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City commits to timetable on homeless

By Russell Contreras
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The city of Lowell has joined more than 200 communities across the country that have publicly committed to eliminating homelessness within a decade.

Flanked by advocates for the homeless, business leaders, and other local officials, Lowell city manager Bernie Lynch and Mayor Edward "Bud" Caulfield announced the US-led 10-year plan at City Hall last week, asking all city residents to join in and help find at least basic housing for all residents.

"It's more than just the people who are living in the shelter," said Lynch. "It's the people who are doubling up in apartments. It's the youth who are bouncing around from shelter to shelter until they find a place to live. It's senior citizens who may have a home but can't afford to pay bills and are one month away from losing their house."

No one knows exactly how many homeless people there are in Lowell, but Lynch estimates there are "several hundred."

Regardless, Caulfield said the fact anyone is homeless in the city means the community has a "moral and financial obligation" to help people get shelter.

Lynch said because the city offers some service programs and is an urban enclave, the homeless problem is more visible. "It's there in our suburban communities," he said. "It's just not as out in the open."

Since the revitalization of downtown Lowell, the homeless have become more evident in the city center as more businesses open and residents begin to visit area restaurants. Occasionally, some homeless can be seen living in tents under bridges around the city.

Like initiatives in other cities, Lowell's broad blueprint involves a coalition of business leaders, nonprofit groups, and advocates for the homeless collecting local data and developing ideas on how to apply for federal and state grants. The plan calls for the city to build more affordable housing so it can get the homeless into stable housing quickly rather than erecting more shelters, which have become ever more expensive to operate. The plan also will look for more student housing and offer home-foreclosure prevention education.

Philip Mangano, executive director of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, said he's seen similar plans in other cities make a difference when implemented correctly.

"You can make a difference when you bring people together," said Mangano, who is spearheading efforts across the country. "Almost everyone is in agreement that we need to end homelessness - Democrats and Republicans."

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Under Lowell's plan, a special committee appointed by Lynch will meet often to assess what services are needed and how the city can help struggling residents.

Committee members include Susanne Beaton, the campaign director of One Family Inc., an agency that seeks to help the homeless gain economic independence.

Beaton, who opened one of the city's first shelters 25 years ago, called the new 10-year plan "phenomenal."

"They're getting it right. They're becoming more strategic," she said. "On all fronts, we're going to make a serious impact. The stars have aligned."

Beaton said new ideas on tackling homelessness were needed since the cost of running shelters has skyrocketed since the 1980s.

Emily Weitzman Rosenbaum, executive director of the Coalition for a Better Acre, a group that promotes affordable housing, said the plan makes sense from both an economic and social justice perspective.

"The more we invest upfront, the less down the road we'll see in suffering, cost, and ill effects on the city," said Rosenbaum, who is not on the committee.

Rosenbaum said she'd like to see more government funding for Section 8 housing to get more residents into affordable housing in the area. She also would like to see more employment training and to make sure that any redevelopment projects don't inadvertently cause more homelessness.

Caulfield said now that the city has a plan, residents should be patient so that the root causes of homelessness can be addressed.

"Remember, this is not a 100-yard dash," he said. "This is a marathon."

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