



**We Are Columbia**

**COLUMBIA TASK FORCE TO PREVENT AND END HOMELESSNESS MEETING MINUTES  
WEDNESDAY, MAY 18, 2022**

The Columbia Task Force to Prevent and End Homelessness conducted a meeting on Tuesday, May 18, 2022 at the Busby Street Community Center, 1735 Busby Street, Columbia, SC 29203. The Honorable Aditi Bussells, Chair called the meeting to order at 4:03 p.m. and the following members were present:

<b>Attendee Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Status</b>
Aditi Bussells	Chair	Present
Edward H. McDowell, Jr.	Council Member	Present
Will Brennan	Council Member	Present
Skip Holbrook	Columbia Police Chief	Present
Matt Kennell	City Center Partnership	Present
Steve Cook	Five Points Association	Present
George Whitehead	Department of Probations, Pardon, and Parole	Present
Allison Farrell	SC Department of Mental Health	Present
John Wilkerson	Downtown Coalition of Neighborhoods	Present
Brett Kloos	University of South Carolina	Present
Amy McCulloch	Probate Court Judge	Absent
Matthew Brock	Associate Probate Judge	Present
Jean Burns	Magistrate Court Judge	Absent
Treacy Dobbins	Inspire Real Change	Present
Kieley Sutton	Assistant Public Defender	Present
Antonio Flores, Jr.	Wal-Mart Market Manager	Present

**PRESENTATIONS**

1. Welcome and Introductions - The Honorable Aditi Bussells - *Received as information.*

Councilor Bussells introduced the task force and discussed some of the concerns that the City would like to tackle with the formation of the task force. This diverse group of advocates and business owners speaks to the complexities of people experiencing homelessness. The City is excited to have these voices at the table to help us in developing solutions. Today, we will set the foundation to understand the state of homelessness. We will hear from City staff on ways we have invested in homelessness services and other initiatives regarding mental health and public safety.



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2. Overview and History of the Taskforce - The Honorable Aditi Bussells - *Received as information.*

Councilor Bussells said this task force was established on February 15, 2022 at the request of the mayor in response to the growing number of homeless, a trend that can be seen all across the country. Columbia is known to be a compassionate city. We have many services available to those experiencing homelessness. Tackling this issue in a way that is compassionate but again addresses the multi-faceted issue of homelessness is something this task force will be dedicated to over the next six months. This is a temporary task force with the goal of releasing a report with concrete strategies that we can implement with our partners both in the short-term and in the long-term. According to the 2020 South Carolina State of Homelessness Report, Richland County has the second highest rate of homelessness in South Carolina. There has also been an increase in criminal activity and drug related offenses associated with people that are experiencing homelessness. There is not a direct correlation between homelessness and crime, but we do know that there is an indirect correlation that stems from things like poverty and drug addictions. The City of Columbia has at least 14 providers assisting populations facing homelessness in Richland County and Lexington County. We may not have a real grasp of the scope of services, the number of services, and the types of providers available in South Carolina. We have commissioned a study with Inspire Real Change to understand the state of our providers and to catalogue services.

Councilor Brennan said we are here to figure out the root cause of homelessness in the City. We need to find approaches to really help the individuals as best as we can.

Councilor McDowell asked if it is about the data or about human lives. We have to take the data and turn it into actual resources. The homeless are always going to be with us. How do we take what we are doing here today and turn it into a critical balance to give us ideas that will help our brothers and sisters?

