

City backs housing for homeless

By ED KEMMICK of The Gazette Staff

From its inception two years ago, the Mayor's Committee on Homelessness has been acting on the premise that finding a solution to chronic homelessness is the key to ending homelessness in general.

Brenda Beckett, community development director for the city of Billings, said national studies have shown that 50 percent of the resources directed at the problem are spent on 10 percent of the homeless population - those most likely to use high-cost services like ambulance rides, emergency-room care, hospitalization, incarceration and detoxification.

"We just need to find a way to get these high-need people off the street," she said.

That's why the city of Billings is accepting proposals to develop six to eight housing units that will be made available to homeless individuals or families who are frequent users of those high-cost services.

Billings was chosen by the Montana Council of Homelessness as a demonstration project for a 10-year plan to reduce homelessness. The Mayor's Committee on Homelessness has been involved in a variety of activities since it was founded in 2006, but this new project will be the first to use the Housing First philosophy endorsed by the federal Interagency Council on Homelessness.

Housing First is based on the idea that if chronically homeless individuals or families are placed in housing first, everything else they need - job training, case management, mental-health services and addiction treatment - will be applied more effectively.

As part of the housing project, information on the cost of services provided to tenants in the 12 months before and after they obtained housing will be collected. That information will be shared with other homeless-service providers in Montana as they develop their own solutions.

Beckett said the city hopes to have good cost-benefit analyses come out of the project, "something we can really draw data from."

To make the project attractive to developers, the city of Billings is making available about \$465,000 in state and federal funds that can be used to buy, build or refurbish six to eight units of housing for individuals or families. The project could be concentrated at one site or several, and the housing would have to be compatible in value and design with the surrounding neighborhood.

Whoever is chosen to develop the project could use the money as either a loan or a grant, depending on the way the project is structured, with the understanding that it would be used to leverage larger amounts of money for the housing project.

Lucy Brown, executive director of the Housing Authority of Billings and a member of the Mayor's Committee on Homelessness, said the owner of the project could apply for existing subsidies to be able to offer the units at affordable rates. It might also be possible for churches or charitable groups to play a role by, for example, buying or leasing one of the housing units and making it available to a homeless person.

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Proposals have to be turned in by 5 p.m. Sept. 5. They will be reviewed by the Community Development staff to make sure they meet technical requirements, after which they will be evaluated by the Mayor's Committee on Homelessness, which will make a recommendation to the City Council.

The final determination will be made by the City Council, which is expected to decide the matter in October. For more information, contact Beckett at beckettb@ci.billings.mt.us or 657-8286.

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