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Siting Emergency Homeless Shelters: Community Opposition and Support
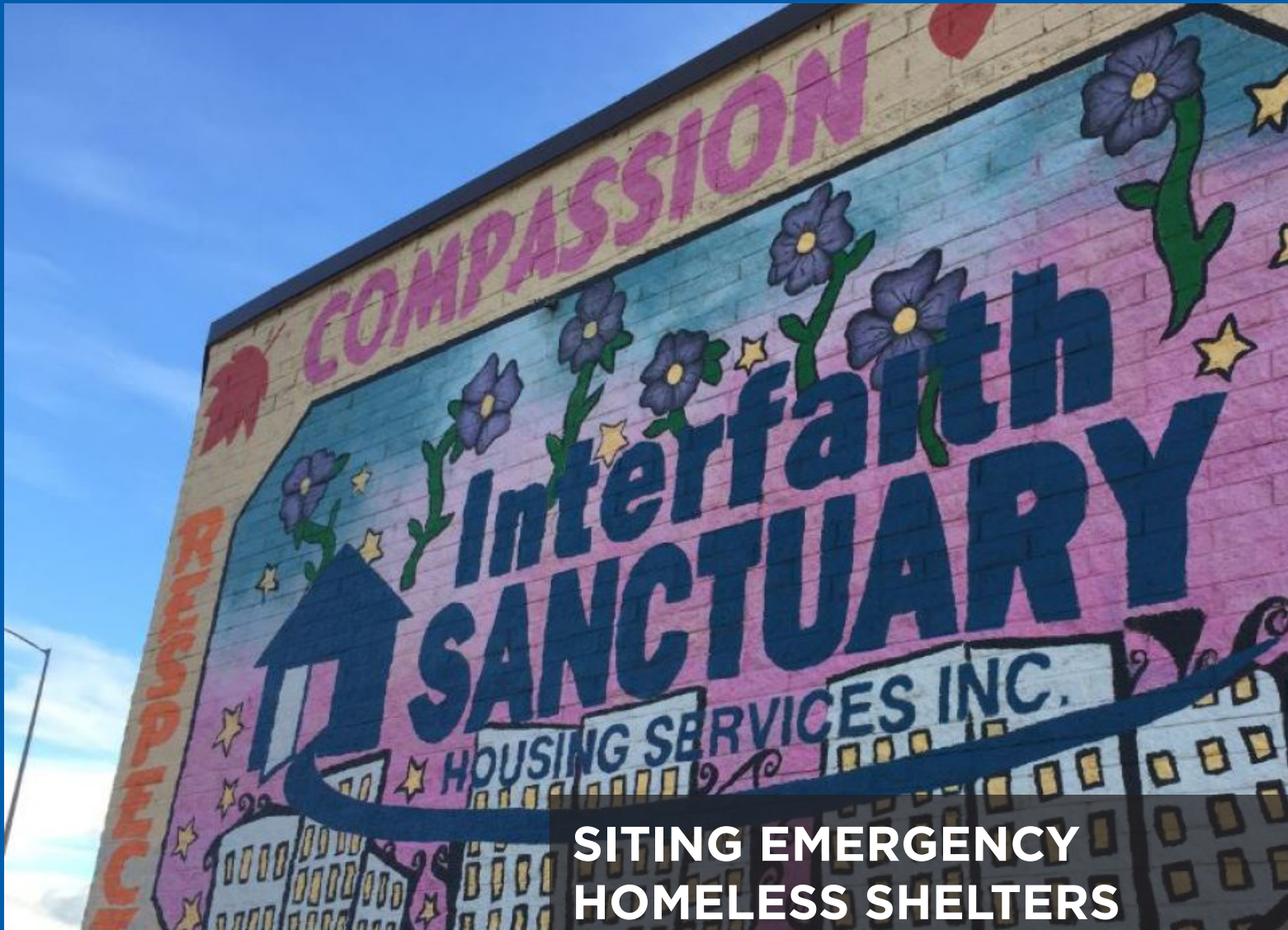
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SITING EMERGENCY HOMELESS SHELTERS
COMMUNITY OPPOSITION AND SUPPORT

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY
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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, approximately 4,035 people experienced homelessness in Ada County.[1] This accounts for 44% of all people experiencing homelessness in the state of Idaho. Not all individuals who experience homelessness need shelter services; however, the need for services is only increasing as COVID-19 related housing protections and resources for populations experiencing homelessness disappear. Four emergency homeless shelters currently serve specific populations in the City of Boise. Idaho Youth Ranch's Hays House serves youth, Boise Rescue Mission's River of Life serves men while the same organization's City Light serves women and children, and Interfaith Sanctuary serves men, women, and families with children.

