

## Request for Creation of a Safe Space Task Force

### Introduction

Homelessness is a problem in Gainesville. Downtown business owners, motel managers on Southwest 13<sup>th</sup> Street, emergency room personnel at local hospitals, residents of neighborhoods surrounding the downtown area, social service providers, and police officers can all attest to severe problems caused by the unsheltered homeless and have seen the problems experienced by homeless people themselves.

Homelessness is a public health and safety problem. The recent discovery that Sweetwater Branch south of the downtown library is contaminated with fecal bacteria, a condition that can lead to disease for children who are attracted to playing in the creek, is only one example. Tumbling Creek, which runs through P.K. Yonge School, has been identified as having similar contamination (Source: TV 20/Gainesville Sun). Drought conditions and a high risk of wild fires make Gainesville, where many people are living in illegal campsites in the woods, a tragedy waiting to happen.

### Background

According to the 2001 Gainesville/Alachua County Continuum of Care Gaps Analysis, there are approximately 795 homeless persons living in the Gainesville/Alachua County area. Although some 268 homeless persons can be housed in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or permanent supportive housing in the community, approximately 527 (66% of the total) currently have no shelter. One-fourth (132) of these unsheltered persons are families with children; the remaining three-fourths (395) are individual men, women and teens.

In spite of concerted efforts since 1995 by local non-profit and public agencies working together through the Alachua County Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry to expand the availability of emergency, transitional and permanent supportive housing, a serious unmet need (gap) in housing for the homeless still exists. Since the largest unmet housing need is for homeless individuals, the Coalition has focused its attention on providing shelter for the most persons within the shortest period of time and at the least cost. This has led to the current discussions on establishing a "Safe Space" facility as a practical alternative for providing emergency shelter. Additional background information and information on the Safe Space concept is contained in the Coalition's report, "Proposal for a Safe Space Facility in Gainesville."

### Aspects of the Problem

The presence of 527 unsheltered homeless people in Gainesville is a major burden on taxpayers. Other communities, such as Orlando, have found that the cost of continual incarcerations and emergency medical care of the unsheltered homeless far exceed the costs of establishing a safe and legal open-air shelter (a Safe Space) for homeless people

where they have access to sanitary facilities and can be connected to health care and other services.

Lack of public education and awareness has resulted in false stereotypes of homeless people, causing them to be objects of exaggerated fear and engendering an attitude that harsh measures and continuous incarcerations will inspire or force homeless people to successfully seek jobs and homes. Social service and medical providers know the truth – this is a population with overwhelming problems such as severe mental and physical disabilities, illiteracy and lack of job skills. In addition, it is demonstrably true that women and children, the elderly, and combat veterans make up a substantial portion of Gainesville's homeless population.

Because homelessness in Gainesville has been defined not as a community problem, but rather as a personal problem of the homeless people themselves, there are no effective structures in place to deal with the problem of the unsheltered homeless. The 120-odd shelter beds available to homeless people do not constitute recognition of the scope and severity of the problem. For the past three years, a small group of committed citizens, many of them social service providers and volunteers, have attempted to formulate a plan for a safe and legal open-air shelter for homeless people. This group, which began as a neighborhood group and then became a work group of the Alachua County Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry, does not have funding and is not part of any organization large enough to address the problem effectively.

The safety net that exists for the homeless is made up of many separate pieces, none comprehensive enough or well-enough funded to address the problem effectively. It is time for elected officials, in partnership with citizens, social service providers, the business community and law enforcement, to establish a facility that is adequate to meet the needs of the homeless and satisfy the public health and safety concerns of all citizens. Strategies must be found to reconcile the protection of existing neighborhoods with the need of all persons for basic shelter.

### Request

The Alachua County Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry believes that in order to move the concept of the Safe Space facility toward the next logical steps and ultimately to its implementation, there needs to be local government leadership and involvement in this project. **We therefore request the City Commission to appoint a task force to further study the Safe Space concept** as referenced in the draft Housing Element Update to the City of Gainesville Comprehensive Plan (see Scope of the Task Force, below). We request that the task force include representatives from the Coalition as well as other community representatives (see Composition of the Task Force, below). We ask that the charge of this task force also include public education and awareness of the issues that the task force is dealing with. Finally, **we request that the task force be directed to report its conclusions and recommendations to the City Commission by December 10, 2001.**

### Scope of the Task Force

Specifically, the task force should be directed to address the following issues:

1. Is there a need for additional emergency shelter space in Alachua County?
2. What benefits would result from meeting this need?
3. What type of new facility would best meet this need?
4. Should the new facility stand on its own or should it be integrated with other facilities?
5. What criteria should apply in selecting a site for the new facility?
6. What specifically are the three best locations for the new facility?
7. Are any additions or changes to City Codes needed to accommodate the new facility?

### Composition of Task Force

The Coalition asks that this task force be composed to represent the community at large, the public and private agencies that deal with the homeless, and homeless people themselves. Specifically, the task force should include representatives of the following:

- 1 - the business community
- 2 - neighborhood associations, particularly from east Gainesville
- 3 - the Alachua County Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry
- 4 - law enforcement and emergency service providers (GPD, Sheriff's Department, fire department)
- 5 - state and local government housing and social service agencies (GHA, ACHA, Alachua County Community Support Services, Department of Children & Families, Agency for Workforce Innovation)
- 6 - health care providers (such as Shands, the VA, Meridian, Corner Drug Store)
- 7 - current shelter and housing providers (such as Salvation Army, St. Francis House, Peaceful Paths, VETSPACE)
- 8 - food providers (such as Catholic Charities, Gainesville Community Ministry, Bread of the Mighty Foodbank)
- 9 - City and County government (City Manager, County Manager or designees)
- 10 - the homeless community (currently or recently homeless people)

### Process of the Task Force

The Coalition requests that the task force schedule its meetings on weekend days and evenings when homeless and working people can attend. Task force meetings should be held in more than one location where homeless people will feel comfortable, such as the downtown library, St. Francis House and neighborhood centers. In terms of process, the task force should allow for extensive audience participation, hear presentations by advocates and the homeless themselves, accept written reports and comment, and gather data and other needed information concerning the overall conditions of homelessness in Alachua County.

## In Conclusion

Gainesville is a community that has been blessed with great abundance. We can solve the problem of homelessness only if we can develop the collective will to do so. We ask you, our elected officials, to take leadership in the development of this collective will, so that our most vulnerable citizens do not have to spend another winter sleeping outdoors.

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