



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Christopher Shorter, Assistant City Manager
Rodney Gonzales, Assistant City Manager

DATE: April 27, 2020

SUBJECT: Update on Homelessness Services During Response to COVID-19

This memorandum serves to provide updates on the intersection of the City of Austin's ongoing work to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and provision of services related to homelessness within the community. The issues addressed in this memorandum include:

Section I: *Operational Planning and Stakeholder Engagement*

- COVID-19 Homeless Services Strategic Planning, and
- Communications

Section II: *Access to Homeless Services*

- Facilities for Isolation & Protective Lodging,
- Food Access,
- Hygiene Resources,
- Downtown Austin Community Court,
- The Homeless Outreach Street Team & EMS Community Health Paramedics, and

OPERATIONAL PLANNING AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

COVID-19 Homeless Services Strategic Planning

As discussed during the April 23rd, 2020 City Council meeting, senior staff from the City of Austin (COA) and from the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO) have been working with City-funded consultants and the HUD-TA consultant to implement an overarching response to the intersecting crises of COVID-19 and homelessness, recognizing that addressing the needs and protecting the health of people experiencing homelessness during this pandemic is a critical strategy for reducing infections and illness and reducing demands on scarce health care resources. COA and ECHO have agreed to the implementation of a COVID-19 Homelessness Response Plan, which focuses on the following Objectives:

- **Objective #1:** Deploying comprehensive screening processes for sheltered and unsheltered people
- **Objective #2:** Securing and operating sites/rooms to provide alternative living arrangements for people experiencing homelessness
- **Objective #3:** Implement purposeful, coordinated, and efficient approaches to supporting people to transition and exit from the alternative living arrangements established and across the time period for economic recovery

- **Objective #4:** Ensuring appropriate social distancing, safety, and hygiene protocols are in place at existing emergency shelters
- **Objective #5:** Addressing the needs of people who are unsheltered, including people living in encampments

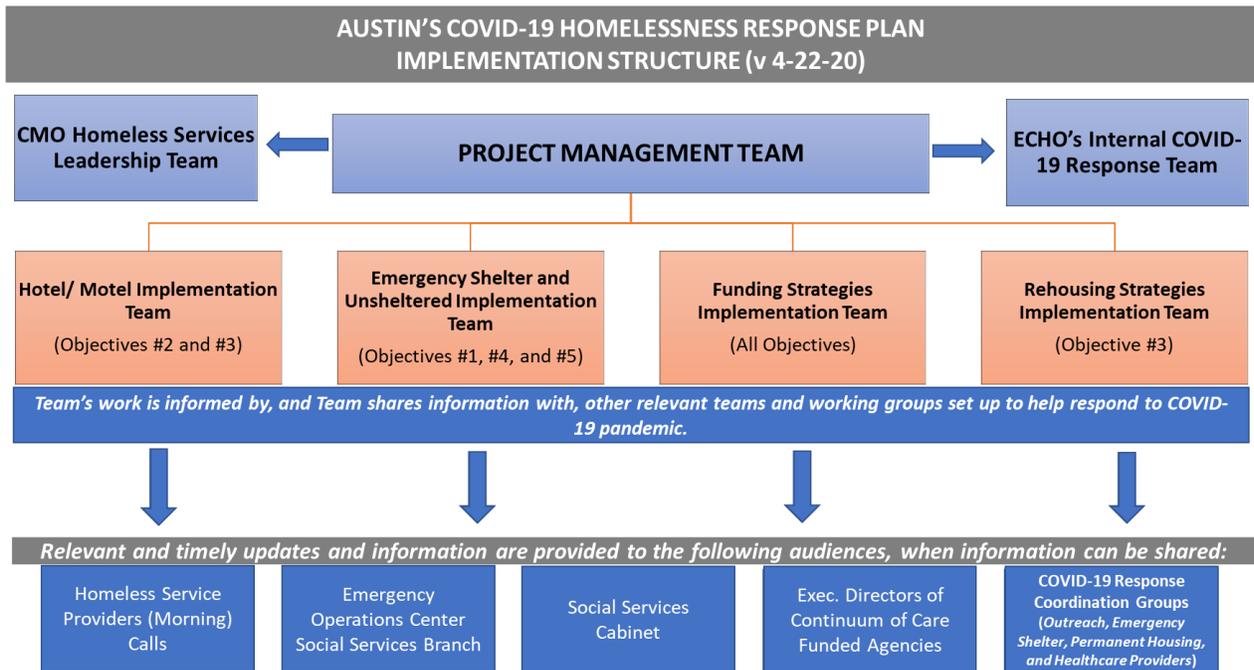
To implement this Response Plan, COA and ECHO, with the guidance of the City-funded consultants, are jointly leading and staffing three (3) Implementation Teams:

