

THE ENQUIRER

June 11, 2011

Cincinnati's plan for homeless shelters takes shape

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Lord's Gym Pastor Kevin Johnson (left) and Lord's Gym Dir. of Haiti Missions Rodger Mishler (right) pray over Darren Treadway, 26. Now homeless, Treadway had been staying at the Drop Inn Center when he walked across the street to the gym. "I just felt the draw to come here," said Treadway, who was just released from the Hamilton County Justice Center on Tuesday. "It's one day at a time," he said. "I'm pretty much starting from rock bottom." / The Enquirer/Carrie Cochran

OVER-THE-RHINE – City council is expected within two weeks to approve a plan that will alter the landscape of Over-the-Rhine and change the way Cincinnati cares for homeless people.

Two social services agencies, City Gospel Mission and the YWCA of Greater Cincinnati, expect to get the OK to move shelters and services for single homeless men and women away from the Washington Park area to the West End and Mount Auburn.

Supporters, ranging from some of the city's powerful businesses to the agencies themselves, say the homeless will be better helped by being allowed to stay in the shelters during the day - when additional health care, addiction and job readiness services will be available.

A handful of advocates for the poor have said it's just another case of displacement and gentrification.

Josh Spring, executive director of the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, said he continues to doubt the designs of Cincinnati Center City Development (3CDC), which is driving the change.

"Its motive is not to help people who are homeless or who will become homeless," he said. "Its motive is to remove people from Over-the-Rhine that get in the way of the gentrification."

The stage is set almost three years after council called for an existing agency, the Cincinnati/Hamilton County Continuum of Care for the Homeless to address what council then termed the "inadequacies of services for single homeless individuals in Cincinnati."

The resulting study, the continuum's Homeless to Homes plan, was approved the following spring. Details were revealed this week by the developer that has been forcing change in Over-the-Rhine, Cincinnati Center City Development (3CDC), and a host of its allies.

City Gospel Mission intends to move from the 1400 block of Elm Street, just north of Washington Park, to the 1800 block of Dalton Avenue in the West End.

It will take with it the Jobs Plus program from Vine Street and the Lord's Gym, clearing another building at the corner of Race and 12th streets at the southeast corner of Washington Park. The mission of 3CDC is to develop residential, retail and entertainment in Over-the-Rhine.

New shelters

Lighthouse on Highland

Address: 2522 Highland Ave., Mt. Auburn

Details: 29 beds, day programs for homeless youths ages 18-24

Process: Program developed, construction in process, planned opening fall 2011

City Gospel Mission Shelter

Address: 1805 Dalton Ave., West End

Details: 76 emergency beds for men, 30 beds for Exodus recovery program

Process: Program developed, site selected, tentative design, awaiting city council approval

YWCA Women's Shelter

Address: 2452 Kinsey Ave., Mt. Auburn

Details: 60 beds, day program

Process: Program developed, site selected, tentative design, awaiting city council approval

Drop Inn Center

Address: 217 W. 12th St., Over-the-Rhine (current location, operating)

Proposed details: 150 beds for men, new services planned

Process: Site selection under way

Talbert House

Address: 2660 Diehl Road, Mt. Airy (current location, operating)

Proposed details: 65 beds for men, new services planned

Process: Site selection underway.

The YWCA will develop a site on Kinsey Avenue in Mount Auburn, across the street from the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, into a 60-bed shelter for homeless women that now exists at the Drop Inn Center.

City Gospel, the YWCA, 3CDC and Vice Mayor Roxanne Qualls all say they're happy. Now they say they need community support. New neighbors for the shelters and rehab programs need to open their arms, they say. And the business leaders on the 33-member 3CDC board, which includes Enquirer president and publisher Margaret E. Buchanan, need to come up with some big bucks, similar to the \$1 million grant Procter & Gamble has kicked in toward the \$22 million to \$25 million price tag.

Stephen Leeper, 3CDC president and chief executive, said he is working with the service agencies to develop a coordinated financing plan and is seeking more funding from public and private sources.

He is confident private contributions "can get us north of \$12 million." What's not raised privately will have to come from

public sources at a time when state, county and city all are facing budget deficits.

Arlene Nolan, executive director of the Drop Inn Center, has seen the plans and sat in on meetings. Homeless to Homes calls for the Drop Inn Center to transform into a 150-bed men's shelter and move to a yet-undetermined location in the urban core. She said the plan doesn't cover the costs of daily operation.

"There's no money in here to keep the lights on, for staff or to run programs," said Nolan, whose organization is cooperating with the continuum and 3CDC but is insistent on moving only if its residents can be better served in a new location.



Del Sharkey of Price Hill listens during Bible study at the Lord's Gym, which happens four times a day. Sharkey is looking forward to its new location, which he said will have more space and more equipment. "It's crazy out there," he said. "This is a refuge and a sanctuary." / The Enquirer/Carrie Cochran

On Monday, Leeper and other Homeless to Homes participants asked Hamilton County commissioners for \$2 million from the county's indigent care levy, the majority of which goes to University Hospital and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center to provide medical care for homeless people in the new shelters.

In a 30-page "Homeless to Homes" presentation Wednesday to the Enquirer editorial board, the indigent

care levy request was listed under the heading of "Operating Funding" that would "cover a portion of the operations of the five emergency shelter facilities for single individuals." They are:

Lighthouse on Highland for homeless youth, City Gospel, YWCA, the Drop Inn Center and Mount Airy Center operated by Talbert House.

