

## THE COMMUNITY ISSUES FORUM RETURNS VIA LIVE STREAMING - JOSH SPRING PROVIDES AN UPDATE ON HOW HOMELESS FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS HAVE FARED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC-by Bill Woods

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How have the homeless fared during the COVID-19 Pandemic? After a hiatus, the Community Issues Forum returned on May 21st with a live streaming presentation by Josh Spring. While most of us stayed home during this health crisis, the Executive Director of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition described how families and individuals without homes have coped with this situation.

The Homeless Coalition explained Spring, with its sixty member organizations involved in sheltering and providing services to the homeless, has taken the leadership in addressing the special problems confronting its client base during the Pandemic. As the state of Ohio established guidelines to stop the spread of the Coronavirus in March, it became apparent that existing shelters for homeless individuals and families were not equipped as physical spaces to provide the social distancing requirements. It was critical to find appropriate alternatives.

An initial requirement was the establishment of a "quarantine zone" where homeless individuals could go who tested positive for the virus. The Coalition asked the City to take this action, and the Over-the-Rhine Recreation Center was selected as the building to serve as the quarantine zone. Having such a facility, not only allowed the isolation of people who tested positive, but also it opened up space in the shelters for proper social distancing.

The biggest step taken by the Coalition, declared Spring, was initiating the transfer of homeless families from the shelters to hotels in this area. With the cooperation and support of the United



Way and the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, this transfer was accomplished. Although families were the initial priority for hotel placements, a number of single individuals have also received these accommodations. Spring noted that at least four hundred people are now being housed in this way. This innovative emergency initiative is not cheap. Spring estimates the cost for this housing is \$800,000 a month. Fortunately, the County quickly allocated a large portion of its emergency federal aid to this priority, and funds were

also provided by GCF and the United Way.

Meanwhile, the Department of Housing and Urban Development has been very slow in allocating the emergency shelter assistance that was included in the Cares' Act passed by Congress. These funds are badly needed to pay for the ongoing emergency accommodations and services for the homeless during this period, and Spring advised that calls or letters to our

Senators and Congressmen and HUD itself would be helpful. He also noted that City officials require a nudge from citizens to urge that they have a plan ready to implement once the Cares' Act funds arrive. In the terms of the legislation, emphasized Spring, most of these federal dollars should pass quickly from the City to the shelters and homeless services.

Beyond the planning and administration that went into putting in place the emergency housing for the homeless, a number of other services needed during this Pandemic also required daily coordination by members of the Coalition. Spring praised the valiant work and daily cooperation of the sixty-member organizations, and said their efforts to date had succeeded in preventing an outbreak of COVID-19 cases within the homeless population under their care.

The next phase of the Coalition's work in terms of COVID-19 is to plan in order to be prepared for a second phase of the virus. Having sufficient testing in place is certainly one priority. As the Coalition's planning group kicks off its work, noted Spring, one idea that has surfaced is utilizing federal grant money to actually purchase a hotel. One critical problem that is already demanding attention in the last two months, he further described, is a growing number of homeless people who are now living outdoors or on the street. The sudden loss of jobs and an economy with families and individuals living with few resources will also cause increased poverty and homelessness.

Homelessness, with or without a Pandemic, declared Spring, is unacceptable. One long-term solution, the creation of more affordable housing, is critical, but the Pandemic has slowed down a major initiative of the Coalition to do just that. The City Charter Amendment proposal to properly fund the Affordable Housing Trust fund will not be on this November's ballot. Spring explained that the backers of the proposal realized that collecting the needed signatures to qualify it for a vote was not a realistic goal during this public health crisis. He emphasized, however, that the campaign would move ahead, and that the May 2021 Primary was the new date established for a public vote.