1. **Project Management Team**, charged with leadership and oversight of implementation of the entire Response Plan, including setting priorities and helping address challenges and obstacles faced by Implementation Teams. (All Objectives)
2. **Hotels/Motels Implementation Team**, charged with implementing the operations and service-delivery at hotel/motel facilities being used to provide isolation, quarantine, and social distancing for people experiencing homelessness. (Objective #2)
3. **Emergency Shelter and Unsheltered Implementation Team**, charged with scaling up screening processes for people experiencing homelessness and supporting safer operations and environments for people in shelters and for people who remain unsheltered. (Objectives #1, #4, and #5)

In addition, the Project Management Team has prioritized the formation of two (2) additional Implementation Teams, and consultants are leading advance planning and analysis work to support the launch of these Teams the week of April 27, and will also support the initiation of a framework and process for modeling to support these Teams:

4. **Funding Strategies Implementation Team**, charged with developing plans for the most strategic use of existing and new funding resources in support of the Response Plan. (All Objectives)
5. **Rehousing Strategies Implementation Team**, charged with designing and implementing effective approaches to rehousing people experiencing homelessness, including those who are temporarily staying in hotel/motel facilities. (Objective #3)

A visual of Austin’s COVID-19 Homelessness Response Team implementation structure:



We will plan to provide a brief overview of the COVID-19 Response Planning effort, as well as, our process for reengaging the Council body on the continuing longer-term coalition building and strategic planning to improve the City’s homeless service system during the City Council work session on May 5th, 2020.

A more detailed presentation on the COVID-19 Response Plan is also being developed for discussion with the Social Services Cabinet on May 5th, 2020.

Communications

The Homelessness Priority Communications Team within the Communications and Public Information Office has shifted much of their focus to engaging those experiencing homelessness in the COVID-19 Public Health Response to stay safe, meet their needs and access services. In service of that goal the communications team is:

Communicating directly with people experiencing homelessness

- Repurposed austintexas.gov/homelessness to provide critical information to individuals experiencing homelessness
- Distributed 2,000 COVID-19 educational flyers through the Food Access/Basic Needs bags and through existing City and community channels
- Launched a [GIS map](#) to help people experiencing homelessness find locations for accessing basic needs during the Covid-19 response, including the launch of Basic Needs Sites where people can meet several needs in one location
- Developing text and social media strategies to increase the number of people reached with messages to stay safe, meet needs and access services

Staying up-to-date, and when possible, coordinating services available to those experiencing homelessness

- Continuing collaborative calls within the City and with community partners
- Expanding the number and types of partners participating in the coordinated response
- Creating updates and talking points for leadership to inform and engage key partner organizations in the coordinated COVID-19 response
- Identifying and acting on unmet needs and opportunities identified on internal and external partner calls

Communicating efforts to the broader public

- Collaborating with the Emergency Operations Center and the Joint Information Center on media inquires
- Partnering with Dell Medical and the Continuum of Care on joint press releases to inform broader public on the breadth of efforts during the COVID-19 response
- Received press coverage of basic needs map, Social Services Branch of the EOC, and the Eating Apart Together (EAT) Initiative

City leadership and staff across departments will continue to collaborate, monitor local conditions, and tailor services to meet the evolving needs within the community.

ACCESS TO HOMELESS SERVICES

Facilities for Isolation

The City has established various facilities to house those impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including our homeless community. To that end, we have set up two types of facilities:

Isolation Facilities (ISOFAC): An Isolation Facility is for individuals who are under monitoring, under investigation, or are COVID-19 positive AND cannot safely self-isolate. Any individuals (including individuals experiencing homelessness) who meet established criteria are welcome at the isolation facility. The City currently has secured emergency temporary occupancy of two ISOFACS to isolate individuals that meet the criteria stated above. Additional hotels are being negotiated if the need arises.

1. 6121 N. IH-35 (near US Hwy 290) (District 4): 292 guest rooms and meeting rooms / capacity for 204 guests
2. 9505 Stonelake Blvd (near Mopac and US Hwy 283) (District 7): 150 guest rooms and meeting rooms / capacity for 108 guests

Protective Lodging (ProLodge): Temporary shelter options for people experiencing homelessness who are at high risk of severe complications if they become COVID-19 positive; for persons in congregate shelters who may have been exposed, but exposure has not been confirmed; and for individuals experiencing homelessness who have recovered and are being discharged from ISOFAC. The City has secured emergency temporary occupancy of three ProLodge facilities and is currently negotiating additional hotels if they are needed.