3. Overview of Current Policy Efforts - Ms. Teresa Knox, Esq., City Attorney - *Received as information.*

Ms. Teresa Knox, Esq., City Attorney said our ordinances are not focused on the prevention of homelessness. These ordinances are ordinances that most cities have. These include ordinances on begging, prohibited acts in City facilities, unlawful urination and defecation, and urban camping. Over the years, everyone has wanted us to toughen these ordinances up. We have to be careful because the U.S. Supreme Court and Federal Courts have looked at these issues because they deal with constitutional rights. Mainly the Eighth Amendment and First Amendment. The



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Eighth Amendment deals with cruel and unusual punishment. Courts have held that fining or arresting the homeless for sleeping outdoors amounts to an Eighth Amendment violation. There are caveats to that like safety issues and time and place issues. The First Amendment has to do with asking for food and falls under the right of free speech. There are caveats for that, too. You cannot be aggressively begging. Cities have tried to create buffer zones like restricting their downtown areas but you can't do that. What we have on the books is constitutionally okay. We have to make sure we stay that way.

4. Public Safety and Homelessness Initiatives - Mr. William "Skip" Holbrook, Columbia Police Chief - *Received as information.*

Mr. William "Skip" Holbrook, Columbia Police Chief said our expectations are professionalism, policing with respect and compassion, and constitutional policing. We are in a challenging time. Being in a southern city, we have seen consistent growth of our homeless population over the last five years. Last year, we made 366 arrests. I would argue that arrests are failures in this situation. Most of these individuals are in some type of distress, mental health or substance abuse. Most services are Monday through Friday during business hours. This causes police to often needed to solve the problem. Oftentimes, jail is not the best place for them but those are our options. The 366 arrests are what we consider quality of life arrests. Our officers over the past winter made 172 inclement weather transports. This is afterhours when there is no available transportation. CPD has taken measures to consolidate our transport times; however, it still causes a police officer to focus on transporting and not on police functions. Officers are tasked with completing zone watch requests each shift. These include businesses, cemeteries, parks, and parking garages that have complaints or patterns of disruptive behavior perpetrated by the homeless. With the help of Council, we have established the Pathways Unit (TPU), which provides an opportunity to reach individuals that may have mental illness perpetuating their homeless status. We have a mental health clinician embedded with the department. TPU reaches out to community stakeholders and groups to coordinate and strengthen the focus of actions when addressing a common cause by attending community meetings, building relationships of support with non-profit organizations, and initiating involvement in existing outreach initiatives. We have seen tremendous success and we are excited to add four additional clinicians. Parks are an area of focus for us and I am anxious to hear suggestions from this task force on how we can strike a balance. I hope that we have action items on how we can transition law enforcement from being the tool for solving our homeless problems so we can better focus on life safety issues.



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5. Current City of Columbia Funding for Homelessness Services - Ms. Missy Caughman, Budget, Program Management and Grants Director - *Received as information.*

Ms. Missy Caughman, Budget, Program Management and Grants Director said the City has four homeless services contracts. The contracts vary between three providers. The contract with United Way is for the operation of the city's Inclement Weather Center (IWC). The IWC has been open since 2014. Prior to the city operating the shelter, it was a volunteer led service when certain weather conditions were met. Currently, the IWC is operated from November 1<sup>st</sup> through March 31<sup>st</sup>. They still provide outreach services throughout the year. Transitions provides the actual operations of the IWC. There are two facilities: one for men and one for women. Transportation is provided to the shelter. The Salvation Army provides meals at night and in the morning. This is the largest part of the city's funding. The City's allocations for homeless services are around \$1 million a year from our general fund. We have a smaller contract with United Way for service coordination. The homeless service coordinator focuses on the coordination of meal share programs. It has been successful in redirecting folks who have generous ideas and have a desire to help the less fortunate. They also help coordinate services and outreach for the repeat offenders that are often reengaging with the police. This funding also goes towards the Homeless Management Information System, a nationwide management system where United Way is the point of contact for South Carolina. We also have a contract with USC Supportive Housing. That is a national model providing supportive housing services for chronic and hard to place individuals. The City funds the supportive services of the contract and the Housing Authority provides the housing component of the program. The city also funds the Midlands Housing Alliance, which is Transitions. The funding supports security services. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides allocations from the Community Development Block Grant, which is an entitlement, grant that cities receive across the country to address areas of interest to HUD. In the current fiscal year, we have funded Homeless No More in the amount of \$40,000 and Mental Illness Recovery Center, Inc. (MIRCI) in the amount of \$40,000. The City also receives funding from HUD for the HOME Program to assist with affordable housing and housing services and Housing of Persons With Aids (HOPWA). The funding is utilized to help prevent homelessness for that specific population.

