

Our City Leads

A plan to reduce the number of homeless people in Salt Lake City and improve safety in the neighborhood near homeless service providers

CROSSROADS
center



Executive Summary

Problems impacting businesses and residents near Salt Lake City's homeless shelter are the same problems that come with any large gathering of people: litter, inadequate restrooms, and crowds in which the criminal element can hide. The solution is reducing the number of people in the shelter area.

Rather than spend the majority of limited dollars on facility design, we believe the greatest effect can be had by investing in proven programs currently up and running and limited only by lack of funds. Quick reductions in the shelter population can be had with an infusion of money to existing rapid rehousing rental assistance programs that have a high proven success rate.

In the meantime, immediate improvement in the livability of the shelter neighborhood will be felt with modest investment in existing emergency services and shelter design. Closing Rio Grande Street, sustained policing of drug trafficking, and the addition of mental health and substance abuse treatment beds will improve public safety.

None of these immediate solutions, of course, address the cause of crowding in the shelter area: Salt Lake City's shortage of affordable housing, the consequences of which became apparent with the surge of homelessness during the Great Recession.

A \$30 million city bond for housing and homelessness would jumpstart housing construction and build a new shelter for homeless families away from the Rio Grande area—further reducing the shelter population while renovating the existing Rio Grande shelter facilities for the next 20 years.

By providing seed money for a new round of permanent supportive housing this bond will have a long-term impact on reducing the shelter-area population. Utah received national recognition for its successful Housing First initiative of the 2000s, which created permanent supportive housing for the so-called chronic homeless—long-term homeless individuals who had essentially been living at the shelter. Housing these individuals opened up many shelter beds at the Road Home shelter. Investing today in a second phase of permanent supportive housing is likely to have a similar effect in reducing the population on Rio Grande Street.

Creating a new facility for homeless families away from the Rio Grande corridor will similarly reduce the population in the shelter area. The Great Recession had an outsized impact on women and children who now make up nearly half of Utah's homeless population. Moving families out of the shelter will open shelter beds and make room for facility and program enhancements at relatively low cost.

The solutions outlined here will improve the neighborhood around the shelter. But ensuring adequate housing for city residents most at risk for homelessness will take a sustained commitment. With the creation of the 5,000 Doors initiative Salt Lake City has taken the first step. To ensure success, the city should launch a Low Income Housing Task Force charged with creating long-term financing and support for affordable housing.

Salt Lake City cannot do this alone. The City should play a leadership role in securing other funding from the private sector, state government, and other local government bodies to fully implement this plan. By providing a substantial up-front investment, the City will be in a position to challenge others to step up and be part of the solution to what should be a shared concern across political boundaries for our homeless residents.

If the numbers of homeless people in Salt Lake City are not reduced, problems of shelter crowding will inevitably spill outside of the shelter walls, no matter how well designed, and will follow the shelter to any neighborhood in which it is placed. Furthermore, we believe that there will always be a need for low-barrier shelter in the downtown area. If shelter is not provided in the heart of Salt Lake City, the number of homeless people on our downtown streets will only increase, regardless of the availability of services elsewhere.

Immediate solutions

The following actions can be taken with modest investments to immediately reduce crowding in the shelter area and improve the livability and public safety in the neighborhood.

1. Close Rio Grande Street to vehicle traffic at the shelter: Closing Rio Grande Street between 200 South and 300 South to vehicle traffic and giving the shelter controlled access will ensure those gathering on the street are seeking help rather than pursuing crime, while allowing providers to program orderly use of the space. Additionally, street closure should create efficiencies for narcotics police by forcing dealers into a smaller area outside of the shelter footprint and hastening the day when the area is too hot for the criminal element.

2. Continue enhanced policing of felony drug crime in the Rio Grande area: An atmosphere of anarchy has pervaded the Pioneer Park area, but this summer's targeted enforcement by the Salt Lake City Police Department demonstrated how quickly positive effects can be felt with concentrated policing. The City should make this effort permanent, funding a sustained police presence in the Rio Grande area, concentrating on felony drug dealing. A process should be developed to track felony arrests, adjudications and dispositions to identify any gaps that may need to be filled to keep dealers off the streets. Close communication with service providers such as Volunteers of America and The Road Home is an essential part of this strategy.