3. 4200 S IH-35 (near Ben White Blvd) (District 3): 129 rooms / capacity for 110 guests.
4. 8010 N IH-35 (near US Hwy 183) (District 4): 71 rooms / capacity for 60 guests.
5. 3105 N IH-35 (near 31st Street) (District 9): 63 rooms / capacity for 57 guests

Food Access

COVID-19 has created disruptions in food accessibility for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness due to changes in business operations across the community. To address these challenges, the Homelessness Task Force through partnerships with social services agencies, the Austin Convention Center, Central Texas Food Bank and Travis County implemented a food access initiative called Eating Apart Together (EAT) to provide food and water to people experiencing homelessness within our community.

EAT devised a multipronged approach to address the diverse needs of our unsheltered neighbors with the understanding that geographic location has an impact on food access. The overall strategy continues to be shaped considering several factors to ensure safe and equitable distribution of this most valuable basic need.

Shelf-Stable Food Distribution

EAT began distribution of shelf stable foods on April 3, 2020 utilizing \$10,000 dollars of food provided by The Other Ones Foundation and subsequently through a donation from the Central Texas Food Bank of 1,000 bags of shelf stable meals, provided weekly, as a response to COVID-19. The Central Texas Food Bank donations began on April 9, 2020 and will continue for six consecutive weeks. The Austin Convention Center serves as the distribution hub for this initiative utilizing its staff to assist with the assembling and warehousing of nonperishable food bags. EAT is currently investigating additional resources for shelf-stable food to ensure operations extend beyond six weeks as we anticipate COVID-19 will continue impacting food access for a longer time period.

Revolution Foods

A contract with Revolution Foods has been signed and the first shipment of prepared meals was received on Wednesday April 22, 2020. In addition, 13,000 shelf stable meals were delivered to the Austin Convention Center for distribution, which supplements the meals provided by the Central Texas Food Bank.

Additional Resources

Sources for drinking water have been limited for individuals experiencing homelessness due to COVID-19. In addition to improving food access for this population, EAT is working on increasing the availability of drinking water by including it with all food deliveries. The aim of this initiative is to ensure that the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness are met with thoughtfulness and intentionality. To that end, EAT has also secured hygiene items donated by ECHO, cloth face coverings created by Dell Seton Medical School, and pet food for pets of people experiencing homelessness. These resources are distributed throughout the community during food distribution activities by community partners. EAT is continually identifying needs and developing creative strategies to close identified resource and access gaps for this population.

Identifying Needs

EAT is exploring ways to increase food access during evening and weekend hours as this has been identified as a need that preexisted COVID-19 and has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Community partners are working to address this gap in various ways, and additional resources and strategies will continue to be investigated by the Homelessness Task Force.

Working in collaboration with the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), a survey was created to track the number of shelf-stable bags and prepared meals distributed throughout the community. The survey was implemented on April 24, 2020 and will provide data based on geographic location i.e., zip code, Council District, and Travis County Precinct. It will help the Homelessness Task Force identify whether there is

equitable distribution of food resources to people experiencing homelessness and allow for changes in operations to address gaps and community needs.

Hygiene Resources for Unsheltered Individuals

The Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) public showers and restrooms along city trails and in city parks remain open until further notice. Additionally, PARD has opened (5) five Controlled Shower Access sites for Health and Hygiene to be made available Monday-Saturday 10am-3pm. Portable toilets and handwashing stations have been placed in 20 areas across town, aligning with current Violet Bag sites and near areas of high activity. City staff are adding additional toilet and handwashing units as well as shower trailers to multiple sites in order to promote hygiene and provide for basic needs. Locations are updated on the [interactive map](#), found on austintexas.gov/homelessness.

Downtown Austin Community Court

Triage case management services: From March 16th through April 23rd the Downtown Austin Community Court (DACC) has served 508 clients through Triage Case Management, which includes provision of a handout to all clients with information on COVID-19, safety planning, and connecting individuals to services and resources to meet basic needs. This number does not account for the additional individuals accessing restrooms at DACC for basic hygiene and other individuals served on current caseloads. Most triage services are conducted electronically, but DACC staff are available onsite to provide items and technical assistance to individuals on an as-needed basis. DACC provides masks to individuals coming into the building for services, and has provided donated items from ECHO and the First United Methodist Church to individuals including bags with various items such as hygiene supplies, snacks, and socks.

