

Crossword/C8
Obituaries/A2-3
Opinion/B2-4
Also Inside:
Comics/Parade/TV

Sunday News-Register



High today: 78
Low tonight: 60
Weather/C8

Volume CXXXI, No. 241

Wheeling, W.Va. Sunday Morning, July 4, 2021

68 Pages - 6 Sections \$2.50

Reactions Mixed To City's Plan

Not All On Board With Homeless Liaison Idea

By **ERIC AYRES**
Staff Writer

WHEELING — The proposed creation of a homeless liaison position in the city of Wheeling has exposed differences in opinions among Wheeling City Council members who will soon vote on the measure, as well as among officials representing local agencies that help the area's homeless.

While city officials all seem to be committed to helping solve the growing issue of homelessness in Wheeling, a consensus is yet to be reached on the best way the city can most effectively become more involved. A number of leaders from local agencies seem to welcome the city officials' willingness to step up to the plate, but no one expects a homeless liaison from the city to knock it out of the park on the first swing.

And not everyone is on board with having a new city employee — somehow by default — automatically become a team captain trying to call the plays.

*Please see **Reactions**, Page A7*

REACTIONS

Continued from Page A1

"I'm very happy that the city is working to be proactive regarding homelessness," said Mark Phillips, Regional Director, Northern, at Catholic Charities WV. "I am concerned, however, that creating a full-time position invests significant resources into an area with which the city has very little experience."

Councilman Ben Seidler agreed with that thought, proposing that the city help fund a new position within the Greater Wheeling Coalition for the Homeless instead of having a homeless liaison working for the city. Seidler voted against forwarding the proposal to council for consideration, but he was outnumbered in committee.

Councilwoman Rosemary Ketchum, who chairs the Health and Recreation Committee of Wheeling City Council, has championed the cause of creating the liaison position. Ketchum voted to move the proposal forward last month, and found support from fellow committee member Vice Mayor Chad Thalmann, who agreed to support the effort as long as the goal of the liaison is clearly defined.

City officials have also expressed a desire to make this a temporary position, not one that remains on the payrolls indefinitely. City leaders suggested that the position be goal-oriented and in place for three years, with the option for renewal to be left in the hands of those seated during the next city council term.

Wheeling Mayor Glenn Elliott also has expressed support for the creation

of the homeless liaison, noting that many reputable agencies all work to fight homelessness in the area, but at times the advocates seem to be working in "different silos." The mayor has indicated that the city's role should be to help coordinate efforts and provide incentives for people to work together and row in the same direction for a common goal.

"If one of the issues that the city cites is cooperation and communication, adding yet another voice -- outside of any existing agency -- can potentially exacerbate that problem," Phillips said. "I'm excited by the fact that the city is looking seriously at this issue. I believe, however, that city officials should take more time to hear from additional agencies about ways to combat homelessness in Wheeling."

"Unless the city is committed to providing additional resources," he added, "there will be no real and lasting change for our homeless neighbors. One newly hired city official attempting to solve this issue in three years is being sent on a fool's errand."

Lisa Badia, executive director of the Greater Wheeling Coalition for the Homeless, noted that they are the lead agency in the Northern Panhandle Consortium of Care or NPCOC, a group of 36 members strong, working together to match each identified homeless person with a provider and a housing opportunity or shelter bed.

"If there is any lapse in communication, it is coming from uninformed or ill-informed people," Badia said. "We depend on our informed and involved partners and welcome what opportunities they bring to the table."

Badia said that in the past, the Coalition partnered with the city, which brought great results. When the NPCOC completed its last strategic plan to end homelessness, this plan was shared with the city staff and council, which remained involved and on board in the effort to move forward.

"The local government should be involved in resolving homelessness in their communities, so it is reasonable to expect the involvement of city staff and city council from that standpoint," Badia said. "We are used to working with folks who want to end an individual's housing crisis permanently."

John Moses, CEO of Youth Services System, agreed that the city should take a more active role in tackling the issue of homelessness, and welcomed the prospect of new leadership and resources.

"I think the city's plan to create a homeless liaison position is a forward-thinking decision," Moses said. "The city's leadership can make the homeless visible and can challenge the stigmas that promote the temptation to keep them invisible."

Homelessness ripples through all facets of a community, Moses noted. Housing, health care, law enforcement,

criminal justice, human services, mental health, substance abuse and many other factors are all at play, he said.

"The conversation needs to happen with all these areas of the community, and I would suggest the importance of representation from the folks on the streets and in the tent camps," Moses said. "Creating a multidimensional plan with the city taking a leadership role is a good idea. Harnessing all these resources in a planful way to an agreed outcome prevents duplication of services and efficiencies in service delivery."

Wheeling officials indicated that the city's distribution of Community Development Block Grant funds could be used as an incentive to bring all of the local agencies together on the same page and allow the proposed homeless liaison to quarterback a collaborative effort. Yet some local agency leaders viewed this approach as waiving a threatening stick as opposed to dangling a carrot.

"The original intention of Community Development Block Grants was to move money from the federal government to city leaders who understand local agencies and their needs," Phillips said. "Installing a city employee to hold the purse strings for whatever model he or she comes up with runs counter to this principle."

"While I agree that more cooperation is possible, I do not think that it requires the resources of a full-time person who works for the city."