



Matt Nazar  
Director of Development Services  
City of Augusta  
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September 29, 2016

Dear Members of Augusta City Council Planning Board:

I am the Executive Director for the Family Violence Project. Family Violence Project (FVP) has enjoyed a positive and mutually beneficial relationship with the City of Augusta for almost four decades. FVP provides comprehensive advocacy services for those affected by domestic violence. These services include emergency shelter, located in the neighborhood currently being discussed. FVP also offers a certified batterer intervention program, Menswork, for men who are ordered by a judge to complete the program. Our effectiveness relies on partnerships with all the institutions that make up a community; for ending domestic violence requires social awareness and change, as well as individual supports and advocacy for persons who are victims and concerned others.

We have been present at two recent public hearings, both times prepared to speak; each time electing not to, as we listened to planning board members and community folks expressing their concerns. We understand these problems from both a narrow and immediate perspective, as well as from the broader community/social/cultural lens. These are difficult and incredibly important problems our communities are confronting. We commend the City, including the Council and Planning Board members for taking the time to fully examine all sides of this complex issue. We recognize how challenging it is to make decisions when one is both personally impacted and professionally directed to consider the issues. We hope you are able to incorporate our thoughts into the discourse and that you understand we are available to participate toward solutions, in any meaningful manner. We work closely with other homeless providers, such as the Bread of Life Ministries, on a local, regional and statewide level to address homelessness and toward finding an end to it. Likewise, faith communities, for centuries, have offered basic community social service and outreach. We recognize that these leaders taught all of us how to build and sustain community; and how to help one another, understanding that the person in need is of us. Belongs to and with us; does not exist outside of us, but lives alongside us. When faith leaders speak, we listen. And...when our municipalities face challenges, we appreciate the role of local government in much the same way; with high regard and deep appreciation for the role.

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The individuals who are walking around town and gathering in downtown areas are here whether or not they are receiving shelter or other supportive services. For instance, the Bread of Life shelter is further out of town; yet, shelter residents come to the center of town during the day. They do this because the resources for daily living are found in town centers: access to food, medical care, safety, social connections, job seeking, social services, etc. In the same way that those of us who are not homeless conduct the business of our lives, folks without homes conduct their own daily routines. Without a home in which to live, they move around in the neighborhood and connect with others doing the same things. It is our experience that access to resources and supports, in as close a proximity as possible, has a positive impact in multiple directions: reduces barriers for those in need; increases likelihood that our most vulnerable citizens will overcome obstacles and become stably housed, with supports in place and/or meaningful employment that pays the bills; and strengthens the capacity of the community to enjoy safe neighborhoods, ample spaces for recreation, parking, congregating.

If we create policies that exclude any one neighborhood from providing additional shelter, supported group living facilities and/or other services, when and where they are needed, we believe the risk is increased for crime, homelessness, untreated mental health and substance abuse. We are concerned that the ordinances may have the opposite impact than what is intended. At Family Violence Project, for instance, our shelter facility is always full and we are not able to meet the demand for shelter that is requested by victims of domestic violence in our community. By and large, these are women, many with dependent children. When our beds are full, and when victims are unable to access other resources that will allow them to safely remain in place, many will choose to leave and take their chances with friends or even strangers who offer shelter from the cold. We call this couch-surfing, and it is often not a safe option for survivors with children. They find themselves in yet another unsafe situation, overcrowded, and they often experience further abuse. Sometimes victims remain in their homes with abusive partners. As we heard in the testimony presented, these homes and families are not safe, and their circumstances present as many risks in our communities as those who are living on the streets. Look no further than recent domestic violence homicide, which most often occurs in private dwellings, in our neighborhoods and communities. The fact that we do not see this violence does not mean it is not happening; nor are we any safer for being blind to it. And our linkages with faith communities, with and on behalf of survivors of abuse cannot be overstated. So many victims have turned to their own or a new faith community, for one kindness or to find a whole new community after their lives have been uprooted. Tying the hands of these vital community leaders is a grave disservice to individuals in need and to all of us, in being human together. Together, we find answers, with the people who are reaching out to us.

One of the greatest problems facing communities across the country is lack of affordable housing for individuals and families. Pioneering efforts include models such as Housing First, Rapid Re-housing, and Permanent Supportive Housing. Initiatives seek to reach those who are most difficult to house and who remain homeless longest (chronic homelessness). Maine's Continuums of Care, the Statewide Homeless Council, Regional Homeless Councils and local homeless working groups are addressing these critical needs in communities across Maine, including Augusta. Augusta is not only a local service seat it is the

city in which statewide policies are crafted. Augusta is home to Riverview and is the community that, by proximity and since 1990, has expanded to accommodate directives of the AMHI Consent Decree. We are presented with a changing and troubling 'face of homelessness' in families with children, veterans, women, youth, lgbt youth, persons with serious disabling conditions, and we are early in our knowledge of how to address these complex, often co-occurring needs. Yet, those who experience homelessness, poverty, unemployment, addiction, cognitive and physical disabilities, and who are victims of violence, abuse and trauma *are our people*. They are our neighbors, and they live in our communities, whether they live on the streets, in a shelter or other facility, an apartment, or in a home they own.

Unless my understanding is incorrect, Augusta does not have a homeless program; nor are there vouchers specifically set aside for the homeless. This might be one small step toward a solution. Augusta Housing Authority is an incredible resource with great leadership (we love Amanda!). Because Augusta does have a local homeless working group, made up of local service providers and municipal leaders, this might be a resource in determining how to move forward in a proactive manner. All of the voices at the table would include agencies such as ours and many others that see the issues and the people affected on a daily basis. If you were to convene a roundtable discussion, we would show up and gladly participate in robust conversation and problem-solving.

I heard it mentioned several times that a model such as that being implemented in the Portland area, whereby residents of the homeless shelter do not need to leave during the day, ought to be considered here. We agree. And we know that it costs an enormous amount of money to implement a shelter program that is adequately staffed 24 hours per day. Our shelter for victims of domestic violence is staffed during the day so that adult victims with young children are not required to leave. But we are not staffed overnight or on the weekends. And if you ask our staff or any Augusta police officer about the least stable times of day for our shelter, the answer is a resounding "evenings, overnights and weekends". We simply do not have the resources to provide 24-hour shelter staff. Furthermore, we cannot dictate the actions of adults. We can offer to provide services, access to food, linkages with other resources, etc. But any adults with whom we work can at any time, tell us that all they need is a safe place to lay their head for a few days. In other words, they may come and go as they please. Unless an adult is "incapacitated" no other adult may dictate their actions, unless there is a serious risk to their own life or that of another. This is true of any shelter program, as far as I am aware. Most people will take us up on our offers of support and access to services, and this increases the likelihood they will become stably housed and supported more quickly and for a longer period of time.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of assistance or to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for consideration of our concerns as you struggle with this challenging decision.

Most sincerely,

  
Melody Fitch  
Executive Director