

Task Force takes on the complex issues of homelessness

WEDNESDAY, MAY 12

Spartanburg Homeless Task Force brings together community partners to find solutions



Spartanburg leaders appreciate that there are no simple solutions to the challenges of homelessness. As Beth Rutherford, director of the Spartanburg Interfaith Hospitality Network (SPIHN), put it, “This isn’t something you can fix in a week.”

The numbers on homelessness in Spartanburg bear that out. A count in 2020 found 201 people experiencing homelessness in Spartanburg, but service providers say it’s wise to assume the true number is likely 3-4 times higher than that.

But there’s a growing understanding that with strong partnerships and a spirit of collaboration, valuable progress is possible. And that was the guiding philosophy behind the creation of the Spartanburg Homeless Task Force in 2018.

“There’s no single organization or group that has all the resources, capacity, and expertise to address all the complex challenges of homelessness,” said Hannah Jarrett, director of financial stability with United Way of the Piedmont.

“If we want to prevent and end homelessness in our community, it will take all of us working together through a collaborative, coordinated approach.”

Assistant City Manager Mitch Kennedy echoed that sentiment. “We understand this challenge is too much for any entity to effectively address alone. The only way to create a truly holistic approach is to combine the strengths each organization brings to table,” he added.

The United Way leads the Homeless Task Force in partnership with the City of Spartanburg, OneSpartanburg Inc., and SPIHN.

The group has looked at the issue of homelessness from all angles, from the need for transitional housing and employment opportunities to law enforcement issues and support for area businesses.

Rutherford said the COVID-19 pandemic slowed the taskforce's early momentum. But she is pleased about several key successes:

- The Northwest Center, located in the Northside community, has become home to the [Spartanburg Opportunity Center](#), a day program where homeless individuals are provided with laundry service and showers, storage for personal belongings, fellowship, snacks, and shelter from harsh weather. Managed by SPIHN, the center has plans to expand job skills training and financial literacy programs.
- The task force plans to develop at least five **transitional housing** units. Families transitioning off the street or out of shelters will receive wrap-around services, including case management, for homeless families. The City has helped identify several properties, and SPIHN has secured funding to begin the project.
- In 2020, the City added the position of **homeless outreach and education coordinator** to provide information to homeless people about community health resources, job opportunities, and relief services.
- The [City's Homeless Court](#) was established in 2019. The court works with local law enforcement to promote treatment and rehabilitation programs for those who have committed misdemeanors. Participation may result in the dismissal of fines and, in some cases, charges altogether.

Rutherford is also excited about a partnership between SPIHN and the City to hire homeless individuals to clean up litter. In addition to a paycheck, those employed on the team will receive case management support one hour each week. Rutherford hopes the pilot program will get underway early this summer.

The Homeless Task Force has encouraged input from business owners, churches, school leaders and others with insights on the issue of homelessness in Spartanburg.

Rutherford was impressed by the pre-pandemic response. Downtown business owners, she noted, discussed nuisance issues and other challenges but expressed a "very compassionate" concern for the wellbeing of homeless people they've gotten to know.

"It's terrible to see people sleep outside on cold nights," said Tori James, co-owner of Two Doors Down, a boutique located in downtown. "These people are members of our community, and we care about how they're doing."

Like Rutherford, Jarrett is pleased by the traction efforts by the taskforce has gained so far. She sees this work as "a reflection" of our community's values and as a strategic priority as Spartanburg grows and evolves.

“Homelessness doesn’t just impact the people who are experiencing it,” she said. “If we want to move the needle on community indicators across the board – from education to economic mobility to health to development – we need to address challenges related to homelessness.”