Intensive Case Management: DACC has Clinical Case Managers that continue to work with individuals on caseloads. As part of case management, DACC is providing critical needs items to clients including thermometers to help monitor their health and cell phones to enable clients to stay in touch with their case managers and access services. Additionally, HEB in partnership with the Central Texas Food Bank provided a limited number of boxes of nonperishable food items that were provided to housed clients.

Bed Management Team: DACC has dedicated seventeen staff to work with the EOC, primarily with the Bed Management Team (BMT) to coordinate a safe place for individuals experiencing homelessness to self-isolate at the locations managed by the City. As of April 23, 2020, DACC has supported three facilities including one isolation facility (ISOFAC) and two ProLodge sites. DACC staff assisting with these efforts include three members of DACC's management team, eight Clinical Case Managers, and six Community Service Restitution Crew Leaders. Staff roles include, but are not limited to the following:

- Management Team Staff
 - Oversight of program and provision of staff support
 - Coordination of services, security, communication of information, and other necessary resources for individuals residing at facilities
 - Regular review and revision of protocols to meet or exceed safety standards set by local, state, and federal health authorities
- Clinical Case Managers:
 - Facilitate process to help track availability of hotel rooms and coordinate transportation to hotel room
 - Screen calls coming in through the COVID-19 Medical Hotline for unsheltered individuals
 - Complete an EOC Housing form that assists in screening the individual for proper placement and follow-up
 - Input each individual's information into the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) so the client can be linked to ongoing social services
 - Assist with tasks needed for program residents such as locating medications (one Clinical Case Manager assigned with this task)
- Community Service Restitution Crew Leaders:
 - Receive guest placement requests and confirm check-ins with the Bed Management Team
 - Identify appropriate room placement for incoming guests and provide keys and intake packets

(NOTE: *this is done outside in an expanded social distancing environment with no direct contact with incoming guests*)

- Assemble hotel related items needed by guests such as toiletries, linens, and replacement key cards in an expanded social distancing environment with no direct contact with guests
- Receive communication from guests who approach the staff area and facilitate getting their requests fulfilled outside in an expanded social distancing environment with no direct contact with guests

Austin Homelessness Advisory Council (AHAC) – AHAC is a group of approximately 15 individuals with lived experience with homelessness in Austin, who typically meet on a biweekly basis to provide input on processes, programs, and practices impacting and serving individuals experiencing homelessness. To enable continuation of AHAC's work, Communities for Recovery is facilitating survey distribution utilizing scheduled time slots for each member to ensure social distancing.

Since the meeting structure has changed, AHAC has provided insights on the impacts of COVID-19, assisted the Office of Design and Delivery and Communications and Public Information Office (CPIO) regarding the City's digital communications strategy around homelessness, and plans to provide the Office of Police Oversight input next on their work related to the Community Communications and Education Cabinet. Any departments or service providers interested in seeking input from individuals with lived experience with homelessness may contact Laura Williamson at DACC.

Homeless Outreach Street Team (HOST) & EMS Community Health Paramedics (EMS CHP):

HOST has been working in the community to provide education regarding:

- COVID-19 based on information from Austin Public Health
- Community mitigation strategies including, but not limited to social distancing, avoiding crowds, and hand hygiene
- Where to find food, showers & other resources

HOST has also been providing direct services, resources, and assistance with referrals including:

- Delivery of phones purchased by Integral Care to clients to help individuals stay connected to services and resources
- Provision of food to clients
- Continued outreach and follow-up to address referrals sent to HOST
- Working to identify individuals experiencing homelessness that need access to the ISOFAC or ProLodge sites managed by the City to provide safe places to self-isolate

EMS CHP continue their work to:

- Coordinate food and personal protective equipment (PPE) donations
- Deliver food, water, and hygiene products
- Assess immediate needs of individuals experiencing homelessness
- Provide COVID-19 Education & Infection Surveillance
- Provide coordination of care
- Collaborate with APH, ECHO, and Community Care Clinics to build a highest priority list of the medically vulnerable for target outreach and admission to ProLodge sites managed by the City to provide safe places to self-isolate
- Address referrals from partner agencies when they are unable to perform outreach/field work

Please reach out with any questions or suggestions about how we can optimize our efforts to serve our neighbors experiencing homelessness during these challenging times.

CC: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
CMO Executive Team
City Department Directors and Assistant Directors