

Dear Jason Gage, Mayor McClure, and members of Springfield City Council,

We are disappointed in your response and your lack of willingness to engage in conversation regarding our written request for the City to lift the current camping restrictions in Springfield through May 1, 2021, and in your failure to place this request on the December 14th meeting agenda for City Council's consideration. This request was made out of the great and urgent need in our community to protect the health, safety, and lives of our most vulnerable community members who live on the streets of our city without shelter, and your choice to disregard it was disheartening.

According to the Ozarks Alliance to End Homelessness (OAEH) Point-In-Time count in January 2020 the City's homeless population was determined to be 247 individuals. It should be noted, however, that as the footnote of that 2020 Unsheltered Report states, "These numbers do not reflect all individuals served by emergency shelters on 1/29/2020. On that date, 452 individuals were staying in emergency shelters, including Crisis Cold Weather Shelters."

Since that time, COVID-19 has ravaged our country and our community. Jobs have been lost and families and individuals have found themselves in the unexpected circumstances of homelessness. Outreach teams working regularly with these members of our community estimate there to be currently more than 600 individuals without shelter in our city. And every day, we meet more people experiencing the terror of their first night on the street. In the middle of winter. In the middle of a pandemic.

We recognize that the Community Partnership of the Ozarks has been able to provide hotels for some select members of this at-risk population through private donations and CARES Act money. While we are grateful for these rooms that Mr. Gage states are providing temporary shelter for 230 individuals, there are still hundreds of individuals who remain unsheltered. There are also many chronically-homeless people who had been determined to be hyper-vulnerable to COVID and who were initially hoteled by this program but have now been discharged back to the streets, citing a lack of funding. CPO currently does not have funding to hotel those who, for example, were evicted from camps this very weekend. This shortfall exists because of recent large grants to CPO limit hotel funding to rooms for families with children and those impacted directly by COVID. This means that many single men, single women, and couples do not qualify for funded hotel rooms at this time.

We are thankful for the work of Safe to Sleep, which offers overnight shelter to up to 20 women due to their reduced COVID capacity. This program alone cannot house all of the vulnerable women in our community. Many women time-out of their allotted stay at Safe to Sleep before they are able to secure adequate housing. In addition, this program does not offer daytime shelter options during the wintertime. The fortunate women who sleep here are forced back to the streets on dangerously cold winter days.

We appreciate the work of Rare Breed to provide safe daytime drop-in and case management services for our at-risk youth without stable shelter. However, they do not have overnight shelter available any time of the year -- including winter. Our current crisis cold weather shelters stipulate that they are open to adults 18 and over, meaning that this city has no place for youth to seek life-saving warmth overnight.

We are grateful for the investment made by Catholic Charities to open additional shelter locations at the recently remodeled Rancho for women's medical respite and for woman-led families in financial distress. While these beds are greatly needed, they do not provide shelter to sick men, to men with children, nor to women without children or medical referrals.

We appreciate the work of The Victory Mission. However, in response to COVID, they have reduced many greatly needed services including meals, showers, and laundry services. In addition, their shelter spaces have several barriers in place that prevent citizens from accessing resources from their organization. For example, they require a hard copy of a government-issued ID, which many of Springfield's unsheltered citizens lack.

We are grateful for the presence of Eden Village and look forward to their upcoming opening of Eden Village 2; however, this location will offer permanent low-cost housing to less than thirty individuals, bringing the total census of both Eden Village developments to around fifty. While this improves affordable low-income housing options for some people experiencing chronic cycles of homelessness, it is important to understand that Eden Village does not offer emergency shelter to those on the streets, nor does it make a measurable dent in the massive shortage of affordable and second-chance housing available to those in our community. We estimate that Springfield needs at least 1000 units of high-quality affordable housing, including units accessible to those with evictions and/or bad credit, to appropriately meet the needs of our housing-insecure neighbors.

