



**WILSHIRE
COMMUNITY
COALITION**

222 S. Oxford Avenue, LA, CA 90004 | 213. 688. 2001 | wccinla@gmail.com | www.wilshirecommunity.org

September 6, 2018

Council President Herb J. Wesson, Jr.
Via Email: councilmember.wesson@lacity.org

Re: FOLLOWING UP ON THE MEETING ON AUGUST 2, 2018

Dear Council President Wesson,

The Wilshire Community Coalition (“WCC”) has held discussion sessions regarding the proposed Homeless Shelters in District 10 with both interested parties and experts on homelessness. We would like to summarize what was discussed and share with you some of the community’s requests, concerns and questions.

We appreciate you mentioning the importance of communication during your recent radio interview. We also believe that when we communicate, personally and truthfully, without outside motivations or agendas, we can resolve the issues together even when facing the most difficult questions. Some of the issues discussed below may not be easy to deal with or discuss, but we believe we can do this by both sides putting forth our greatest efforts.

Location of the New Shelter

Many community members still ask, if there is a better place to serve the homeless and minimize the impact to the community, shouldn’t we consider it?

The City of Los Angeles will spend millions of dollars on District 10’s new homeless shelters, not only for building the shelters, but also operating them. While some may agree with placing a shelter in the new site at Hoover and Wilshire, some others do not. They have expressed concerns that the procedural problems that have existed from the beginning of this process, i.e. lack of public input and an incomplete search for what truly is the best site to help the homeless, still exist now.

The City in early May initiated these discussions improperly, by unnecessarily creating the adversarial setting that we have been trying to correct for several months. Yet, there are still fundamental questions to be answered, from the point of view of the homeless persons for whom the shelters are being built. Their safety, their health, their privacy, and their freedom have all been placed at risk due to the failures of existing homeless shelters. If the new shelters do not address these issues, they, too, will fail.

Learning from Existing Shelters

Many of the homeless population living on the streets today have been refusing to go to existing shelters. The shelters have empty beds, but those living on the streets still do not want to use them, the reasons of which are:



1. Safety. The existing shelters are not safe. There have been many reports of physical attacks, sexual assaults, and vandalism.
2. Hygiene. The existing shelters are not clean. Poor hygiene has led to the spread of serious illnesses among the homeless population, such as the recent lethal outbreak of Hepatitis A.
3. Privacy. Existing shelters do not provide private areas for individuals, and little division between beds.
4. Freedom. Many homeless individuals do not wish to be limited by the rules of a homeless shelter.

Safety

Homeless individuals have complained that existing shelters are unsafe. If you become homeless and go to a shelter, you are housed with those suffering from drug addiction, alcoholism, and mental illness. Those living in shelters are forced to sleep in an open space together, leading to attacks and sexual assaults.

If we do not take measures to ensure the new shelters are operated in a much different manner than existing shelters, the same safety issues will be present.

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (“LAHSA”) has identified several categories of homeless individuals. These include families with children, adults, youths under 18 years of age, veterans, victims of domestic violence, sex trafficking victims, and individuals suffering from substance abuse disorders, serious mental illness, and physical illness and/or disability. Each category has become homeless for different reasons, and they each have different needs.

Many community members and experts say that the big picture, as it currently stands, is wrong. Hundreds of shelters presently accommodate everyone together, without serving the different needs of each category of homeless persons. This has caused the shelters to fail. The City must embrace a different big picture, one that provides different shelters for each category of homelessness. Otherwise, the homeless population will continue to avoid the new shelters and the new shelters will fail.

If the City provides separate shelters for each category of homeless persons, many concerns may be alleviated. For example, shelters for individuals who are homeless because of economic reasons may be able to focus on providing job training. Shelters for those suffering from substance abuse disorders may devote more resources to drug treatment programs. This approach may better serve homeless individuals and provide more effective treatment for those who need it.

