

Human Rights Commission Proposed Policy Principles

The Human Rights Commission (HRC) welcomes the opportunity to meet with the City Council in the December 9, 2015, work session and, in accordance with our mandate, to present a human rights perspective on ways the City can move forward toward the goal of eliminating homelessness in Eugene.

We are greatly appreciative of the steps thus far taken by the Council in concert with the broader community to address some of the pressing needs of those in Eugene who are homeless. Despite these efforts there is no doubt that much more needs to be done, that homelessness in Eugene and across the state has been at crisis proportions for some time, and that it is indeed a statewide emergency situation as the Mayor has stated. From the HRC’s perspective, the continued existence of homelessness is not only a violation of the fundamental human right to housing, but is also a violation of human rights to personal security, health, and life itself.

It is in that spirit that the HRC urges the Council to consider formally adopting the following policy principles, principles that we believe are consistent with the City’s avowed commitment to the human rights framework:

1. The City of Eugene will seek to eliminate barriers that have unintended and negative human rights consequences, including making it more difficult for people who are homeless to access housing and jobs.
2. The City of Eugene is committed to working with other jurisdictions and the Eugene community to provide safe and legal places to be for all who lack shelter as well as those who have the capability of self-sheltering.
3. The City of Eugene is committed to the Housing First Model. This model prioritizes placement of all homeless persons in permanent housing, thereby recognizing the human right to housing.

1. The City of Eugene will seek to eliminate barriers that have unintended and negative human rights consequences, including making it more difficult for people who are homeless to access housing and jobs.

City ordinances, codes, and policies intended to guide the behavior of all residents can and do at times have disproportionately negative consequences for people who are homeless. This disparate impact is often inadvertent and yet is harmful in its human impact. The U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development have asked that cities eliminate practices that even unintentionally punish unhoused people for engaging in necessary life-sustaining activities, such as sleeping and sheltering from the elements, activities that must be carried out in public spaces in the absence of alternatives. A police record of citations and arrests for such necessary activities functions as a barrier to individuals’ acceptance by potential employers and landlords.

The City needs to implement alternatives to what international human rights and U.S.

Federal agencies are calling the “criminalization of homelessness.” Besides greatly expanding shelter opportunities while pursuing permanent housing for all (see 2 and 3 below), such alternatives should include taking steps to progressively modify and lift the camping ban. Other City actions could include the establishment of additional homeless day centers so more people have a safe and legal place to be; creation of a specialty court that can cleanse minor offenses from individuals’ records and offer referrals to assistance in lieu of punishment for “quality of life” offenses; enhancing collaboration between service providers and law enforcement in conducting outreach to individuals who are homeless so as to limit arrests for non-violent offenses; mandating specialized homeless crisis intervention training for EPD officers; and, contracting with Cahoots as a 24/7 service provider. In addition, we urge the Council to pass a motion requesting that the City Manager call upon experts, including those associated with the National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty, for advice on creating a smooth glide path for implementing such alternatives to criminalization so that the City of Eugene stands out as a national human rights model in this regard.

2. The City of Eugene is committed to working with other jurisdictions and the Eugene community to provide safe and legal places to be for all who lack shelter as well as those who have the capability of self-sheltering.

Placing people who are homeless in permanent housing in the face of a shortage of low income or affordable housing in Eugene promises to be a slow process. In the interim, our community needs to find as well as create additional safe and legal places to be for those who lack shelter or who can self-shelter, e.g. in tents or vehicles. In addition, the benefits of a public shelter located in Eugene must be assessed, the public informed, and action taken to implement a public shelter plan. The Lane County Poverty and Homelessness Board (PHB), which has representatives from three jurisdictions, can help by acting as a coordinating body to make sure that the County, Eugene, and Springfield are all involved in this process. The City of Eugene can display leadership by working more proactively with local businesses, our spiritual communities, and neighborhood associations so that there is much wider participation in providing opportunities for shelter and this participation becomes a community norm. Providing such safe and legal places to be will also reduce the vulnerability of people who are homeless to being punished for performing necessary life-sustaining activities in public spaces.

3. The City of Eugene is committed to the Housing First Model. This model prioritizes placement of all homeless persons in permanent housing, thereby recognizing the human right to housing.

Members of the Lane County PHB, of which Mayor Piercy is a member, are pursuing funding for projects that would expand implementation of the Housing First Model in Eugene, and the Mayor has frequently spoken of the importance and value of using this model in our city. However, the City Council has not to date formally endorsed use of the Housing First Model as a policy principle. Doing so would aid the PHB, City staff, the HRC, and other groups in presenting and explaining this model to the broader community and thereby facilitate its implementation in Eugene. We thus urge the Council to adopt a resolution endorsing implementation of the Housing First Model as a priority for Eugene.