

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC HOUSING STABILITY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, August 31, 2022

3:00 PM

Council Chambers

Members Present:

Mayor George S. Hansel, Chair
Councilor Bryan Lake
Natalie Darcy, Human Services Manager
Steven Bragdon
Doug Iosue
Jennifer Seher
Stacie Pickford
Joshua Meehan

Staff Present:

Elizabeth Dragon, City Manager
Rebecca Landry, Communications &
Marketing Director/Assistant City Manager
Andy Bohannon, Parks Recreation &
Facilities Director
Steve Stewart, Captain, Keene Police
Department
Don Farquhar, Chief, Keene Fire Department

Members Not Present:

Craig Henderson
Jennifer Alexander

1) Roll call

Chair Hansel called the meeting to order at 3:02 PM.

2) Approval of Minutes of Last Meeting

Councilor Lake motioned for approval of July meeting minutes. Doug Iosue offered a second for the motion. Minutes approved through unanimous vote.

3) Review of Recent Campsite Activity and Available Shelter and Transitional Services

Rebecca said staff are going to discuss what their involvement has been with campsites. Andy Harris, manager of Hannaford's, was not able to be in person at this meeting, but Ms. Landry will be sharing a message from him.

Andy Bohannon, City Parks & Recreation and Facilities Director started. We put together some notes and background of how we currently manage a campsite when we come upon a campsite in one of the parks. Section 58 33b2 camping within our city ordinances, states no person may camp on city land except with permission from the Director of Parks and Recreation who may permit camping on an occasional groups on a case-by-case basis. The first priority is always

safety. Often times we get calls from public regarding a campsite along the trail. Safety is number one for not only the user of the park, but also the staff and the housing insecure as well. Almost all parks and trails are experiencing this at one point or another. Most recently, a site was cleaned up at the Emerald street connection for the rail trail and staff is still working on cleaning it up. Took four people approximately two hours, which equates to eight hours of staff time dedicated to cleaning up trash and debris. Included in that trash and debris was 27 needles. This was right in a very visible location in our downtown. Many of the other locations are not as visible and sometimes we even have sites in our cemeteries. If one was to look at any community survey about Ashuelot River Park, safety is always one of the top issues mentioned and many females report they are not willing to walk alone on the parks and trails.

On maintenance level, he had categorized this as a level one. One or two encampments results in response to the report, investigation and determination of what kind of additional response is required. A determination of whether the site is active or abandoned, whether trucks will be needed to access the site, and to gather an idea of manpower required. This information is entered as a task within the work management system, Cartograph. If the site is active, a call is made to homeless outreach to make a connection and if not outreach is not available, parks and rec staff make the connection. Notice of 24 hours' is provided to the individual and notice is attached right to their tent with a copy of the city ordinance with contact information including resources.

Chair Hansel asked Andy Bohannon how many hours is his staff occupied by this. Mr. Bohannon responded that it ranges and is usually heavier in the spring, tapers off a bit and then end of July we see it pick back up. End of the months tends to pick up because individuals have paid the first three weeks and struggle to pay for the fourth week. He was not able to pull exact data, but knows off hand they are six sites they have cleaned up this particular calendar year. He added that they do not have someone that goes out and actively looks for this. If they were to do that right now, there are likely a few that have not been addressed. In Wheelock Park, down off the bike trail headed out towards the highway is a common area and is one that is not maintained regularly. As such, staff do not regularly go unless there is a complaint.

Chair Hansel asked if this activity is having a positive result. What happens to the individuals? Mr. Bohannon responded that this year, they have had some of the most positive experiences, actually two within the same week. There was a group of three individuals in a campsite. The clean-up for that site required four pickup trucks full of debris (not personal belongings just debris). The individuals took their belongings and went elsewhere and were not interested in City services. Later, Parks and Rec found a site on the Jonathan Daniels trail and it was those same three individuals. They did pursue assistance from Natalie Darcy and were able to obtain housing for those individuals.

Notice states 24 hours, but they will often request 48 hours to connect with individuals. Mr. Bohannon grants that and is very receptive to giving time to allow individuals to obtain assistance. Ultimately, sometimes that does not happen.

Councilor Lake asked Mr. Bohannon if he through there has been an increase over the years in the number of people camping.

