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Homelessness task force moving along

By Zachary Horner | zhorner@sanfordherald.com Sep 17, 2017

Community leaders and elected officials are continuing to seek solutions to homelessness in Sanford and Lee County.

S3 Housing Connect, the homelessness task force established earlier this year, met Thursday afternoon and gave updates on a new white flag shelter and discussed possible grants to seek and organizing a point-in-time count.

The task force, which runs like a governing body, chose the Bread of Life Ministries building on Third Street as Lee County's first white flag shelter, designed to hold the homeless during times of extreme heat or extreme cold. The architectural design for the shelter, scheduled to be completed by December, is done and a special use permit has been submitted to the city.

The task force is still in its developing stages but is already pushing for progress. The members of S3 established six committees: Data & Metrics, Resource Development, Community Engagement, Housing, Service Provision and Low Barrier Shelter. Each committee has a chair from the community and works towards a specific goal, spelled out in the name. Jeffrey Rawlings, case manager at Johnston-Lee-Harnett Community Action, was appointed as S3's chair last month, with Betsy Jungkind of Central Carolina Hospital chosen as vice chair. There are nine voting members on the task force.

Those in attendance Thursday included various elected officials such as Sanford Mayor Chet Mann, Sanford City Councilmen Charles Taylor and Byron Buckels and Lee County Board of Commissioners member Cameron Sharpe. Representatives from various nonprofits, such as Tamara Brogan from Family Promise of Lee County and Kendra Martin of United Way of Lee County, were also present.

The Data & Metrics Committee reported that the current plan is to do internal point-in-time counts, recording the number of homeless in Sanford and Lee County, perhaps up to four times a year. The committee has already created a survey in English and Spanish and has scheduled a point-in-time count training session for Sept. 28.

While more permanent details are being worked out, the committee is looking for ways to help those in emergency situations that are turned away from the current shelters for various reasons. Rawlings spoke about an instance recently where a homeless man he met was aided by a citizen, given a night in a hotel room, but he said it's important to get something

"Although we are getting up and we are getting our shelter going, we need something now," Rawlings said. "We need something right now, because the need exists right now."

He added that S3 needed money soon to set up a fund to pay lodging at hotels. He said there would likely be abuse of that system, but that it was worth dealing with to help people in a dire situation.

"Part of what we do is try to help and get people in housing," Rawlings said. "We're trying to get people into permanent solution. When you put something out for free, bottom feeders are going to know and are going to try to get it. And we're going to. You can't reject an entire family because you have issue with the person that's actually presenting. There is absolutely going to be abuse. Get used to it."

The task force will meet again next month, but members of the group are generally satisfied with what has been done so far.

"I'm glad that all of us have come together to address this," said Brogan, a former Lee County Board of Education member who recently was appointed interim director of Family Promise. "I'm very optimistic that we'll be able to do things in Lee County and Sanford to address our homeless situation."

John Kirkman, chairman of the Lee County Democratic Party, added, "I found that this problem is a lot more serious than I realized. We're not meeting the needs of the people. I love the fact that we've come up with this because we're going to be focused and make homelessness rare."

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