Councilor Bussells said council has allocated some of the American Rescue Plan funding towards non-congregate housing. That was recognized as a need from our homeless service providers. We are looking forward to making this investment and continuing to provide housing. Many different issues that play into homelessness: housing, access to opportunities, access to healthy food, and others. It is important for us to recognize that while the City is the leader, this is something that we need other municipalities and state government to help us in solving as well.



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6. Strategies from other local governments - The Honorable Aditi Bussells - *Deferred*

**COMMITTEE DISCUSSION**

Mr. Treacy Dobbins, Inspire Real Change said we did a research project last year in Columbia. We worked with 30 individuals that were currently experiencing homelessness. Out of the 30, we had 29 identify some form of health care issue to include physical, behavioral, or addiction. Out of the 29, 22 identified emotional trauma concerns. Both of those numbers are high and we found that there were many needs that were not being addressed. When we started the project, we were focusing on recidivism. Working with this population since 2015, I saw how people would enter into housing programs but months later, they would end back up on the streets. We quickly shifted into a bigger scope. When we talk about cost and shelters, out of the 28 individuals that have stayed at a shelter the average is 173 nights per person. We averaged the cost to be \$5,017 per individual for shelter cost. When we looked at the percentage of individuals that left the shelter as an unsuccessful outcome, we realized that the majority of those exited by choice. About 70% said their needs were not being met. We have individuals with behavior issues, addiction issues, and physical issues and we have to identify their needs. Individuals need a quality assessment to understand the full picture of their needs and from that integrate it into a service. With our partnership with the City, we are looking at a service provider platform both internal and external. This will be something where we can plug in these resources and services because currently we do not have a collaboration effort or coordinated entry process. This will connect everything together. There will be an external source that you can plug into to get the individual connected with the right resources. The thing I like is the accountability component. Someone gets an assessment based on their needs. They are directed to a service and the clock starts when that person is assigned to a service. The person has to be contacted and at that point either their needs are filled or they are redirected to someone who can. You will have an assessment, referral, case management, accountability, and a public connection component to it as well.

Councilor Bussells said I want to challenge us to think about what we can do in the short term. A lot of these strategies to make a systemic change are going to be long term and things we all have to invest in. What can we do to address the issues we are experiencing right now?



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7. Reflections - The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr. and The Honorable Will Brennan  
- *Received as information.*

Councilor Brennan said thank you all. This is a wonderful way to get to know each other and the caring community and professionals. Everybody in the room right now has a higher calling for being here. You are very compassionate, you care about the citizens of our wonderful city, and I thank you for that. I look forward to the next month and getting to know your knowledge to help us understand the gaps in the services. I believe that the state has a big role to play in the ultimate solution.

Councilor McDowell said we can't play the blame game. This is not the Police Department's sole responsibility. This needs to be a collaborative effort. Nothing is going to get done until the whole community addresses our brothers and sisters. This is just the beginning of what needs to take place in these next six months. We have a gap in services. Every community has to play a part as we look at this critical issue in our city. I am appreciative of those who spoke up. Thank you Dr. Bussells for bringing us together.

8. Closing Remarks - The Honorable Aditi Bussells - *Received as information.*

Councilor Bussells said I recently joined the Affordable Housing Task Force in hopes of both committees working together to build some holistic solutions to address the problem. You will be receiving our future task force meetings and we will be having a meeting with providers that have been funded by the city.

**ADJOURNMENT**

**The meeting was adjourned at 5:38 p.m.**

Respectfully submitted:

Erika D. Moore Hammond, CMC  
City Clerk