



Office of Mayor Miro Weinberger

MEMORANDUM

To: Development Review Board
From: Mayor Miro Weinberger
Date: June 21, 2022
Re: Emergency Shelter Proposal

We are facing a crisis in addressing the homelessness situation in Chittenden County and in our City. There are now upwards of 250 chronically homeless people in Chittenden County, according to the latest estimates, an increase from roughly 35 people at the lowest point before the pandemic.

As part of my 10-step Action Plan to fulfill the promise of housing as a human right in Burlington, I called for an investment in approximately 30 shelters to create a new low-barrier facility for 2022. The City Council unanimously approved the allocation of federal ARPA for this effort. The Council also approved by a vote of 11-1 the change in use of the subject property from a City parking lot to an emergency shelter. These emergency shelters will offer people, some of whom who had lived in encampments, an appealing alternative where we can closely work with them to find them permanent housing.

Starting on June 30, the State of Vermont will implement more restricted eligibility requirements that will limit eligibility for emergency housing, exacerbating our ongoing homeless crisis.

To be clear, these shelters are the not the single solution to chronic homelessness in our City. But they are a critical component of building our capacity to create emergency shelters as an intermediate step to help people find more permanent, affordable housing.

Building temporary emergency shelters, as we have proposed, represents a new kind of innovative thinking to address a challenging problem. This is an approach that is working in other cities. As documented in a [case study](#) by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, the City of Boston has effectively created “Reimagined Shelters” as part of the city’s public health approach to address homelessness.

- Case Study - “Reimagined Shelters”: Boston used Emergency Solutions Grants from the CARES Act and State and Local Fiscal Recovery funds from the American Rescue Plan to launch three (and eventually four) sites near the encampment that operated as special 24-hour “low-threshold” shelters. Compared to other shelters in the city, these offered more privacy (with no more than a few residents in each room), more freedom (residents could come and go as they wanted), and more empathy for the realities of addiction (substance use was not allowed in the facility but outside use did not expel them from the shelter).

These reimagined shelters are an important part of the preliminary success described in this case study describing Boston's approach to reducing illegal encampments. Here in Burlington, we are on the right track, and now have direct validation that a similar effort is working elsewhere in New England.

As I noted in December, the root of all housing affordability challenges in Burlington and Chittenden County is a severe, long-standing, and intensifying shortage of homes that demands large government investment and dramatic regulatory change to correct. This shortage must be overcome for Burlington to make good on our deeply held community value that decent, stable housing is a human right available to all. Properly serving the most vulnerable – those experiencing chronic homelessness – requires both substantial numbers of new homes and additional system change and focus.

Existing emergency shelters throughout the area are at capacity and, nightly, turning away people who are in need of housing. The proposal before you to build these emergency shelters on Elmwood Avenue takes essential steps to help end chronic homelessness. There can be no more delay. The City must act.

I strongly urge the City's Development Review Board to approve tonight this proposal for an emergency shelter so that the City can move forward and take action to address our record levels of chronic homelessness.

We had planned to open this temporary facility in July. That is no longer viable due, in part, to the delay in permitting. As you consider this issue this evening, remember that we can't begin to address chronic homelessness in our City unless we act. With a permit issued by the DRB tonight, the City will strive to have these critical emergency beds available in September.

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