Some may argue that the shelters should be built now without considering these issues, and the use of security officers or expert consultation can address these concerns. This is the approach currently employed by existing shelters, and it has failed.

We understand the new shelter at El Pueblo now has 3 trailers in each of which 15 homeless persons would be accommodated. The concern is how the safety of the 15 homeless persons in each trailer can be secured unless there would be security staffs and other experts staying in each trailer 24/7, which may not be practically viable, or even if we do so, would be a very inefficient way of operating the shelter only to unnecessarily waste money. With the above-suggested change of big picture, each shelter may operate more efficiently while spending less costs.



Rather than attempt to ease these problems after they have occurred, we urge the City to please address these problems before they begin. The homeless persons say existing shelters are not safe. We must think about how to designate each category of homeless shelter now, or face the same failures. We should stop the problems before they begin.

Hygiene

The homeless population has complained of numerous problems with hygiene at existing shelters, such as bed bugs and generally unclean conditions. Some feel that creating their own accommodations on the street is cleaner than living in a shelter.

In many cases, they are correct. Many of those living on the streets seek decent, clean, and quiet shelter, like everyone else, but homeless persons have complained that the shelters have failed to provide for these basic needs.

When the proposed shelters open, they will be clean and new. But when all of the shelters' new residents move in, they will be placed in an open space together. Some will keep their areas clean. Others will not. Some will be mindful of their personal hygiene, by keeping their clothes clean and taking regular showers. Some may refuse to do so. If shelter residents do not keep their areas clean or care for their personal hygiene, the shelters may not be clean enough to live in, like other existing shelters.

This becomes an issue, as there is no way to force individuals to keep the shelters or themselves clean without rules, but this arguably intrudes upon their personal freedom, which has been another reason why the homeless persons have complained about.

Privacy

Many homeless persons have complained that there is a lack of privacy in existing shelters, and have cited this as one of the reasons why they refuse to live in the shelters.

The new shelters are being designed without individual rooms, likely for safety reasons. Instead, areas for each individual resident will be separated by shoulder-height walls, making it easy for residents to see each other while they are sleeping.

Experts should be consulted for a better solution that balances the need for privacy with the need for safety. We want to hear from you on this issue as well. Unless a better option is found, the new shelters may go unused like other existing shelters.

Freedom

Many homeless persons have expressed their desire for freedom and stated that this is one reason why they continue to live on the streets. Many have avoided shelters because of shelter rules that they feel restrict their personal freedom. However, without some rules in place, other shelter residents are exposed to greater risks.

It is our understanding that the new shelters will not have sobriety rules. According to this approach, while shelter residents may not be allowed to drink alcohol or consume illegal substances in the shelters, they may do so outside of the shelters and enter shelters while under



the influence. This raises concerns regarding safety, hygiene, and privacy. While under the influence, shelter residents may become disruptive, aggressive, violent, or confrontational, exposing other shelter residents to noise, attacks, nuisances, and other dangers. Any security officers assigned to the shelters will be forced to say or do something, and suddenly a rule is in place.

Suggestions and Questions

1. No Response Yet to the Letter Sent by Wilshire Center–Koreatown Neighborhood Council

In mid-July, the Wilshire Center–Koreatown Neighborhood Council sent a formal letter to both you and Mayor Garcetti, raising many questions and making a number of requests regarding the proposed homeless shelters. As of today's date, no response has been received. We hereby request that you respond to this letter as soon as possible, as the community and the press are anxiously awaiting your response.

2. Request for an In-Person Meeting with You

We would ask you please meet with the Wilshire community residents face-to-face for real communications. The residents of the community would like to sit down with you and discuss their concerns, suggestions, and questions. They are also anxious to receive an in-person response from you.

We believe that hearing from each other among residents, experts and you would enhance the understanding about the existing plan on the new shelters and enable us to come up with even a better plan together. Furthermore, having met with you more than once, we believe that an in-person meeting with you would be an opportunity for all parties to share their points of view and find a much-needed middle ground.