Interfaith Sanctuary is seeking to improve their service approach by developing a new emergency shelter facility. Their most recent proposal plans to offer 200 beds as well as on-site supportive services. These services include but are not limited to transportation, medical care, case management, food services, and educational programs. This approach is common among successful shelter systems.[2]

While planning the new shelter, community members expressed concern and opposition to the project. This report attempts to address this concern and opposition by answering the following research questions:

- How have other communities successfully moved through the siting of emergency shelters effectively and collaboratively?
- How can the siting of a shelter in a community meet the needs of both the community and homelessness response services?

The report includes strategies for identifying shelter sites, community engagement ideas, and examples of shelter programs experiencing similar challenges in nearby and peer communities.

SHELTER SITING PROCESS

Selecting shelter sites can be complicated and is often met with community resistance. Shelter guests benefit from having access to safe transportation to health services, workforce services, and public spaces such as libraries, senior centers, and educational institutions.[3] Siting is usually done by organizations planning to host and operate the shelters, but local governments are often involved to ensure the new shelters align with City objectives for addressing homelessness. The process of choosing a location accounting for additional services and community concerns can be simplified using the following strategies:

- Developing basic criteria to guide shelter site selection. These criteria can be set around client needs, city goals, zoning processes, and distance to other services.[4]
- Using spatial analysis to identify a location with easy access to services while also being well distanced from other shelter locations to prevent a concentration in a single area of a city.[5]
- Engaging community members in the process to receive input and address concerns.[6] The more people are involved in the process, the more they will be satisfied with the outcome.[7] Community engagement should continue once a shelter is operational.[8]

- Avoiding indefinite delays because of community opposition. Delays can increase financial costs for the shelter provider and the broader community while preventing people experiencing homelessness from accessing needed shelter and services.[9]

Regardless of the conditions of the neighborhood selected, shelter providers, local governments, and other stakeholders should have a plan to provide additional support to the neighborhood by committing to long- and short-term investments in the physical and social infrastructure. This may include improving walkability and improving transportation options by implementing transit and ride-share programs to other services, and creating communication networks between public, private, and government organizations. This additional support should aim to improve the lives of neighborhood residents as well as shelter guests.[10]

ADDRESSING COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Community resistance is often shown in the form of "not in my backyard" sentiments or NIMBYism. Residents expressing NIMBYism often believe that people experiencing homelessness deserve access to housing solutions and services, but are hesitant to have those services provided in their own neighborhoods.[11] Reasons for hesitancy are usually related to the public participation process, the physical design of the project, and the potential impact on the community.[12] Organizations planning to host and operate shelters should not be alone in responding to NIMBYism; all relevant stakeholders should be involved.[13] Actions stakeholders can take to address community concerns include:

- Educating the community on the reasons for and experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity with the goal of de-stigmatizing shelter guests.[14] This can be done using media outlets, public meetings with city officials, including law enforcement, or through outreach to community groups such as religious organizations, educational institutions, or housing associations.[15]
- Working with local law enforcement to determine and then communicate any new safety protocols in the neighborhood.[16]
- Identifying opportunities for community support and input, including crafting Good Neighbor Agreements between shelter providers and neighboring residents and businesses.[17]
- Increasing community interactions with shelter guests through events and shared use of public spaces to eliminate social stigma.[18]
- Educating the community on shelter objectives, such as decreasing length of shelter stays and improving the shelter-to-housing transition, to demonstrate the potential impact of the shelter for guests.[19]

Any community engagement activities should attempt to eliminate commonly-used "us versus them" rhetoric while also addressing the root fears driving community opposition.[20] Compromise, by definition, involves each party making some concessions to their desired outcomes. However, community engagement should be approached by all parties with the common goal of providing shelter and the understanding that delaying the process for too long can be costly and result in fewer people receiving needed services.[21]

CASE STUDIES

The challenges faced by the City of Boise in the shelter siting process are not unique to the area. Boise peer cities,[22] including Anchorage, Alaska; Madison, Wisconsin; Spokane, Washington; and Wichita, Kansas have recently been through this process. Additional geographically and politically similar cities including Missoula, Montana; and Salt Lake City, Utah also provide lessons in shelter siting processes.

The key takeaways from the experiences of these cities include:

- The urgent need for shelter space is intensified by the lack of affordable housing, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and extreme heat and cold.
- Stakeholder cooperation and support is essential for shelter projects. Shelters with innovative approaches, like providing on-site services, are possible with support from the city and broader community.
- Providing opportunities for engagement and input from community members serves as an avenue for education, addressing concerns, and incorporating feedback. It also improves participants' satisfaction with the outcome.
- There is a cost to not acting. An indefinitely-delayed shelter is harmful to people experiencing homelessness and costly for the shelter provider and community.