Mr. Bohannon responded yes. The majority is often times from someone new to town and so the conversation relates to where have you been, how did you get here, etc. Common responses received include needing to get away from drug-infested locations, which the campsite allows. Mr. Bohannon will often then point out that camping is not allowed as it is against City Ordinances and works to try to connect them with services. He noted that he has often observed that the tents and sleeping bags used by the individuals are brand new and probably donated. Brand new items, used for a night or two and then abandoned and end up in the trash. It is frustrating and not a good use of someone's good will intention.

Doug Iosue asked if Mr. Bohannon would be able to give an estimate of percentage of time people are amenable to services. Mr. Bohannon responded that it is roughly 50/50. Stacie Pickford spoke and thanked others for the work they do. She asked Mr. Bohannon what he thought were the top barriers to the work you do when people do not want to seek help. Mr. Bohannon responded that often these individuals do not want to be in shelter; they want to be outside. His department and staff do not get into past with them. However, sometimes they share anyways. Many have personal reasons why they may not be able or comfortable being in shelter system. If one is to look around site, it is often clear there is a drug issue. Mr. Bohannon thinks services related to drug and alcohol services are imperative. Mr. Bohannon and his team often rely on Kevin MacLean for help on that front as his staff are trained in that, but are certainly not experts. It is common for his staff to receive harassment while cleaning up sites, which he noted was something that actually occurred earlier that day. Mr. Bohannon believes that stronger training, improved services and more community awareness are necessary. He has participated in national efforts to share ideas around methods and ways to address and is always trying and willing to learn more.

Ms. Pickford asked what the average length of stay was and whether he had noted that there are frequent repeated stays by the same individual.

Mr. Bohannon responded that since these instances are occurring on City property and in a park, the stay is generally short and often noticed within 24-72 hours. Longest he has worked with one individual has been about a week and was due to the individual experiencing delays in lining up services. He stated he is not going to displace someone for one night when services are in process.

Rebecca Landry asked whether people give an answer or inkling as to why they choose not to use the shelters and whether he could provide an update on the portapotty.

Mr. Bohannon responded that a portapotty was placed in the skate park in mid—June. They worked with company to do so despite their reluctance due to history of damage. By mid-August, it was destroyed. The door was broken off, toilet paper rolls strewn, garbage

everywhere, and the toilet seat was damaged. It was removed and lasted a lot longer than he anticipated.

Mr. Bohannon added that as for why people decline services, they do not want to be in shelter. They do not want to be under someone's watchful eye and abide by the rules of the shelter or are fearful for one reason or another or due to trauma.

Mr. Bohannon was asked if they often encounter children. He responded that yes, they do occasionally encounter that, and there is usually a much more proactive approach where DCYF is often called in much quicker. He noted that parents are often more willing to go and find shelter.

Councilor Lake asked if Mr. Bohannon had recommendations for additional city services for those individuals that do not want or cannot take services that might help lessen the impact to the individuals and the environment. Mr. Bohannon pointed out how crucial the mental health connectivity was and the importance of having someone who can navigate and is able to connect to that world to help guide them to a lifestyle change. Behavior management is a significant portion of that and any individual in that role will require a particular set of skills and training. Most individuals they encounter do not want to be there and want to get better, but struggle in knowing the steps to take.

Mr. Bohannon added that the trash piece is huge because they are usually in remote sites and the trash is everywhere. The exposed human waste is significant and creates a hazard not just in clean up, but also because it often ends up in our watersheds. If the city was able to help one person or create a partnership with MFS and create those inroads with those individuals, he believes it would make a significant difference.

Captain Stewart spoke and stated the Police Department experience was similar to what Mr. Bohannon outlined. Generally, the PD is rarely involved in most of what Mr. Bohannon and his team do. The Police Department has more experience with the bigger sites. Captain Stewart said he has been out there personally and spoken with many of these people and they all have different things that have gone wrong in their lives whether it be substance misuse, trauma, mental health issues, etc.

Their resistance to services often lies in their avoidance or lack of agreement with rules, lack of freedom, having been asked to leave previously and no longer welcome. All of these things make it difficult to see where to go with them or how to help them. He noted that in his experience motivation is often lacking. Captain Stewart said he has seen a mix of local people who are in between and down and out and those that just drift into town with no why or reasoning as to how they ended up in Keene. In some other cases, they were sent here from other towns who did not have the resources and have since stayed. Most of the complaints received by the Keene Police Department are relating to the trails and bike paths and due to panhandling that result in park users being uncomfortable.

