The Development and Maintenance of Sheltering and Housing Efforts

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of San José was in the process of developing its Disaster Housing Plan and coordinating associated trainings and exercises when COVID-19 became a threat. As more information and guidance concerning COVID-19 became available, the City recognized the need to revisit the framework that it had established for disaster housing and include concepts for noon- congregate sheltering as part of shelter operations. Leveraging existing relationships and previously established coordination infrastructure, the City of San José convened with counterparts at the County of Santa Clara to establish a Joint Departmental Operations Center (JDOC) to coordinate the homeless response. Through this effort, the City and the County were effectively able to jointly develop a multi-pronged written shelter plan to facilitate a coordinated sheltering and housing response to COVID- 19214. The plan delineated clear responsibilities and tasks for both organizations and established a common mission to protect those who were most vulnerable (older adults with underlying health conditions or persons with three or more underlying health conditions) from contracting the virus. Ultimately, this collaborative effort was aimed at helping reduce the spread of the virus among individuals who were experiencing homelessness and, by extension, throughout the region.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Approximately six years ago, the City of San José and the County of Santa Clara launched a deliberate and collaborative planning effort to end homelessness in the region. The global outbreak of COVID-19 merely amplified the need for housing and shelter for those who were already experiencing homelessness and those that have become economically displaced by loss of jobs and income due to the public health shelter-in-place mandate.

On March 19 and March 20 of 2020, the City received 104 trailers from the California Office of Emergency Services (CalOES). The trailers were delivered to the City with very little time to thoroughly plan for a feasible disaster housing operation. The City had to quickly identify a San José owned site to stage the trailers and prepare to provide healthy, safe, and acceptable accommodations for those experiencing homelessness. In addition, many of the trailers were not in a habitable condition and needed to be refurbished. After the refurbishing process was complete, only 90 of the 104 trailers were deemed habitable. The trailers also were delivered to the City with little guidance provided on how to properly assemble and maintain them. City staff were already stretched thin across the COVID-19 response organization. The staff assigned to the disaster housing site did not have prior training on how to set up, operate, and maintain the trailers. The plethora of challenges presented by these factors created even more risks to public health and safety. The City ultimately determined that it was best to decommission the use of the trailers and return them to CalOES. This very difficult decision to decommission the use of disaster trailers was made on behalf of the community.

Although there was a clear need for disaster trailers to support the housing need during COVID-19, the lack of prior planning and coordination between the State, the County, and the City proved to produce more risk- potential than healthy and safe solutions. The initial determination was for the trailers to be used to house the “medically vulnerable”. However, the trailers were not set up or configured in a way that was conducive for safely housing individuals with preexisting medical conditions. It took eight weeks to set up the trailers. The personnel that were to set up the trailers were not trained and, as a result, resorted to watching YouTube tutorial videos in order to perform the task. The trailers required ongoing maintenance for which the City needed to hire a subcontractor.

The City moved forward and, in coordination with the County and other community partners, was able to house individuals experiencing homelessness in six area motels. Feeding community members once they were housed proved to be an ongoing challenge due to vendor inconsistency as well as stringent guidelines around nutrition and requirement for safe food packaging. Nonetheless, continued communication and perseverance on the part of those managing the logistics allowed for the provision of three meals per day to all housed individuals.

Working within the parameters for healthy and safe food handling during the COVID-19 response was a major challenge for the City. To establish a consistent delivery of health and safe foods within this response environment, many individuals were provided the same types of meals every day which they were not pleased about.

The shortage of EOC staff who had prior EOC training and experience was another challenge facing the disaster sheltering and housing mission. Because many of the staff that were working in the EOC under the Homeless Support Services Branch had not worked in an EOC before nor with the homeless population, there was a lack of following standard EOC procedures.

Although resources were able to be obtained, the resource request process was cumbersome and needs to be refined in order to support future disaster operations. While the Homeless Support Service Branch was able to make requests to the EOC, once resource requests were submitted and were being processed, there was a lack of follow- up communication regarding the status of those requests as they were being fulfilled as well as the cost of the resources that were procured. In many instances, requestors did not have visibility on when their requested resources were scheduled for delivery and what the cost of the resources were until they arrived.