CASE STUDY #1
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA - CITY-OPERATED SHELTER

Anchorage is aiming to create a new shelter space for 400 people to replace the pandemic emergency shelter established in the Sullivan Arena. In May 2021, the acting mayor began negotiations to purchase the former Alaska Club gym to become an emergency shelter with a capacity of 125 under pandemic distancing protocols.
Plans changed in July 2021 when the newly-elected mayor opted not to buy the former gym by the deadline and instead pursued a temporary emergency shelter on city land in East Anchorage. This proposed shelter would be a "sprung structure," a prefabricated tent-like building with a capacity of 400-450, and would provide various services, including medical appointments, housing support, substance use treatment, job training, and mental health care. Neighbors and other groups opposing the plan were concerned about the size, cost, location, fast timeline, potential negative impacts on the neighborhood, and potential reduction in service quality due to the shelter's size.
The Anchorage Assembly blocked the new mayor's plan over concerns about the size of the shelter and the rising costs of the proposal. Additionally, two ordinances related to shelter siting have come again before the Assembly in summer 2021 after being shelved in summer 2020. One would expand new shelter locations to include high-density business districts rather than only public lands and institutions. The other would require shelters to undergo a licensing process and follow certain regulations.

The lack of cooperation within local government and the absence of community engagement has hampered this urgent shelter siting process.[23]

CASE STUDY #2
MADISON, WISCONSIN - NONPROFIT SHELTER WITH CITY SUPPORT

The City of Madison has needed a shelter site for single men for 35 years. The nonprofit Porchlight provides shelter and services to single men using makeshift sites in crowded downtown church basements and now pandemic emergency shelters. For years, the City of Madison has proposed various sites for a permanent Porchlight men's shelter, but plans have repeatedly fallen through because of neighborhood opposition, logistical issues, and financial complications.

In spring 2021, the City of Madison considered purchasing a site near the East Towne Mall with a capacity of 250 people, calling it the best available option. The site has enough space and the flexibility to add services, but it is far from downtown, the day shelter, and other homeless services. Neighborhood opposition included concerns about safety, property values, and impacts on businesses and development projects. The mayor emphasized that a permanent men's shelter was much needed, and that blocking the proposal would further delay the shelter siting process, increasing human and financial costs.

In May 2021, the city council narrowly voted against the proposed site since many of their constituents opposed it. The city is now in the early stages of considering four other sites, and the city council has approved $2 million in federal COVID-19 funds for the future site.[24]

CASE STUDY #3
MISSOULA, MONTANA - NONPROFIT SHELTER

In May 2011, the Poverello Center announced plans to build a new emergency shelter in the Westside neighborhood after three years of searching for a location. Although there was some community support for the proposed shelter, there were also community concerns about the safety and economic impacts of the shelter. Community members wanted to be informed about the shelter's plan and involved in the process. As a result, the city engaged facilitators from the Missoula chapter of the National Coalition Building Institute to mediate the siting process.

Facilitators utilized deliberative processes, restorative justice, and just practice frameworks to understand the concerns of those involved in the controversy. Facilitation groups consisted of residential neighbors, businesses, shelter guests, city representatives, and organizational partners. The deliberation process included four phases:

Phase 1:
- Generate a list of stakeholders.
- Conduct one-on-one interviews and focus groups to hear their perspectives and concerns.

Phase 2:
- Hold an open community meeting where the shelter provider presents the need for a shelter and provides education opportunities to address biases about people experiencing homelessness.
- Utilize peer teaching as a tool to facilitate learning.
- Create an interactive online forum for voicing concerns.
- Engage stakeholders in mediated meetings to hear their questions and concerns about the shelter.

Phase 3:
- Form a working group to find potential sites informed by the concerns voiced at the community meeting. (In Missoula's case, the working group included representatives from the city, the shelter provider, the neighborhood, and the business community. People who supported and opposed the proposed shelter site were represented.)

Phase 4:
- Hold a final community deliberation meeting to discuss potential sites.

The successful facilitation process highlights the importance of creating spaces where different perspectives are thoughtfully considered. The deliberation process brought transparency and credibility to the siting process, and it allowed participants to feel welcomed and heard as part of the community. The neighborhood and the Poverello Center created a communication plan to continue engaging with each other. Additionally, meals at the shelter are open to both guests and the general community to foster engagement.

The shelter opened in December 2014. Today, the Poverello Center has 95 emergency beds for adults and provides food and supportive services in a substance-free facility. There is a community outreach team that actively engages with housed and unhoused community members, neighbors, and businesses to discuss their questions and concerns. The team is easily identifiable with brightly colored clothes and labeled vehicles. The outreach team also provides a hotline to contact if an issue arises in order to avoid escalating to law enforcement.[25] Continued outreach helps with the ongoing success of the shelter.

CASE STUDY #4
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH - NONPROFIT SHELTER WITH CITY SUPPORT

In 2016, Salt Lake City completed an extensive site selection process to expand their shelter services. Sites were selected based on their distance from public transit, homeless services, and neighborhood services.