Spring said there is good and bad in plan. The Lighthouse shelter and program will better serve the needs the homeless youth, many of whom are on the streets because of sexual identity questions.

Spring said he's been convinced that City Gospel's long-held desire to move and expand its effective program has been met.

"But why pull the women out of the Drop when it is doing a great job?" Spring said. "If 3CDC can't move the Drop, it will weaken it by attrition."

New, larger capacity shelters will cost more to operate than the current smaller configurations. Leeper said a coordinated fund-raising effort will be undertaken and that money would be shared proportionately.

"We want to attack and alleviate problems," such as alcoholism and drug addiction, Leeper said when asked if the \$2 million request for indigent care money would pay for services already provided by the hospitals. "We don't want to rob Peter to pay Paul."

In short, he said, the Homeless to Homes plan would reduce the number of homeless people and lessen their burden on the health care system.

The attempt to redevelop Cincinnati's urban core, including blighted neighborhoods adjacent to the central business district, is similar to efforts that have been undertaken in dozens of U.S. cities over the past 30 years and are ongoing in places such as South Philadelphia and the Moore Square Historic District area of Raleigh, N.C.

William Rohe, a professor and director of the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of North Carolina, is an expert in central city and neighborhood revitalization.

"The first question to ask is, 'how realistic is the proposal?'" Rohe said. "Are there firm financial commitments? Or are they saying 'we're going to write grants'?"

Participating agencies, ranging from City Gospel Mission and the YWCA to the Lord's Gym and Jobs plus, were part of the planning process. Their involvement was important, Rohe said.

"At some point, you have to trust the advocates. If the advocates are saying 'This is better for our clients' you have to believe them, right?"

What to do

Not all panhandlers are homeless. Not all homeless people are panhandlers.

When approached on the street and asked for money, be aware there are frauds - with props such as torn clothing, blankets or pets.

Remember that many people who might approach you for help are suffering from mental health problems, addictions or poverty. Most are harmless.

If you want to help, social service experts suggest contributing to or volunteering with services or charities in the community that offer help.

Experts suggest that you acknowledge the panhandler, and if asked for money respond, "Sorry." Then move purposefully on. Do not allow yourself to be engaged or fumble for and pretend you have no change to give.

In the event you experience or witness aggressive behavior, call 911.

If you go

What: City Planning Commission will hear speakers and discuss recommendations regarding Notwithstanding Ordinance applications for "special assistance" shelters at 1801-05 Dalton Ave., West End, and 2452 Kinsey Ave., Mount Auburn.

When: 9 a.m. June 17.

Where: Two Centennial Plaza, Suite 700, 805 Central Ave.

The leaders of the City Gospel Mission and the YWCA of Greater Cincinnati indeed said the Homeless to Homes plan is better for their clients. Participating agencies and shelters, including the leadership of Talbert House and Lighthouse Youth Services, have signed onto the plan.

The proposed YWCA shelter in Mount Auburn would offer non-dormitory sleeping quarters for 60 women, up from the 42 now available at the Drop Inn Center, said Charlene Ventura, YWCA of Greater Cincinnati executive director. On-site services would address women's mental and physical health needs and provide more individualized case management.

Some Mount Auburn community leaders and business executives were not aware of the planned women's shelter when contacted by the Enquirer. Holly Dorna, president of the Mount Auburn Chamber of Commerce, said no discussions have been held with the chamber's 55-member businesses or the chamber with developers or the YWCA about the site.

"But we are supportive of a women's shelter, which is a fundamental and necessary social service," Dorna said. "The YWCA is an excellent organization that we support. We say, 'Come on down.'"

Qualls and Leeper said the United Way, which moved back into its renovated building, is happy with the YWCA's move into the neighborhood and will share the shelter's parking lot.

City Gospel, which has not received as warm a welcome from some business owners near the chosen new location in Queensgate, would expand to full-day services, in-house medical care and improved sleeping arrangements for homeless men, said president Roger Howell. The mission's bed total would increase from 36 to 76.

The area of West End and Queensgate, where City Gospel, the Lord's Gym and Jobs Plus would relocate, is zoned for general manufacturing use. A 3CDC subsidiary has an offer on the buildings at 1805 Dalton and the adjacent 1211 York St.

The building at 1805 Dalton is a former office building for a heating/air conditioning company that has been vacant for 10 years. The York Street parcel is the former home of a school for disabled children run by social service agency. It's been empty for six years.

In a letter dated May 24 to City Council members, the business owners' attorney wrote that granting a zoning variance would reduce potential for economic development, harm existing businesses and not be safe for agency clients.

"While all laudable programs, (the agencies) are not a part of these economic development plans," wrote attorney Joseph Trauth Jr., asking that an application for a notwithstanding ordinance be denied by the Department of City Planning and Buildings. "Notwithstanding" is a governmental loophole around an existing law.

Leeper said he respected the concerns but generally discounted them. He said physical improvements would be made for traffic flow and pedestrian access.

He said the relocation of services and the shelter is "not contrary" to economic development efforts already under way in Queensgate.

"We want to get people to an employable state," City Gospel Mission's Howell said. "What better economic development is there than that?"