This made created a detrimental blind spot for those submitting the requests and planning for the disaster shelter and housing operation.

Overall, the City and County were able to house and feed the populations they were aiming to and have maintained strong relationships between themselves and with businesses and community-based organizations (CBOs) which bolsters their response capabilities for future disasters.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND STEPS TO MEET CHALLENGES

Although the City and County faced challenges with sheltering, they found ways to mitigate those challenges through existing partnerships, communication, and innovative ideas. Due to long standing relationships between the County and the City with regards to working with the homeless population, it took one 30-minute phone call for the City and County to coordinate and come up with a plan, set assignments and formed the JDOC to coordinate the homeless response. A city staffer was embedded into the County EOC which helped facilitate that coordination. Daily morning and afternoon calls were scheduled with the Housing and Human Services Branch of the City's EOC where relevant updates were shared concerning the work being done. These calls also served as an opportunity to efficiently coordinate with the Logistics Branch as the determination was being made to decommission the trailer program.

Because there was already a standing relationship with the homeless population, the JDOC had a solid understanding of many of the most pressing needs individuals experiencing homelessness were faced with during COVID-19. This catalyzed the City's ability to immediately take action and start setting up resources for those individuals. The City moved quickly to get those resources and set up new housing sites. The City rapidly set up four temporary shelters: Parkside Hall shelter, South Hall shelter, Camden Community Center shelter, and Bascom Community Center which had 435 beds combined. Personal protective equipment (PPE) was well stocked and available at all City and County sites. A flyer was created and used for outreach services with the number to a homeless hotline to get individuals the resources they needed. In addition, the City worked closely with businesses and CBOs to establish the Silicon Valley Strong Campaign – an online tool that allows vulnerable populations to identify the food, housing, and other resources that are nearest to their physical location.

Although the trailers did not end up being the best solution for housing, there was strong interdepartmental coordination and communication that went into the initiative. To infuse data into the City's ongoing feeding and housing operations, the EOC's Digital Inclusion Branch developed a Priority Index– a GIS tool for determining where the greatest needs for resources are throughout the region. This tool has yielded significant positive impacts and has enabled the EOC team to drive effectiveness in service delivery.

LESSONS LEARNED & GAPS

It should be understood that homelessness is fueled by a number of systemic factors. Among them are the rising gap between the rich and the poor across communities, the lack of affordable housing, particularly for those at the lowest income levels, and longstanding structural and

racial inequities. These challenges have been compounded by the novel coronavirus pandemic, placing ever-more pressure on the nearly 10,000 individuals County-wide currently experiencing homelessness and the tens-of- thousands more who are at risk of falling into homelessness in the coming months and years.

The 213RRs process is still not set up in a way that is fully useful to the requestor. Adding to the process a piece that provides the person who submitted it with information such as the request was fulfilled, x was delivered and it cost this amount would save time and the hassle of running down the information. Providing appropriate resources and having the appropriate personnel to manage those resources is crucial to them being properly utilized. Training for EOC positions and any fieldwork should be continuous and mandatory for anyone who is being asked to work in a position outside of their normal job tasks.

CONCLUSION

The combination of circumstances surrounding COVID-19 presented never- seen-before obstacles for protecting public health and safety. The City of San José, in close coordination with the County of Santa Clara and other community partners, was able to create and maintain safe disaster housing operations for those among the most vulnerable populations. The coordination and planning that had already been underway between the City and the County was leveraged to take swift action and address the needs of the homeless community. Amid less than perfect systems and a shortage of previously trained response staff, the City exhibited a deep concern for its residents in need and a great sense of self-determination by quickly learning while simultaneously acting. The City demonstrated agility by exploring unconventional ways to provide housing and food for those experiencing homelessness. This allowed for employees who had no prior experience to set up disaster housing. The lessons learned during the COVID-19 response should be codified and incorporated into future planning efforts and reinforced through training and exercise programs. Collaboration, open communication, and acting quickly with purpose were critical components to executing the housing project that was necessitated by COVID-19.

CITY OF SAN JOSE
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CONSTANT ASSOCIATES

COVID-19 PRELIMINARY OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT REPORT (OAR)

SAN JOSÉ OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT