



## **CITY OF FORT BRAGG**

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### **MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** February 13, 2017  
**TO:** City Council  
**FROM:** Linda Ruffing, City Manager  
**SUBJECT:** **Summary of interviews with business owners regarding impacts of homelessness**

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This memo is included in the City Council's February 13, 2017 agenda packet as information in support of the Mendocino Coast Hospitality Center's (MCHC) update to the Council and community regarding their facilities, programs and services for homeless and mentally ill persons. The MCHC presentation is agendized as an update. At the Public Safety Committee meeting on February 15, a more informal and in depth discussion will be held to help problem-solve homeless issues.

Over the past couple of weeks, I met privately with more than two dozen downtown business people to talk about homeless issues in their neighborhood. My focus was on businesses located in the 100 and 200 blocks of North Franklin Street. The interviews were intended to elicit a sampling of observations and opinions from businesses in the area of downtown that is most impacted by the homeless. It was not a comprehensive survey of all downtown business owners. The following is a summary of what I heard.

1. People expressed concerns about being perceived as "anti-homeless" or lacking in compassion if they speak publicly about their negative encounters with homeless folks in their neighborhood. While everyone had concerns and stories to tell- I also heard many expressions of compassion regarding the plight of homeless persons.
2. There was very little blaming. The folks I spoke with understood the complexity and challenges of dealing with the root causes of homelessness. People spoke with concern for homeless people with mental illnesses. People understand that Fort Bragg's homeless issues are not unique and that most communities in California are grappling with similar challenges.
3. A number of people indicated that they had not supported locating the Hospitality Center at 101 N. Franklin Street, but most are now resigned to it remaining there. Some felt that the number and visibility of homeless people in downtown has increased as a result of the Hospitality Center being located at the corner of Oak and Franklin. There were several complaints relating to negative impacts that are thought

to be associated with foot-traffic between the Hospitality Center and the Hospitality House.

4. Specific negative behaviors of homeless persons that were identified included the following:
  - a. Littering: abandoned shopping carts, cigarette butts, paper coffee cups, vodka bottles, needles, etc.
  - b. Urination, feces, vomit
  - c. Dog poop
  - d. Loitering
  - e. Shouting, arguing, cursing
  - f. Smoking pot
  - g. Panhandling
  - h. Shoplifting
  - i. Sleeping on sidewalks, in vehicles, Post Office lobby, etc.
  - j. Taking short-cuts through private property
  - k. Hanging out in bushes
  - l. Vandalism
5. Business people are concerned about the impacts of homelessness on the image of downtown, both for residents and tourists. Groups of homeless hanging out can be intimidating. The behaviors/actions identified above contribute to negative perceptions.
6. The concept of "respect" came up again and again. These business people observe and/or interact with a spectrum of homeless people each day. Many expressed appreciation for the homeless persons who are respectful in their actions and interactions in the community. However, people are irritated by the fact that some homeless individuals behave so poorly and disrespectfully, especially while many of these individuals are receiving free meals and supportive services.
7. The Fort Bragg Police Department received praise for its responsiveness to calls for service and patrolling of the downtown streets and alleys. There was an awareness of the value of having our officers make contact with and get to know homeless individuals. Several people mentioned the basic civil rights of homeless persons. Homelessness is not a crime.
8. The Mendocino Coast Hospitality Center (MCHC) was also credited with responding to complaints, particularly from businesses in proximity to their two facilities (Hospitality Center at 101 N. Franklin St. and Hospitality House on N. McPherson St.). Many businesses had the cell phone numbers of MCHC staffers. People mentioned MCHC's shopping cart pick-up/return program, efforts to prevent loitering near their facilities, and their downtown cleanup efforts.
9. There is a sense that a majority of the homeless have come to Fort Bragg from elsewhere. The questions of "Where are they coming from?" and "Why are they coming here?" came up again and again.

10. A number of suggestions were offered in the course of these discussions:

- a. Don't provide free meals, showers, laundry services, access to the Extreme Weather Shelter to people who are causing problems in the community. Implement a "behavior-based" model for access to services. Incentivize respectful behavior.
- b. Consider only providing one meal per day to the general homeless population - and it should be in the morning.
- c. MCHC should not let folks leave its facilities with paper coffee cups, which often become litter.
- d. MCHC should open Hospitality Center earlier so that people coming from breakfast at the Hospitality House can enter facility or courtyard, rather than congregating on sidewalk.
- e. Consider placing portable toilets in convenient location(s).
- f. Establish a work program for homeless persons to perform regular deep cleanings of neighborhood (including dog and human feces).
- g. Provide more aggressive enforcement of anti-camping regulations, including camping in vehicles.
- h. Obtain data regarding where homeless people came from and why they came to Fort Bragg.
- i. Establish better lines of communication between neighbors, MCHC, and FBPD to respond to immediate incidents and to problem-solve over time.

These conversations left me hopeful that we can work together to help address the needs of our businesses while crafting pro-active approaches to minimizing the impacts of homelessness in our community.