

May 18, 2020

To: Pierce County Executive Bruce Dammeier, Pierce County Council, and Pierce County Human Services

From: Tacoma-Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness

## **Recommendations for strategic uses of CARES Act Relief Fund**

### **Who We Are:**

The Tacoma/Pierce County Coalition to End Homelessness is a loose network of individuals, non-profit agencies, government agencies, and community businesses working together to serve people experiencing homelessness. Our end goal is to help folks establish safe housing as quickly as possible and help them to retain that housing so their homeless episode is short and never repeated. We also work to address many of the factors that drive homelessness. Each week, 50-100 coalition participants meet and more than 400 people are on the Coalition's email distribution list.

### **Why This Letter:**

At our May 8th meeting, in response to a verbal request for recommendations from Pierce County Director of Human Services Heather Moss, we generated a list of actions/approaches the county could take when distributing CARES Act Relief Fund to assist persons experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. During this meeting, we did not seek consensus on the strategies, but generated a range of options for consideration by the County when making funding decisions using these targeted dollars.

Our recommendations, not in a prioritized order, address the following:

1. New Shelters
2. Safe Parking Lots
3. Hygiene Resources
4. Racial Equity and Homelessness
5. Behavioral and Physical Health Resources

We urge you to prioritize strategies that both respond to the immediate COVID-19 crisis and secure sustainable assets for meeting housing/shelter needs beyond the December 2020 CARES Act Relief Fund spending deadline. Some of the strategies listed below may not fit the criteria for this specific relief program. We encourage you to revisit these recommendations as you determine the distribution of other allocated funds to meet the needs of vulnerable residents in Pierce County.

As service providers and housing advocates, we generated these recommendations with strong awareness of current lacks in Pierce County's response to the dual crises of COVID-19 and homelessness: all homeless shelters are continually full (and congregate shelters are high risk for spread of infection); hygiene options are limited to non-existent, making infection even more likely; communities of color are disproportionately represented among those living homeless; and there are very limited behavioral/physical health resources available, especially in smaller cities and the unincorporated rural areas of the county.

### **How to Connect With Us:**

We offer these ideas for your consideration now, and as an invitation to a continuing dialogue with us on practical measures to ensure adequate shelter for all in Pierce County. You are welcome to join us at any of our weekly meetings, currently online, from 9-11 a.m. Our meeting agendas, online access information, minutes, and ZOOM recordings are available at [www.pchomeless.org](http://www.pchomeless.org).

Thank you for your time and work in caring for our community across Pierce County during this unprecedented time. We look forward to connecting more in the future. For any questions, feel free to email [info@pchomeless.org](mailto:info@pchomeless.org).



## 1. New Shelters

With all shelter options currently full, we need to increase a variety of shelter options across the county:

- **Shift from large congregate shelters to smaller distributed shelters.** Congregate shelters make safe distancing very challenging. We suggest that creating future shelters on that model is not advisable due to safety. Smaller, distributed shelters, and development of single occupancy room low-income housing, are preferable, more respectful of human needs, and will prepare us better for future health emergencies. Many Coalition participants suggested the following strategy:

**Purchase hotel or motel to repurpose as a shelter option for very low-income persons.** If the County is planning to invest significant money in establishing an isolation and quarantine facility, it makes sense to purchase buildings that can be used for this pandemic response now, that could become available as SRO housing in the future. Purchasing such resources now, using the CARES Act Relief Fund, could offer time to develop a responsible plan to transfer such property--to a land bank, land trust, nonprofit or housing authority--ensuring available low-income housing in perpetuity.

- **Establish a county-sanctioned campground for unsheltered tent campers:** This should be close to transportation options and could provide a safer and healthier option for those currently relying on informal street encampments—especially during this pandemic. Organizing a tent campground for sustainability would require dedicated management, but need not be 24/7 paid management. Options for self-management and community building are possible and the county could learn from successful models elsewhere. CARES Act Relief Fund monies could be used to establish these sites throughout the county and fund proper hygiene measures (like porta-potties, handwashing stations, and trash services). The Camp Hope legal encampment in New Mexico, described in the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty’s 2017 report, “[Tent City, USA](#),” might serve as a model of how this can be successfully done. This low-cost option could be maintained after the end of CARES Act Relief Fund and can also be shut down at minimal cost.
- **Replicate the Tacoma Stability Site or TEMS approach throughout the county:** While this has provided needed shelter option, as a long-term strategy it is unsustainable as it would require major general fund or other support after CARES Act Relief Fund dollars are spent.

## 2. Safe Car Lots:

This idea has percolated for some time among shelter advocates as a promising alternative to current unsafe street parking and “move on” citations for those living homeless in their cars. With the COVID-19 social distancing requirements, providing a secure, managed site for parking cars (overnight and/or for an extended period) offers a safer alternative to congregate shelters, as well as a safe temporary option while seeking more permanent housing. Coalition participants offered the following specific recommendations:

- **Model a program after the Santa Barbara area program, [New Beginnings Safe Parking Program](#).** This multiple site program provides a manual for planning and sustainable operations.
- **Consider Land as a Resource for Shelter Options:** To carry out this strategy, the county could designate county-owned surplus land for development of a safe lot, buy an existing parking lot, purchase a campground for possible longer-term car camping, and partner with faith communities (who are interested in sharing their parking lots, but need to secure physical resources for hygiene provision--showers, toilets, water, laundry, security, and case management aspects. Such spaces could also be leased for a short term to respond to the health crisis.
- **Provide access to existing coordinated entry resources, as well as CTI navigators to assist with health, employment possibilities, assistance in gaining more permanent housing.** Safe car lots could require a small nightly fee, as many living in their cars have jobs but are unable to pay for an apartment. Further, such places could engage the talents of persons currently living in cars as “camp hosts” who could receive a more permanent



and free site in exchange for managing the site for some number of hours. For the longer term, the county could consider a safe car lot as a diversion program, as some people living in cars do not need long term assistance.

