HOMELESSNESS IN HUNTSVILLE
Concerned community members gather again to tackle a growing problem head-on

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Community members, elected officials and directors from multiple organizations came together in late January to discuss the growing issue of homelessness in Huntsville in hopes of shining some light on this growing problem as part of The Center for Community Engagement’s “Homelessness in Huntsville” initiative.

On Friday, the effort continued as people from the community gathered in the Teacher Education Building on the Sam Houston State University campus during a special roundtable discussion.

“This is just the beginning,” said the center’s executive director, Joyce McCauley. “We had a panel discussion and read all of your responses from that and they were very helpful. The need was where do we go now?”

Center director Lee Miller added, “The goal of this meeting today is that we hope you will have productive discussions at each table and that you will come up with at least one action step for each of our topics.”
The 30 community members who participated in last week’s discussion had the opportunity to choose from five different factors that surround homelessness that they would like to discuss and focus on the most.

The categories included mental health, unemployment and low wages, disabilities, family instability and housing. Each group discussed key talking points in respect to their chosen factor, and what steps could be taken to possibly find a solution.

After about 40 minutes of brainstorming, each group presented what they discussed and the action step they developed.

The mental health table, which consisted of Miller, Good Shepherd Mission director Dave Smith and others, said they didn’t want a complicated approach. They wanted to develop something that would “fill in the gaps.”

“We were thinking about community and the ways we can get more expansive training to family and community members,” Miller said. “We want to train them about how to identify mental health symptoms, resources, de-escalation and rapid psychological assessment techniques so they are empowered and know how to help their neighbor or family member.”

Zachary Doleshal, a lecturer in the history department, discussed how the Huntsville community could develop classes and use local resources to educate people about housing, and to develop ways to identify those who are homeless in the community.

“Oh, obviously, we need to identify and have a greater sense of who is homeless,” Doleshal said. “I know Huntsville ISD has a good sense of that, but we need it in a broader sense, especially at Sam Houston. We have a really tight housing market here and we discussed ways we can build. We have land, but not a lot of housing.”

Taylor Morrison, program coordinator for the center, discussed family insecurity with Huntsville ISD Superintendent Howell Wright, Deputy Superintendent Gregory Rodriguez, president of the Huntsville-Walker County Chamber of Commerce Carol Smith and others.

The action step they developed was to do asset mapping to see what local resources currently exist, where the gaps are in terms of family insecurity and what needs to be created to fill those gaps.

“We talked about potentially creating a homeless coalition that can apply for federal and state funds to access more types of money for housing outside of what we get,” Morrison said. “We also talked about what we could be doing in the meantime, because that is a huge undertaking. We talked about an awareness campaign and types of services and resources that we can give to families, kind of like a list of available options that are already in existence while we get something else into place.”

Rebecca Wentworth, assistant professor in the College of Education, presented what her group came up with when discussing those living with disabilities.

“Disabilities can be a cause of homelessness or the other way around. One of the things that we discussed was about simply listening to these people in this situation about their needs and wants,” Wentworth said. “We are coming from a very different place and their needs are different than ours. We talked about having access to insurance for medication. We also talked about breaking down the stereotypes of what homelessness really is, and developing a real doable action plan that addresses the real underlying problems.”

Daniel Mabry, who works with Workforce Solutions in the Houston-Galveston area, discussed how his group talked about needing to raise minimum wage to a livable wage for working parents, as well as discussing future plans with students.

“We need to catch students before they graduate from high school to see if they are planning to go to college or get a certification in a trade,” Mabry said. “I think it is important to identify training opportunities and those resources to help make them more accessible to everyone and not just high school students.”

The center plans on having another Homelessness in Huntsville event in April. To stay up to date on upcoming events, visit www.shsu.edu/academics/cce/.