We applaud the creativity of the recently announced RV Park that Eden Village is opening on West Chestnut which will offer the opportunity for individuals, including those characterized as homeless, to pay for a night's stay in a small teardrop camper. However, these are not dedicated units for the unsheltered and there is great concern that the \$10 a night rental rate (which is equal to \$300 a month) will be a barrier for the majority of our unsheltered population to use as a long-term crisis cold weather shelter option. Currently, there are only seven campers on-site and for those who are able to afford this limited resource, they will only be able to access shelter between the hours of 8 PM and 8 AM. This results in unsheltered individuals having to leave, with all of their belongings, during the daytime hours to seek shelter elsewhere. In addition, this new resource is not set to open until mid-January. Meanwhile, at the beginning of January, the CDC's current eviction moratorium is set to expire, which could double (or more) the number of unsheltered individuals in Springfield.

In addition to the organizations listed above, there is good work being done by the teams at The Kitchen, Inc., Burrell, The Salvation Army, Harmony House, Great Circle, and others. In a town full of large churches with locked doors, we cannot overstate the life-saving generosity found in the willingness of Grace United Methodist Church and East Sunshine Church of Christ to serve as crisis cold weather shelters throughout the winter, as they have done faithfully in years past.

While this is all good work and we are grateful for it, it is important that our leaders and community members understand that these programs provided by the various members of the Ozarks Alliance to End Homelessness (OAEH) are not meeting the substantial and growing needs of the unsheltered members of our community. There are simply more people than there are programs, resources, funding, and shelter spaces. And unfortunately, many of our unsheltered neighbors have circumstances that exclude them from most, if not all, of the aforementioned sheltering options.

In his response to our request, Mr. Gage commented that "...we have just recently been made aware that up to three additional cold weather shelter options may soon be opening." We urge city leaders to consider the meager number of shelter beds that may be added to the current system and the paltry length of time that they will be available. One of the sites referenced was The Salvation Army's Harbor House location that only opens after January as overflow for the current location. Last year, there were only 15 beds able to be used for cold weather shelter, and we expect the number will be even less this year with COVID restrictions. In addition, this location has several barriers that exclude everyone from access, including the requirement of a hard-

copy, state-issued ID, an age restriction, breathalyzer testing, and other obstacles for individuals in need.

The second referenced site was recently informed they are no longer going to be available due to a vote by the leaders of the school that leases space from their church. However, in recent days, The First Unitarian Universalist Church has stepped up to offer their building and received city approval. We are deeply grateful for these additional 15 spaces of warmth and shelter; however, we must stress that these few beds will fill quickly and a need will still remain on the streets of our city.

The third, Hope Community Church, has graciously agreed to open their space to up to an additional 25 men which we are deeply grateful for; however, it is only for January 1-31. Last year, Missouri's freezing temperatures extended into mid-April, and it is not unheard of for it to snow well into May. It takes less than one night to perish from exposure.

Looking deeper into the details of these spaces makes it clear that even combined, they will only barely match 2019's number of shelter beds for single men, and will only do that for the 31 days of January. For the remaining weeks of December, and for the months of February, March, and potentially later, the number of beds for men will only be 85. Meanwhile, more people are falling into the housing insecure category daily, and those numbers are expected to skyrocket in January when eviction moratoriums end. Citing these shelters as a comprehensive solution only engenders a false fix.

It is also worth noting that the crisis cold weather shelters were only open for approximately 60 nights in the winter of 2019-20, so even if we had enough shelter to protect the entire unsheltered community on below-freezing nights, we would still have hundreds of people with no legal place to sleep the other approximately 300 nights per year, which includes nights that are windy, stormy, rainy, and in the 30s and 40s. It is entirely possible to experience hypothermia on nights that are not cold enough to trigger the opening of Springfield's shelters. And even in perfect weather, all humans have a physiological need to sleep. Where do you propose they do that?

We agree with Mr. Gage when he writes "Shelter buildings ensure warmth and provide the highest level of safety and hygiene services. That is why we believe them to be the most manageable and appropriate option for our unsheltered population- particularly during the harsh, cold winter season..." which is why our members have spent the entirety of the pandemic working to ensure adequate sheltering options that we hoped and expected to exist by now. The city and the OAEH's current strategy of asking local churches to open their buildings, provide volunteers, and provide supplies has not produced an adequate amount of positive engagement. Multiple requests have been made to churches of every size to open their spaces via presentations to the city's Have Faith Initiative, via group conversations, and via private one-on-one asks by numerous members of this committee trying to work with members of the OAEH. Unfortunately, many faith communities have chosen not to offer their space or manpower for sheltering for a wide variety of reasons. We respect those choices and we ask that the city moves past the idea they will change their minds to secure other necessary life-saving plans.

