 7:36 p.m.

ATTEST:

Sean Warren, Chair

Melanie Dykstra, Staff Liaison