We are requesting this meeting sooner than later. Many questions still remain, especially regarding the “big picture” plan for implementing the new shelters in District 10. This needs to be discussed as soon as possible. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure; if we wait until the current plan is already in motion, it will be costly and difficult to change course or address the problems that will arise. The issues with existing shelters demonstrate how challenging it can be to fix a problem once it has taken hold.

Based on the above, we suggest that you please allow the community meet with you in-person at least two times in the month of September.

3. Safety Issues

The City's current approach to homeless shelters is to bring all categories of homeless persons together in a single open space, without considering the special needs of each category. Many residents and experts on homelessness disagree with this method, and urge the City to designate each shelter, including existing shelters and the new shelters, to serve different categories of homeless persons.



Categorizing shelters will help in better serving homeless persons for their different needs, such as job training for those in shelters who are homeless due to economic reasons, drug and alcohol treatment plans for those suffering from substance abuse disorders, and medical care for residents who suffer from physical illnesses and disabilities.

The WCC asks that you please consider implementing this alternate approach, and if not, please provide your reasons for choosing another option.

4. Safety, Hygiene, Privacy, and Freedom

We understand that giving each resident separate rooms will create safety concerns. However, only separating each individual area with shoulder-height walls will create privacy issues, and the new shelter residents will complain.

The hygiene issues in existing shelters are also a serious problem, one that will plague the new shelters if it is not addressed before the shelters are built.

The issue of freedom in shelters is typically not raised by those who became homeless due to economic reasons. More often, it is a concern voiced by those suffering from substance abuse disorders who wish to be free from restrictions on their consumption.

These are difficult issues that have not been resolved by existing shelters, and will become a problem for the new shelters if they are not addressed now. The members of the WCC believe that the City should consult experts on homelessness, and may need additional data from existing shelters to formulate a more effective approach.

We would propose that District 10 provide different shelters for the different categories of homeless individuals. Doing so allows each shelter to address the particular needs of each group, which differ widely from one category to the next.

5. Drop-In Centers

Experts on homelessness have often recommended “drop-in centers” as a means to prevent temporary homelessness from becoming permanent.

There are many individuals who have become homeless solely due to economic reasons (e.g., they became unable to pay rent because they lost their jobs and had nowhere else to go). In such cases, the longer they get to stay on street, the harder for them to get new jobs to get off the street. Using drop-in centers, we can help them in making their unfortunate economic situation only temporary, and resolving their financial issues once a new job has been secured.

Drop-in centers are designed to provide housing during this temporary period between jobs. Residents are given temporary housing for three to nine months while they search for a new job, and they move out once a new job has been secured. Experts say this option would help many individuals avoid becoming permanently homeless.

Including drop-in centers as a type of homeless shelter offered by the City could help alleviate the City’s already severe homeless problem and slow its continued growth.



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6. Affordable Housing Projects

Your suggestion on August 2, 2018 included the projects of building affordable housings at both 682 S. Vermont Ave. and 923 S. Kenmore Ave. The community members want to know more about the details and the timeline you may have. Many of them expressed their concerns or suspicions that these projects may be delayed or canceled. It would help in addressing them if you could please share more details about your plan on the projects.

Conclusion

We would like to hear from you whether you have a plan that addresses these concerns, and what your thoughts are on these issues. The WCC asks that you please consider the issues discussed above and give us your responses thereto as soon as you can. In particular, we ask that you please, by September 14, 2018 provide potential dates for at least two in-person meetings between you and the Wilshire Community residents this month. The meetings will give all parties the opportunity to discuss the issues and work together to come up with the best solution.

Should you have any questions or need additional information, please contact me any time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chan Yong Jeong', is written over a horizontal line.

Chan Yong "Jake" Jeong, Esq.
President of Wilshire Community Coalition