

To the Homeless Strategies Workgroup:

First, I am cheering all of you on in taking quick action to effectively supply more and better options that community members without shelter had last winter. In reading over meeting summaries I can see how the County and its cities are behind in terms of having lost some resources they had last year. I know it will take everyone facilitating each other's efforts - all the local government agencies and all the organizations capable of providing sheltering resources, and all the volunteers who can be brought in to participate - to create sheltering options that will meet the needs of all of our community members.

I have a couple of concerns I wanted to address:

I read the announcement made by the City of Bellingham on their website regarding their proposal of the Civic Stadium building for a temporary women's overnight winter shelter. I found that in the July 26, 2019 meeting summary for the Homeless Strategies Workgroup that it was outlined that "The City of Bellingham has identified a 3-month shelter location, but the location will not be announced until August. The site will accommodate 35-40 women. Opportunity Council will serve as the primary manager in support of the mission." The summary went on to report that clients would check in at the Mission.

I do not know if this is part of the arrangement that will be used regarding the Civic Stadium shelter, but many aspects from the description in that July meeting summary sound similar to the what was said in the City's announcement of a temporary shelter location for women, and it is stated that the Opportunity Council (which is a secular organization) would be operating the shelter. What was not mentioned at all in the City's announcement, however, was any involvement of the Lighthouse Mission (which is a religious organization). If individuals are going to have to first go to the Lighthouse Mission to check in before they would be taken to the temporary women's shelter, members of the community should be told about that up front. Also not mentioned in the City's announcement is that Fountain Community Church would be in charge of transporting people to the women's shelter at Civic Field. If this is part of the protocol, community members should be made aware that these religious organizations are involved and that individuals seeking shelter at Civic Field would have to interact with them.

Further, I would like to know if people wanting to stay at the Civic Field shelter would be ensured of staying at that location, or would they potentially be directed by the Lighthouse Mission to stay at their facility instead?

Meanwhile, if the Lighthouse Mission and Fountain Community Church are, in fact, involved in this shelter location, then it is still vitally important that other secular sheltering locations be made available for those who cannot go to ones run by a religious organization. It is also vital that the City of Bellingham not put the responsibility for determining availability of secular sheltering options based disproportionately on data or decisions offered by religious organizations.

Another thing I was wondering about is that I heard Hans Erchinger-Davis speaking on the August 31, 2019 Saturday Morning Live radio show. He had said that the Lighthouse Mission is going to be installing additional restroom facilities at their location. He also said that the porta-potties would be removed from their location from outside the building. Mr. Erchinger-Davis had also mentioned during the show that often people who do not wish to go inside the Lighthouse Mission will hang around in places near the Mission building for the sense of security it provides them.

I am concerned then, about how these people will be able to access restrooms when they need them if the porta-potties are removed and if they will not go inside the Mission building. I was wondering if there would be direct access from outdoors to the restroom, at least without people having to check in, and how the people outside would be made aware that they could do so. It would seem to be a concern that without an arrangement that people are actually comfortable with that they may resort to using other areas to relieve themselves that could present a health or environmental risk.

Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Dena Jensen
Birch Bay, WA
