

Fresno City Council to review homelessness issues

By George Hostetter

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Officials today are expected to deliver a simple message to the City Council on homelessness in Fresno: Much has been done, much remains to do.

"We're offering opportunities to those who want to take advantage of them," City Manager Bruce Rudd said.

Added Kelli Furtado, Mayor Ashley Swearingin's deputy chief of staff, on community-wide efforts to help the homeless: "We are making progress."

The council and administration staff are slated to hold a homelessness workshop at today's council meeting. Its focus will be a six-month report card on last summer's high-profile razing of three downtown encampments.

The workshop doesn't have a timed start. The council has a light agenda, so the workshop could begin soon after the meeting convenes at 8:30 a.m. The council typically takes no public comment during workshops.

The camps were on Santa Clara Street by the Poverello House, west of E Street in what used to be Germantown and along H Street south of Ventura Avenue.

The camps were torn down and personal belongings stored at city expense during three separate sweeps. Nearly 470 tons of material were removed.

City officials said the camps had become a threat to public health and safety. Uncontrolled fire was a routine scourge. Police said criminals used the camps for running guns and pushing drugs, often preying on the weakest camp residents.

City officials say 110 of the approximately 250 displaced people have been moved into temporary or permanent housing. Another 45 to 50 still sleep in the area, but scatter during daylight. City officials say it's hard to pin down the fate of the other 100 or so. They suggest some have left town, some went home to family and some found help through the Poverello House or Fresno Rescue Mission.

And some no doubt settled in nooks and crannies throughout Fresno, city officials admit.

A number of agencies, nonprofits and homeless advocates have been involved with helping those who lived in the three camps. Much of the work is being done by the Fresno Housing Authority, Fresno First Steps Home (a homelessness-fighting nonprofit dear to Swearingin's heart), the Fresno Madera Continuum of Care and City Hall.

"I have never seen a more coordinated effort," Police Chief Jerry Dyer said. "It's paying big dividends."

Housing Authority Chief Executive Preston Prince said government and nonprofits began reforming their approach to the homeless challenge several years ago.

"We now have a better understanding of who the homeless are," Prince said. "We have a more thoughtful approach."

City Hall created a homeless task force in the wake of the camp-razings with twin missions: ensure the camps don't return and help the homeless so inclined to get off the streets. Four police officers, two code enforcement officers and two employees from the community sanitation division are directed by Sgt. Robert Dewey.

Dyer said task force members are on the streets seven days a week. All wear a body camera to record contacts with the homeless.

"They do wake-ups, getting people up and moving them along," Dyer said. "They have gotten to know people on the streets on a personal level. We get very little resistance."

Dyer said razing the downtown camps "caused a certain amount of displacement" to other parts of the city. He said he's seen no evidence that the camps' criminals have set up shop in similarly blatant fashion in other neighborhoods.

People living and working in the neighborhoods empathize with the plight of the homeless, but are relieved to see the camps go.

"It's a lot better now," said Jovany Lopez, who lives in the 300 block of E Street in old Germantown. "Now my daughter can go outside."

James Diaz, owner of Diaz Auto Repair on E Street near the Poverello House, said he wishes city officials had acted sooner.

"It's good to see City Hall putting pressure on things a little better," said Diaz, 77. Looking ahead, city officials say they are exploring ways to build more emergency housing. Homeless advocates have long questioned the wisdom of razing camps when the displaced have no place to go.

City Hall also is exploring if there's a connection between recycling centers and concentrations of homelessness. The concern is whether the centers with a lot of business from the homeless end up destabilizing neighborhoods. Tougher regulation of the centers may come.

Prince said the Housing Authority will continue to expand its homeless registry and fine-tune its "vulnerability index." These tools enable the Authority to build a census of Fresno's homeless and identify the most frail wherever they are in the city.

Furtado said the administration will soon propose spending about \$1 million on housing assistance for the homeless.

"We've learned that 'housing first' works," Furtado said. "We need to keep at it."

If you go:

What: Fresno City Council workshop on homelessness

When: 8:30 a.m. today or soon thereafter

Where: Fresno City Hall Council Chamber, 2600 Fresno Street

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6272 or ghostetter@fresnobee.com. Read his City Beat blog at fresnobee.com/city-beat.

Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/02/12/3766302/fresno-city-council-to-review.html#storylink=cpy>