There are a number of categories of people excluded from most -- if not all -- of the present overnight shelter options, including but not limited to: couples who choose to remain together, individuals accompanied by service and emotional support animals, youth 17 and younger, those without a proper state-issued ID, those suffering from active addiction, citizens with significant mental health and behavioral difficulties (which often leads to being banned from a shelter), citizens with trauma triggered by the crowded shelters, LGBTQ people who may feel uncomfortable or unsafe in church settings, and citizens who have recently become homeless or who are not connected to Springfield's various aid services.

It's perhaps easy to say that people should just conform to the shelter guidelines, that couples should split, that homeless people shouldn't have pets, that people with trauma and anxiety should just get over it. But the fact is, our neighbors who are suffering from housing insecurity are people and hold their loved ones very dearly. How many of us would leave our spouse shivering below a bridge and take shelter ourselves? How many of us would choose to abandon our pets, let alone our emotional support and service animals in exchange for a night of warmth? They are faced with an impossible choice -- stay with loved ones or seek temporary safety. Any sheltering solutions we come up with as a city need to account for the fundamental humanity of the homeless, and account for their emotional/relational needs and special circumstances as we attempt to care of those not sheltered by any of our current services.

Alternatives must be pursued in order to save lives in Springfield this winter. A failure to do so will result in increased strain on community resources like EMS, the fire department, and already overtaxed emergency rooms, as well as the certainty that unsheltered people will lose their lives on the streets of our Springfield this winter.

Our task force initiated an exploration of the availability and cost of the vacant CVS building located at Sunshine and Glenstone. We presented this option in an email posing the question of it being used, based on zoning, and funding to assist in covering the cost of the space. While it's deemed to be a possible property based on zoning (under the Calamity Declaration) the cost to lease this property for one year, with taxes, repairs, and insurance would total more than \$500,000. A cost this great will require the use of city funds and city involvement - not simply the impractical expectation of a church or non-profit covering this cost alone. Based on the City's unwillingness to so much as meet with us for a de rigueur Pre-Planning Review, we presume that financial support is not forthcoming. On account of this, it is very unlikely that any new property could be acquired, outfitted, permitted, and opened before the end of the cold-weather season.

It is for all of these reasons that we continue to call for the lifting of the current camping restrictions in place in our city.

The recent events of Friday, December 18th highlight the great need for a safe, stable camping site where services can be provided to our unsheltered community. The city itself failed to follow established protocols which put more than 20 vulnerable neighbors in danger and with nowhere to go when the City labeled the property a nuisance and ordered the property owner to clean it up. In a recent email City Communications Director Cora Scott stated, "The City's BDS department had posted a nuisance property notification Dec. 2. In hindsight, that would have been the right time to initiate the Homeless Camp Protocol."

The city's failure to follow their own policies led to an unsafe situation between campers and property owners that involved the use of chainsaws dangerously near occupied tents and demands that the campers leave all that they own behind and vacate the property within thirty minutes. When Police initially responded to the scene, the officers were not aware of the guidelines that have been in place since 2014 for moving a camp location. It was not until an SPD supervisor arrived that an additional 24 hours was able to be given for people to pack their belongings and have volunteers help them relocate. During this event, multiple task force members witnessed a desperate elderly camper ask law enforcement for guidance asking, "Where do we go?" Officers responded first with "There is nowhere for me to tell you to go."

This cannot be the answer of our city. So we ask you as our leaders, where are they supposed to go? Having no answer is not acceptable.

We reiterate our previous suggestion to set up a safe, designated camping site to ensure the

livelihood of our citizens who would access this temporary resource, as well as our community as a whole:

New tents are allowed to be set up in designated locations around the community. These locations will allow for security patrols, centralized meal deliveries, coordinated medical care, trash clean up, and contact tracing for possible COVID-19 exposures within the unsheltered community.