The Salt Lake City Police Department is also in the process of hiring eight new social workers to interact with homeless people on the street. This effort should be integrated with existing programs and service providers in the area to maximize effectiveness. Specific goals and outputs should be developed for these new positions.

3. Expand existing shelter-to-housing programs: Construction of affordable housing to fill the gap in Salt Lake City's market will take time. Immediate impact in dropping the shelter population can be had by increasing funding to rental assistance programs used to move people from shelter into housing. These programs have a dramatic proven success rate and can begin tomorrow, provided money is available.

The Road Home is not simply an emergency shelter, but works hand-in-glove with housing programs to get shelter residents into housing as quickly as possible. We can predict the success of investments in these programs, because we know the outcome from past investments. Since 2009, the Road Home has provided rental assistance to approximately 2,400 families and at least 87 percent of these families never returned to the shelter.

Such programs have traditionally relied on federal funding, which is drying up. A cash infusion from Salt Lake City could make an immediate impact on reducing the shelter population. At a cost of approximately \$5,000 per household, an additional 300 families each year could be moved more quickly from homelessness to self-sufficiency lessening the burden on the shelter system and removing people from the Rio Grande area.

4. Double the number of jail diversion beds at the Detox Center: The portion of the homeless population that generates most neighborhood complaints includes those homeless people who also have mental illness or substance problems. Emergency detoxification is currently not available for many, as recent government funding cuts have meant consolidation of Salt Lake City detoxification programs.

Doubling the number of jail diversion detoxification beds operated by Volunteers of America from ten to twenty will provide emergency help for acute cases now on the streets. Detox beds cost approximately \$50,000 each per year. There is also an urgent need for medical detox beds for more extreme cases with life-threatening conditions. Medicaid eligibility would make this type of service possible. But a key problem for this population is the inability to get admitted for inpatient treatment once detoxification has been completed.

5. Fund access to in-patient treatment: The lack of in-patient treatment beds open to Salt Lake City's homeless population means many live in a constant cycle between health and illness in the downtown core, cycling between emergency detoxification (or mental-health intervention) and life on the streets. The cycle will not end without access to in-patient treatment.

A state remedy providing health care coverage for all single adults living at The Road Home shelter would go a long way toward a solution. In the shorter term, the city should purchase three mental health beds at the University Neuropsychological Institute as well as three beds at substance abuse treatment facilities to ensure immediate access when needed by outreach providers working with homeless people

Big Picture Solutions

1. Issue a \$30 million Salt Lake City bond for housing and homelessness to help:

A. Construct 800 units of permanent supportive housing, \$16 million: Beginning in 2004, Utah significantly reduced the shelter population with its Housing First program that created permanent supportive housing for chronically homeless individuals who had been homeless for more than a year, often due to mental illness or substance problems. Supportive housing's combination of small apartments with on-site support systems has kept a majority of these people off of the streets.

Unfortunately, Utah has not added new permanent supportive housing for years, and the combined effects of the Great Recession and population growth mean there is again a significant population of chronic homeless living at the Road Home shelter using beds that could serve many more short-term homeless. About 600 individuals have been living at the shelter for one year or more. There are an additional estimated 200 chronically homeless individuals living on Utah's streets who are prime candidates for permanent supportive housing.

Creation of 800 units of permanent supportive housing in smaller apartments complexes geographically distributed throughout Salt Lake County would take care of the current need and greatly expand capacity at the Rio Grande shelter. Additionally, while the chronically homeless people are a small minority of Utah's homeless population, this population is more likely to give rise to neighborhood complaints.

Eight hundred units of permanent supportive housing will cost about \$80 million. Salt Lake City should spur development by bonding for about 20 percent of the cost, providing the gap funding needed to complete financing in the traditional funding combination of federal tax credits, state, local and private contributions.

B. Build a new shelter for families with children and single women, \$10 million: During the Great Recession, The Road Home saw a 300 percent increase in the numbers of families seeking shelter. Families now make up nearly half of Utah's homeless population. This effect is likely to dissipate as economic recovery takes hold, but it is clear a new shelter facility is needed for families and single women away from the Rio Grande corridor.

In addition to allowing for design of a secure and safe and space targeted to the needs of women and families, such a facility would significantly expand capacity at the current shelter and open space there for additional support services. A \$10 million contribution from Salt Lake City would go a long way toward making this a reality.

