

HOMELESS CRISIS AFFECTS 400; ADVOCATES SEEK COUNTY'S HELP

OCTOBER 7, 2022

By CAREY JOHNSON, The Franklin Times Staff Writer

LOUISBURG -- For more than 30 minutes on Monday, those on the front lines of homelessness continued to engage the county in an effort to address the problem on a grander scale -- speaking to officials via the public comment portion of the meeting.

Beverly Kegley, a key member of the Franklin County Interfaith Council's homeless committee, which has tasked itself with addressing the problem, has spoken to the board about the issue since the spring and, again, led the charge on Monday night.

She was not alone, though, as a handful of Council members, transient residents and stakeholders appeared before the board, asking for assistance.

"Thank you for the charge you gave us on May 2 when I approached you about homelessness," Kegley said on Monday night. "You asked questions I didn't have the answers to. "We brought you answers tonight," she said.

Based on interviews with county Department of Social Services, Veterans Affairs, the school system and other sources, they estimated there were more than 400 homeless people in Franklin County.

"The major thing ... is we still don't have a total count," Kegley said. "I thought we were doing well, but I get phone calls [from homeless folks] all the time."

Kegley then yielded to a group of folks she brought with her to enlighten the board about the county's homeless problem and some resources for assistance.

Suzy Khachatryan, a senior policy analyst with the NC Budget and Tax Center, said there are state and federal pots of money to help, including American Rescue Plan Act funds. "... With rent unaffordable for 42 percent of renters in Franklin County, and more than 20 percent of renter households in Franklin County spending more than half of their income in rent, I would strongly urge the commissioners to consider tackling this serious and growing issue in the county and American

Rescue Plan dollars pose an incredible opportunity to start that work," the Carrboro resident said.

James Ward, with Southeastern Health Care, and also a member of the Interfaith Council, said he's seen the need here. And, plans need to put in place for affordable housing, workforce development and homelessness prevention. "... Homelessness is out of control," he said.

"... What are you going to do about it?" he said, addressing the board. "People need to know what you're going to do about it." He suggested that at least two county commissioners join the Council's task force to combat homelessness. "... We need for you to understand that many people are here that need your help," he said. "Your county needs your help."

As personal testimonies, one speaker said barriers to finding a place to live might seem small to some, but can be cavernous to others. "... I work and shop in town, but I feel like this town does not want people like me in it ... because I can't afford to live here," she said. "There is no affordable housing here," she said. "There is nothing under \$1,000 rent to live," she said, noting that throwing in utility bills means that folks have to pick and choose which bills to pay. "... It doesn't feel nice to feel like I'm being pushed out," she said. "It's not fair and it's not right. "It makes us feel invisible and unwanted."

Brenda Coward also shared her story. She found a place to live in Franklinton, but she's finding it hard to pay the first month's rent and the Deposit. "I just need a little bit of help," said the 68-year-old. "... I look at all these houses being built, and say, my my, I wish it was mine, but it's not. "I hope you can help."

During board comments, which comes at the end of the meeting, Commissioner Kelli London, a member of the Interfaith Council, said she "will stay committed to helping the homeless and tackling the problem because it is a growing issue."

Commission Chair Michael Schriver said he agrees that homelessness is a problem and "I agree, we need a plan." He took umbrage, though, with an apparent sentiment that the county didn't care and wasn't trying to help with the issue.

He also had a message for Kegley, urging her to sit down with county management so that the matter could be addressed as a proper item on the board's agenda. "I'm begging you to come sit in [County Manager Kim Denton's] office and bring folks and facts," he said. "I hope you take that invitation. "We need to learn together," he said. "It needs to be our plan, collectively. "If you're asking the county do something, you're going to have to work with county. "We need to work, meet, share and collaborate."

During the meeting, Kegley appeared stung by Schriver's comments, but was not allowed to express them at that point in the meeting. Following the meeting, though, Kegley said she would rather bring the items to the attention of the board, rather than having them filtered to be on the agenda. And, she said, she's not trying be controversial or confrontational. "Am I trying to create trouble and angst? No," Kegley said. "Am I trying to find a solution to the problem? "Absolutely." She promised that she'd keep appearing before the board.