- **Partner with service-providers to get the project off the ground quickly:** Given the short timeline for spending the CARES Act Relief Fund dollars, this option would need some non-profit organizations to come forward quickly that might be willing to manage such a project. Coalition participants are willing to meet for further conversation and planning if this idea gains traction.
- **Strategic planning to meet unsheltered needs throughout the county:** One benefit of safe lots is the relative ease of setting one up (of course needing to consider management/staffing, liability issues) and dismantling. Such lots could be of various sizes based on what those who oversee it can manage, but also have sites spread throughout the County.

### 3. Hygiene Resources:

Knowing that few resources exist to meet the hygiene needs of persons living homeless in Pierce County, the Coalition generated a list of basic resource needs, all of which will be ongoing, but some of which could be resourced by the county procuring physical assets that remain available after CARES Act Relief Fund dollars are spent. Resources include:

- **Mobile shower units** (See Lava Mae’s online [toolkit](#) as an example)
- **Mobile toilets**
- **Toilets and handwashing stations**--plumbed for safe car lots and urban campgrounds.
- **Buying a laundromat** (could be accessed through a voucher program) would meet a pressing need.
- **Purchasing a large supply of hygiene supplies** to share with unsheltered residents—including soap, gloves, masks, sanitizing wipes, etc.

### 4. Racial Equity and Homelessness

Given the findings from the 2018 SPARC report that communities of color are disproportionately represented among those living homeless in Pierce County and those at risk of homelessness, and aware of the current national data on disproportionate numbers of persons of color contracting COVID-19, Coalition participants urge the county to make funding decisions supporting the expressed sentiment of communities of color of “nothing about us without us.” Recommendations include:

- **Ensure that projects using CARES Act Relief Funds include measurable outcomes** that demonstrate a commitment to racial equity in planning and access to services.
- **Use existing data** such as the SPARC report and ongoing service data needs to help develop service priorities with communities of color.
- **Whenever possible provide people of color with diversion services to prevent homeless outcomes.** This includes more extensive rental and utility assistance, and partnering with other funding sources to sustain this longer-term strategy.
- **Make sure that organizations providing rental assistance devote focused attention to the needs of communities of color** and that these outcomes are measured.
- **Direct funds to making clients of color “paid content experts”** in providing feedback on how programs are meeting their needs. Such funding can help individuals build capacity to pursue more stable housing options.
- **Ensure that organizations run by people of color and serving these communities are included in funding outcomes.** Build new capacity for small nonprofits such as churches to access funds and administrative support including data gathering and evaluation. Consider establishing itinerant data/administrator/grant support persons who can supplement administrative capacity in small organizations.



## 5. Behavioral and Physical Health Resources

Aware of the lacks within Pierce County in responding to the COVID-19 challenges for people living homeless, and the ongoing crisis of behavioral health within the county, Coalition participants identified a wide range of needs that could be met in part with CARES Act Relief Fund monies. Some recommendations echo strategies described earlier in this document, but here have a specific focus on health needs.

- **Promote Safe Access to Residential programs:** Provision of more PPE, better screening, etc., might help these programs get more comfortable with accepting referrals.
- **Strengthen Ability to Safely Communicate with Clients:**
  - Consider purchase of phones with mobile data for homeless folks to access online services. Could also secure tablets for those in homes, but must be able to access the internet.
  - Consider expanding the Pierce Transit free WIFI pilot program. Also consider partnering with the Washington State Broadband Office that is offering drive-in hot-spots associated with a variety of state libraries, utility districts, education offices (with help from private funding). See [www.driveinwifi.wa.gov](http://www.driveinwifi.wa.gov) for more information.
  - Establish phone booths that have privacy and charging stations either in shelters, safe camping, or sanitation stations.
  - Partner with private or nonprofit groups to provide technical support and to help folks sign up for phone/IT support.
- **General recommendations for needed resources to provide COVID-related health services throughout the county:**
  - Establish hotel-based programs that could be used to access services (offer hygiene, WIFI, and/or access to a landline).
  - Purchase Mobile van/station to serve those in encampments with mobile sanitation and the ability to be 6ft apart.
  - Create reliable transportation options for in-person appointments at social service agencies.
  - Establish Telehealth stations that are mobile and/or that are available throughout the county.
  - Expand LIHI-type housing for folks coming out of treatment and/or hospitals. (Could include a service trailer with nursing or counseling capacity).
  - Offer additional medical screening options to help folks access residential programs.
  - Establish a county-wide process to assist those living homeless to gain needed IDs or documentation needed to access medical/mental health care.
  - Allocate resources to existing behavioral health or medical clinics that would allow folks to keep the 6ft distancing, sanitation stations, and/or hygiene/PPE.
  - Create program and protocol for hospitals, crisis centers, jails to give 30 days of medications and determine better workflows to help people coming out of institutions gain quicker access to mental health services.