Chair Hansel asked are there any things that City of Keene could help with. Captain Stewart responded that the key is getting at the root of the problems. Doing so, would in turn, address many of the quality of life issues that homelessness impacts.

Stacie Pickford asked Captain Stewart how often he comes across individuals who had drifted into town from Cheshire County jail. He responded that while he has seen those instances, more often, it is someone who has been unsuccessful in substance treatment and transitioned to the woods after being asked to leave a shelter like Hundred Nights.

Jen Seher asked Captain Stewart is there was a social worker or someone in social services on the team at Keene Police Department. Captain Stewart responded that there is no one on the team with those skills so they rely on referrals to area organizations in those instances.

Ms. Seher asked Captain Stewart if something like that would that be beneficial. Captain Stewart stated he could certainly see the benefits of it. The logistics of carving out a specific role and vetting out duplication of services might be a challenge, but he can definitely see the benefit. Captain Stewart was asked by Ms. Pickford if the Police Department finds there are many people camping in their vehicles and how often does that occur or whether that was hard to quantify. Captain Stewart responded that it does certainly happen. It is hard to quantify, but does happen. They bounce around a lot from parking lot to parking lot.

Chair Hansel asked the group if there were any further questions. With none, he thanked Captain Stewart for his time.

Rebecca Landry noted that Chief Farquhar attended, but would be unable to stay the full-time and introduced him next.

Chief Farquhar thanked Ms. Landry and the group for the invitation to attend. In terms of first response, challenges of note are that in these campsites there are no streetlights resulting in dark areas, no house numbers, and no streets. All of these make it significantly harder to find people. The response can be difficult and the remote locations can lead to delays. Timely response is especially imperative with opioid response as time is of essence. If people are mixing drugs, and are administered Narcan, it can cause heart issues and calls can become very complex very quickly requiring sizable resources and become hard on the department. Calls can be difficult on the people involved and the first responders. He noted that in general, most people are happy to see fire department members and are often willing to get help so they rarely run into any sort of physical interactions. Great deal of good will, etc.

Chair Hansel asked how many calls are to places that do not have a street address.

Farquhar- calls tend to be episodic. There are often highs and lows based on dosing of opioids and when a strong dose comes in, we see more calls. Anecdotal average is 4-6 calls/week and sometimes it jumps to 6-8calls per weekend. He noted that he could certainly provide some more specific numbers. Chair Hansel requested percentage and data.

Councilor Lake posed an open question as he has heard quote a bit of commentary around needles. He asked if there were publically available needle disposal.

Chief Farquhar responded that the Food Kitchen has needle depository boxes in the bathroom. It sometimes does have the paradoxical effect of people using in the bathrooms. Therefore, risk management is important. He added that IF we could find a meaningful or actionable way to concentrate where those needles are, that would be very helpful. Chief Farquhar also suggested strategies to reduce accidental needle sticks.

Chair Hansel asked if he could also provide needle sticks numbers, which Chief Farquhar agreed to provide.

Stacie asked what the recommendation for public is if they come across needles. Chief Farquhar noted that as a private citizen, he would not touch it and call the police department or fire department. Longer standing encampments make it difficult because of terrain, natural debris resulting in hidden items and inadvertent sticks.

Ms. Pickford asked if it was fair to say there has been a significant increase in the past two years. Chief Farquhar responded that he has only been in his role from early spring to today. That noted, it does seem to be moving up and in speaking with senior officers, it is fair to categorize that this it he most intense that they have seen. Chief Farquhar was thanked for his time. Josh Meehan asked if there a regular census of the encampment performed. Chief Farquhar responded that the City is not doing any sort of census.

Chair Hansel opened the floor to Natalie Darcy to speak on transitional services.