The number of tents in each designated location be limited for social distancing and noise control.

Regulations could be placed on noise to stipulate no loud music coming from designated camping locations to protect local neighbors and businesses.

Existing tents in wooded areas without complaints would be allowed to remain in place, unbothered, until the end of the projected frost season which is May 1st, or the end of the social distancing restrictions in place due to COVID-19 -- whichever is later. This request also encompasses city initiated nuisance property clean-ups similar to the one that led to the events of Friday, December 18th be postponed until after this date.

Trash service would be secured for these locations with a trash bin being placed for ease of clean up and removal. The Connecting Grounds is willing to absorb the cost of providing trash service at these locations. Trash that is not picked up regularly would be grounds for having to remove tents from a location.

Porta-Potties could be placed at tent locations to improve the hygiene of the areas. The Connecting Grounds is willing to absorb the cost of providing these facilities and their regular maintenance through the duration that they are needed.

Coordination could be provided with outreach teams from area support agencies to help meet the needs of individuals that would be staying in these areas.

Suggestions for designated areas would be to grant permission and/or publicly held property like city parks, vacant schools, or large congregate parking lots like the fairgrounds that are not used as heavily, or at all, during the winter months. Taskforce members are willing to do anything needed to help with the logistics of the implementation of this life-saving plan to protect Springfield's unsheltered citizens.

These solutions have been implemented successfully in a number of other cities similar to ours. Furthermore, the CDC suggests that during the pandemic, well-run tent encampments may be safer than large congregate shelters, CDC heavily advises against forcing citizens out of their tent dwellings at this time.

In addition, following the events of December 18th, we also ask that Chief Williams please better educate and inform officers of the content of the Protocol for Moving Homeless Camps that were approved by the city on 2/3/2014 and updated 2/5/16. These policies have been in place for more than 5 years, there is no excuse for officers not being aware of these guidelines that stress how 24 hours are to be given and aid to be coordinated with area non-profits and homeless advocacy groups to help displaced individuals. We also ask that training include advising officers from refraining from cutting up tents and destroying the personal property of unsheltered individuals; despite Mr. Gage's insistence in his December 14th response that this behavior is not a common practice, this is a situation that advocates have observed on multiple occasions.

In addition, Mr. Gage also stated in his response, "we are very concerned that during cold

weather the use of tents and tarps simply will not meet the safety needs of our unsheltered persons and are not an option to be considered until our existing cold weather shelters are full.” We would like to stress that the men’s shelter was full to capacity that very evening; the following two nights, Tuesday and Wednesday, December 15-16, the shelter was also full.

We personally witnessed a significant number of unsheltered people wandering in temperatures that fell below 27° with nowhere to go. No one is more insistent on the importance of high-quality, appropriate housing for our homeless friends than we are. It's cold now, and our priority is keeping people alive long enough to access that housing. It takes under an hour to freeze to death. An appropriate tent campground could be made available within a day with the City's permission.

We also stress that the only day shelter in Springfield, MO, the Veteran’s Coming Home Center, has been running at full capacity for months. They regularly turn 50+ individuals away to wait outside due to social distancing restrictions indoors. Now that daytime temperatures have dropped at or below freezing, this population is at risk of exposure at night, and during the day. An organized, safe, and structured tent community would reduce strain on our only day shelter and offer alternative protection from the threat of cold, around the clock for Springfield's unsheltered neighbors.

It is clear that there is a large need in our community. We urge our city leaders to respond quickly to this need, rather than putting citizens' lives at risk by delaying necessary action. Our original letter has received over 900 additional signatures in support of this request. It is clear our Springfield community demands steps be taken to provide compassionate and pragmatic options to those at greatest risk this winter. We hope to see this proposal discussed at Tuesday’s Special City Council Meeting, and enacted at the first possible opportunity -- lives are at stake.

Please work with us to save lives and make the much-needed changes in Springfield's community.

Sincerely,

NAACP Economic Justice Task Force and Concerned Citizens of Springfield