C. Renovate Rio Grande shelter and day center facilities, \$4 million: Removing families and the chronically homeless people from the shelter population will dramatically increase bed space and free-up room that can be repurposed for additional support services. Expanding day center facilities and improving the area opened up by closing Rio Grande Street will improve support services and public safety.

By making these improvements on Rio Grande Street, Salt Lake City takes advantage of expensive investments being made at related facilities. The Fourth Street Clinic completed a \$3.5 million remodel in 2014, while Volunteers of America has broken ground on a new \$6 million youth shelter in the downtown core. The Road Home's Community Winter Shelter in Midvale has initiated a \$6 million ground-up rebuilding scheduled to be completed by November 2015.

Expanding day center space for homeless people will mean fewer shelter residents outside during the daylight hours and should reduce queuing on streets. Expansion will enable the day shelter to create a one-stop-shop of support services, as well as space for program enhancement, giving shelter residents not only somewhere to go during daylight hours, but things to do.

2. Launch a Low Income Housing Taskforce: Salt Lake City made great strides against homelessness in the past decade. We have fallen behind largely due to the Great Recession that eroded housing affordability even as it threw many more people out of their homes. Utah and its capital will continue to experience this cycle of falling behind and playing catch-up without structure and funding stability.

The vast majority of residents who seek shelter on Rio Grande Street are not the long-term homeless with intractable problems, but rather residents for whom a life emergency made paying the rent impossible. In the long term, problems associated with the homeless shelter won't be solved without addressing affordable housing.

As pointed out by a 2013 City study, Salt Lake City lacks more than 8,000 units of housing affordable for its working residents with very low incomes. Salt Lake City's recently launched 5,000 Doors initiative is beginning to address this problem with affordable housing retrofits of several city buildings. Salt Lake County's Collective Impact Committee has begun the job of coordinating homeless services and will provide leadership and metrics for measuring success and guiding future efforts. However, solving this housing gap will require a combination of creative financing, incentives for developers and housing policy. It will not happen without sustained effort and can't be solved by Salt Lake City alone.

3. Bring in partners from the private sector and state and local government: A Salt Lake City Low Income Housing Task Force will build on these efforts, but we also need to challenge other levels of government, other municipalities, and the private sector to step up their efforts to address homelessness. For example, permanent supportive housing needs to be provided at a much higher level and the City can't pay for it all. Nor should these new housing units be located exclusively in Salt Lake City. Finally, cost associated with providing the services so integral to the success of permanent supportive housing must be met. Funds like the State of Utah's Pamela Atkinson Homeless Trust Fund must be increased substantially to make operating funds available so new program and facilities can succeed.

There will always be a need for an emergency shelter in Salt Lake City, and those at the shelter deserve to be treated with dignity. But our goal as a city should not be to have the biggest and best shelter in the country, but rather the smallest — because we have the fewest homeless people. Such a focus is both the right thing to do and the shortest route to alleviating the burden the shelter places on the neighborhood in which it is located.

Plan Summary

Immediate solutions:

These steps could be taken in one year and will cost \$5-\$10 million in City funding

- Close Rio Grande between 200 South and 300 South to halt drive-through drug trade and provide more space for service providers.
- Continue enhanced police enforcement of drug trafficking.
- Integrate new social work outreach by the police with existing service providers.
- Double funding for rental assistance programs to quickly move families out of the shelter (approximately \$1.5 million).
- Double the number of jail diversion beds available at the Detox Center (approximately \$500,000).
- Fund three new, dedicated beds for homeless people with severe mental health issues at the University Neuropsychological Institute, and three new substance treatment beds.
- Adopt a Medicaid expansion plan that includes mental health and substance treatment.

Big picture solutions:

These steps will take 2-10 years to complete and cost \$30 million in City funding.

- Issue a \$30 million bond for housing and homelessness that includes:
 - \$16 million to jumpstart development of a second round of Permanent Supportive Housing (approximately 20% of total construction costs for 800 units).
 - \$10 million contribution to a new facility for homeless families.
 - \$4 million contribution to renovate existing shelter and day center structures and improve the area opened up by closing Rio Grande Street.
- Launch a Salt Lake City Low Income Housing Task Force charged with long-term financing, strategy and support for affordable housing.
- Bring in partners from the private sector and state and local government to help address these issues, which have a regional impact.