Natalie Darcy discussed the process. When individuals come in, they are taken in and their staff tries to understand where they are coming from. Families are of utmost concern because there are kids involved. First option is to go to shelters and look for space. If space is available- a time to meet with shelter staff is scheduled and they meet with them. If no space is available, they arrange for hotel stays. Occasionally, the individuals are able to pay for a portion for their stay. During the month of August, there had ten different hotel rooms through three different hotels. There was no space available in the shelters. Unfortunately, they lost one hotel. The manager was so upset by an incident that he will no longer rent rooms to City of Keene clients because of that incident. Ms. Darcy noted that she had another call from a manager today that was upset because a tenant brought in an unregistered dog. There is often an extra charge for the dog and they make that clear to them. Hotel agreements are given and outlined to the clients and clients are required to sign. Unless the hotel says it is ok, they generally do not allow pets because of the damage that some of the pets can/have caused. Ms. Darcy noted that they cannot afford to lose any more hotels. Unfortunately, when these things happen, it reduces capacity for all. Her recommendation would be find more transitional housing where mental health issues can be addressed. Hotels do allow some individuals to have certified service animals as long as they are certified. This does not include therapy pets.

The main issue right now is hotels are being booked out on weekends because of colleges and weather/leaves. This significantly limits options available for people in need of housing. Chair Hansel noted that he would make sure her recommendations are noted.

Ms. Landry asked Ms. Darcy with incident previously mentioned, what was the nature of the abuse to the property? The individual had been found unconscious and had been huffing gasoline in his hotel room and had an open container of gasoline in the hotel room with him along with two unauthorized guests.

Elizabeth Dragon wanted to response to Jennifer's earlier questions. Ms. Dragon noted that the City has been having conversations on how to incorporate mental health services and police services. Chief Russo has been working with MFS the past few years and while we had a great relationship between the organizations, we have not been able to move that initiative forward as social workers are lacking. Conversations have been happening on how else we might address that. Another thing they are looking at is a position in Natalie's office, in which the job description is being revised to include outreach. City has a great a partnership with Kevin and Southwestern Community Services. We are trying to make stronger connections with the three shelters and the City.

As part of that, we have revised the MOU to talk about ways to strengthen that. They want information on how are we determining where the individuals are coming from, where they go, what services were received, etc. The City asked the State to become part of their homeless reporting agency. Natalie has agreed to take on the training and confidentiality agreements to take that on.

Other thing is that The State of NH had sued regarding the opioid issue. This council knows we received 15% of that as part of that reward. It is not a lot of money. We complained that it was not a lot of money. As a result, they put Ms. Dragon on the commission. This commission is looking at giving out grants for the larger awards. She has asked Chief Russo to look at the grant application. Chief Russo just retired today and Sept 9 is the deadline so it will not be for this round. City of Laconia has had an outreach person that works at the PD but they follow up on all the substance use calls and connects them with resources as well as provides tracking on them. We are far from having a proposal to put forward, but these are things that are in the works and have funding sources have been identified.

Chair Hansel thanked Ms. Dragon, notified that he will have to leave, and asked Ms. Landry to take over as chair.

Ms. Landry discussed that Andy Harris is store manager for Keene Hannaford Store and came to speak to the City recently. Overall message has been that his approach has been to try to help the person rather than just call the police for someone stealing.

Rebecca Landry read two e-mails from Andy Harris testifying to his experience and views as manager of Hannaford's including his approach to try first to help people when they try to leave the store with stolen goods; his experience involving people stealing, destroying property, and using panhandling money to buy alcohol; and a positive outcome including four current employees that were previously homeless. In his message he also suggested signage to dissuade the public from giving funds to panhandlers.

Ms. Landry asked if anyone had any more questions or comments.

Ms. Pickford asked if there is a city ordinance concerning panhandling. Captain Stewart responded that there is no City Ordinance regarding panhandling. He noted that there is not likely a legal one in the country as most of the courts regard that as free speech and protected speech. Only way to address it is in regards to the manner in which they are panhandling (intimidation, aggressive, etc.).

Ms. Seher asked if there was or if Ms. Darcy could provide an average cost that the city pays for hotels rooms per month/ week. Ms. Darcy responded that it ranges from \$1100-\$1300/week. That cost is in addition to the monies that the city puts out for shelter services.

Ms. Landry opened it for public comment.

Joy, member of party for social liberation, 36 Ellis Court. He stated that it seems quite clear that you have laid out all the issues, difficult of access, difficulty of legally addressing the issues, community services challenges, and the unacceptable conditions, such as shelter, lack of freedom and how anyone of us would be unwilling to accept those conditions if they came from our mortgage company. Believes that we should extend the same humanity to these people and we ought to recognize that the only proper way to address this is to expand housing options for these people. If you do not have a home to go to at the end of the night and know that your rights will be respected and addressing the basic needs of individuals, we will never address this issue as a community.