Once the potential sites were selected, the Salt Lake City Planning Commission engaged the public through presentations to neighborhood community councils, open houses, and an online survey. These were followed by a public hearing to review applications for the shelters and take any public comments. The Planning Commission voted to approve the shelter applications after the hearing.[26]

During the development process, the City offered neighborhood safety tours to the community to address any safety concerns at the sites. The City also created action plans to better prepare and improve neighborhoods for the shelters. Key strategies for these plans included:

1. Committing to long-term investments in the physical and social infrastructure
2. Leading efforts to secure funding from non-City sources
3. Prioritizing planned City projects in the neighborhoods
4. Fostering community-driven efforts to improve quality of life in neighborhoods

Examples of projects included in the neighborhood action plans include:
- Constructing bike lanes
- Building a community garden
- Improving street lighting
- Building more homeless service offices[27]

The shelters opened in late 2019. Although the City led the site selection and engagement efforts, the shelters are operated by nonprofits. The shelters each serve 200 guests and have been operating near full capacity since opening. The mayor recently announced the need for 300 more shelter beds as a solution to decreasing crime and general disorder associated with unsheltered community members.[28] This push for more shelter space is happening concurrently with plans for a tiny home village. Both projects are seen as necessary to meet the City's goals to address homelessness.[29] The City is involved and supportive of these additional projects but are not the sole funders nor will they serve as the operators of the projects once completed.[30]

CASE STUDY #5
SPOKANE, WASHINGTON - NONPROFIT SHELTER WITH CITY SUPPORT

In 2019, the City of Spokane tried to open a 24/7 low-barrier shelter with a capacity of 120 to replace a previous city-funded shelter that had closed. The proposed shelter would have included job training, substance use treatment, a commercial kitchen, secure storage space, and a hygiene center.

When the site was announced, there was strong neighborhood opposition from residents and an adjacent nonprofit serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The city met with these neighbors to address their concerns about safety, presenting plans to hire private security and establish a community neighborhood impact board. The proposed site ultimately did not move forward because it did not receive the necessary funding from Spokane County and the neighboring City of Spokane Valley.

In late 2020, the City of Spokane was able to fund a new shelter with a capacity of 102 using county COVID-19 aid funds. Operated by Salvation Army, the site serves as an emergency pandemic shelter and will later become transitional housing. Neighbors and developers with nearby property were concerned about safety, property values, and impacts on businesses. During the planning process, the city met weekly with neighbors and incorporated their safety concerns into the shelter plans, including a security team and shelter rules against loitering.[31]

CASE STUDY #6
WICHITA, KANSAS - NONPROFIT SHELTER WITH CITY SUPPORT

In late 2020, the city of Wichita and the Sedgwick County Continuum of Care provided funding to the nonprofit HumanKind Ministries to buy the former 316 Hotel. HumanKind already operates a year-round shelter, winter shelters, and affordable housing units. The former hotel will become a 56-unit permanent supportive housing complex with space for service providers, opening in September 2021.

During renovations, HumanKind has used the property as a temporary women's pandemic shelter. The project is anticipated to reduce crime in the area and complements a Department of Justice grant to provide resources for homelessness in the same part of the city.

Repurposing the former hotel as a temporary shelter and then as permanent supportive housing was possible due to strong stakeholder cooperation and community support.[32]

LIMITATIONS

Most community concerns around a new shelter are related to property values and crime. Though research on shelter impact is minimal, research on the impacts of supportive housing finds no significant change to either property values or crime.[33] Some reporting suggests crime is more relevant in areas where shelters cannot meet demand and unhoused community members congregate in the area not knowing where else to go.[34]

The process of siting shelters is not well-documented through research. Most information for case study examples was limited to recent local news sources covering incomplete or recently-completed shelters. As such, it is difficult to know the steps taken to engage the community and the long-term success of these efforts.[35]

Cities with more established shelters do not tend to publish community experiences and responses to a shelter over time.[36] However, as the goals of a shelter are to help people experiencing homelessness receive services and transition into more permanent housing, the outcomes of these goals should be the ultimate focus of the shelter siting process.

CONCLUSION

Community engagement is necessary for shelter siting success. It serves as an avenue for education, addressing concerns, and incorporating feedback. The more people are involved in the process, the more likely they are to be satisfied with the outcome.

In order to facilitate community support, shelter providers should work with local leaders to build relationships and educate community members on the realities of housing instability and the benefits of the shelter. Shelter providers should also work with local government leaders to determine infrastructure changes that may be necessary to benefit the community and the shelter; this may include traffic signals, public transportation routes, or upgrades to local schools. Finally, community engagement should continue once a shelter is operational. The tides of public opinion may change, and community relationships are expected to remain crucial throughout the lifetime of a shelter. True compromise involves each party making some concessions but ultimately leads to a more successful shelter siting process.

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