Open Letter to the Community Regarding Homelessness Solutions

March 29, 2019

Dear Community Member,

Homelessness is a major and growing concern for the Santa Rosa community and has been identified as one of City Council's top priorities. Unlike a public works project or an economic development initiative, homelessness is a complex social issue with many contributing factors that cannot be easily or quickly solved by a single agency or organization. Solutions require both immediate and long-term strategies, and partnerships with County agencies, community organizations and individuals in the community. This letter is intended to engage you in a dialogue on the issue, to share Santa Rosa's efforts to address the problem and to invite you to be involved in a solution.

Sonoma County, as a whole, has seen a 34 percent reduction in homelessness since 2011, while at the same time, the problem has become much more visible and its impacts on the entire community more apparent. Recent data identified approximately 3,000 persons experiencing homelessness in Sonoma County with nearly 1,900 persons living in unsheltered conditions throughout our community – in cars, on the street, and other public spaces. We are still learning the impacts of the wildfire disaster on our homeless system of care, but preliminary data shows a small increase (6%) in the population between 2017 and 2018, the first spike in homelessness in Sonoma County since the fallout of the Great Recession. Recognizing the importance of the issue for Santa Rosa, Council has taken several steps over the past few years to strategically address homelessness and create more housing opportunities. These steps, along with some of our successes are outlined below, and represent a beginning, not an end to solving homelessness.

- **Comprehensive Strategy:** Adoption of a Housing First Strategy, which prioritizes the provision of permanent housing as the primary tool for ending homelessness in alignment with Federal and State policy. Housing First accepts individuals for who they are without preconditions or barriers to entry such as sobriety, treatment or service participation. This is modeled on evidence-based practices.

- **Regional Planning:** Membership on the Leadership Council of the Sonoma County Continuum of Care (CoC), Home Sonoma County, a public-private partnership that brings together local government, service providers and community experts to achieve "functional zero" homelessness in Sonoma County through the utilization of a Housing First Strategy. Functional zero recognizes that homelessness will always exist, however, this measure is

achieved when a community has demonstrated that its system of care has the capacity to quickly and efficiently connect people to housing and ensure that homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

- **Housing for All:** Adoption of a [Housing Action Plan](#) to address unmet housing needs, including the development of 2,500 new affordable housing units by 2024. While the City has more than doubled its investment in homeless service programs, the shortage of affordable housing continues to be the greatest barrier to ending homelessness.

- **Services, Shelter, and Housing:** City funds support a multi-service day center, 351 year-round shelter beds for single adults and families, an innovative street outreach program (Homeless Outreach Services Team), and a Housing First Fund which provides landlord incentives, risk mitigation, and rental assistance. During the 2017/2018 fiscal year, approximately 280 individuals were housed through City-sponsored programs many of them directly from the street to housing through the HOST program. See the [Homeless Services Dashboard](#) on the City's [Open Data Portal](#) for more information.

- **Encampment Strategy:** Launched the Homeless Encampment Assistance Pilot (HEAP) Program, a multi-disciplinary team focused on a compassionate approach to address the health, safety, and shelter needs of persons living in encampments and to ease the impacts to surrounding communities. Since August 2017, HEAP has resolved four large encampments in Santa Rosa, connecting these individuals with services, shelter, and housing and offering continued engagement through the HOST program.

- **Community-based Solutions:** Established the Community Homeless Assistance Program (CHAP) that permits the use of private property (commercial or meeting facilities) for the provision of homeless services such as safe parking and temporary overnight shelter. Council is considering expanding this program in 2019 to increase community participation and potentially to include public property.

  Ending homelessness in Santa Rosa is a community-wide issue that requires a community-wide response. Based on the 2018 Sonoma County Point in Time Count, the top five causes of homelessness (based on responses from those experiencing homelessness) were in order,

  1) Lost job
  2) Alcohol or Drug Use
  3) Asked to Leave
  4) Eviction
  5) Divorce/Separation/Break-up

Though we have had some successes, we are very much aware of the frustration still felt in the community related to this issue. I invite you to join any of the regularly scheduled meetings of the City Council which are held on most Tuesdays starting at 4pm. You may also share your thoughts with the entire City Council at any time by emailing citycouncil@srcity.org. For more information about the City's programs and initiatives please visit our Homelessness Solutions webpage or send your questions or concerns by email to homeless@srcity.org.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. We know we have more work to do, and the City Council looks forward to the involvement of our entire community as we take on this serious issue.

Sincerely,

Tom Schwedhelm
Mayor, City of Santa Rosa