Tom Julius, Gilsum, NH but employed in Keene for 40 years and is the chair of Monadnock Interfaith Project (MIP). They are focusing on housing as a topic in our community. Would like to thank the city of Keene for posting signs directing people to public restrooms. MIP brought this topic to City of Keene some time ago after hearing people's concerns. Public signs are emblematic of the City's willingness to respond and the impact that comes, as people are willing to focus on solutions. Good things happens when local government are responsive to ideas that come from citizens. He thanked everyone for leaning into this and getting it done. He expressed his tremendous gratitude for the responders working with unsheltered people in wholehearted and compassionate ways.

He noted that he has been a member of church in Keene for many years and one of his fellow members who knows MIP is working on housing ideas sent an e-mail in the past few weeks. He

obtained her consent to read it, she says, “I am gathering information for resources currently available for people living out of their car. Son will no longer have a place to live after 9 days. Had a major expense for his car and has concluded that living out of his car is his best option. Son has various mental health challenges. Our son has been successful on several fronts, full time job, car, case manager he trusts and a good family relationship but had not been able to find affordable housing in this area. He has been at the top waiting list for a studio apartment for months. Would appreciate legal, safe and sanitary places he could park at night while waiting for housing.”

Mr. Julius points out that this is an experience of real people in our community. Exemplifies for need of variety of housing options from safe tenting, to shelters, to coordinated services and access to more housing. He urged all to keep thinking at levels of scale from concrete doable solutions to coordination of civic, county, and social service groups addressing housing stability and thinking in the results, focused systemic ways to do something.

Ms. Pickford asked if he had found a place to park. Ms. Landry encouraged Mr. Julius to connect the family with Ms. Darcy, to which he replied that he had.

Mike Hall, administer of Keene Unitarian Universalist Church. His background is in substance use, through his work has gotten to know many affected individuals, and strongly believes it would be a good idea if the committee works towards getting a social worker to liaise between the city and people. Mr. Hall mentioned that Phil Wyzick is leading committee on trauma informed communities. He urged more interaction. He urged the group to be careful, that unless we know otherwise, assuming that it was unsheltered people who damaged the portapotty. He appreciates learning more of what the city does and does want to ask to get back to stability of housing. He pointed out the numerous concrete things that we can do and while some may be temporary, some are more long-standing and permanent.

Ms. Landry responded that the group has met 4-5 times. Moving forward they will begin to look at recommendations and start talking about the ways in which we would like to move forward to make recommendations to city council. She made note that it would be broader than just covering housing issues for unsheltered folks.

4) Communications and Supporting Documents

With no further comments from the public, Ms. Landry noted that they did receive messages from Ms. Seher with some interesting resources that we all look at. It was included in the agenda packet. Would encourage folks to look at that.

Have also received a number of post-cards. Copies are available in the agenda packet and available to the public.

5) Future Agenda Topics

Ms. Pickford wanted to suggest access to mental health, building more family housing, NIMBY (not in my backyard mentality) and how to fight that.

Mr. Iosue asked if someone was putting together an outline of ideas and recommendations for a summary in writing and beginning in the September meeting. Ms. Landry said she has been collecting them and taking notes and will submit a list next month representing topics covered and high points.

Josh Meehan added while talking about housing solutions, discussions include the housing first model, which is recognized as most successful method with low barrier access. Think it might be helpful to learn a little more about housing first as we consider housing solutions. Ms. Landry agreed to include that.

Ms. Seher added that everyone should keep minds open to being person first and talking to people where they are at. Housing first can mean figuring out who the person is first. Most people who are struggling do not want to be identified as someone with a mental health issue. If we are really talking about people at risk, we need to figure how to talk about people in the most respectful way possible with the fewest barriers possible.

Ms. Landry agreed and noted the suggestion.

Next meeting is next Wednesday. Given it is only one week away and Ms. Landry would be away at a conference, she wondered if the group would entertain next meeting date no sooner than second Wednesday of September?

Ms. Landry noted that September 14th will be the next meeting date unless a quorum is not possible.

6) **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Co-Chair Landry adjourned the meeting at 4:25 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Amanda Trask, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by,
Rebecca Landry, Assistant City Manager/Communications & Marketing Director