



**MINUTES  
HOMELESS ACTION COMMITTEE  
SPECIAL MEETING  
WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2024- 3:00PM  
Lawton City Hall  
3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Conference Room  
212 SW 9<sup>th</sup> Street  
Lawton, Oklahoma 73501**

Chairman Harris called the meeting to order at 3:00 PM. in the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor conference room of City Hall.

**STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE WITH OKLAHOMA OPEN MEETING ACT, 25 O.S. 301-314**

Meeting notice and agenda were posted by the City Clerk's Office as required by State Law.

**ROLL CALL:**

**PRESENT:** Kelly Harris, Allan Hampton, Mary Ann Hankins, Sherene L. Williams, Bernita Taylor, Melissa Simms

**ABSENT:** Terri Lee

**OTHERS PRESENT:** John Ratliff, City Manager; Tammy Huffman, City Manager's Office; Cynthia Williams, City Manager's Office; John Andrew, City Attorney; Garrett Lam, City Attorney's Office; Tammy Branstetter, City Clerk's Office; Anthony Garibay & Heath Want, City Marshall's Office; Christine James, Planning Director; Ronald Dimmitt, Police Department; Tanna Vu, Alternate 3; Kim McConnell, Lawton Constitution; Colin Henderson, Member of the Community

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**INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS**

All Committee members and City of Lawton staff present at the meeting introduced themselves.

**BUSINESS ITEMS**

1. Discuss an ordinance pertaining to offenses and crimes by creating section 16-3-1-325, division 16-3-1, article 16-3, Chapter 16, Lawton City Code, 2015; by adding language to define camping and public property, adding language to penalize unauthorized camping in non-designated areas, and adding language to create a misdemeanor and penalty provision and make a recommendation to the Lawton City Council.

Garrett Lam, City Attorney's Office, provided background information on this item. A copy of the proposed ordinance may be obtained from the City Clerk's Office upon request.

Lam said he drafted this ordinance to closely follow what's going to be enacted in state law in November, though it doesn't mirror it identically. He said staff set out to give definitions in the beginning of this ordinance for what camping and public property would be. Following that, it's pretty close to the state law.

Lam said the proposed ordinance states that, “no person may utilize public property for the purpose of establishing an un-authorized camp”.

Lam said the penalty provision, which follows state law, states that, “any person who violates this section shall, upon conviction, be guilty of a misdemeanor punishable by a fine not to exceed Fifty Dollars (\$50.00) or by imprisonment in the city jail not to exceed fifteen (15) days, or by both such fine and imprisonment. However, a person who commits a first violation of this section shall be issued a warning, and a citation may not be issued unless the person refuses any assistance offered to them by the arresting officer. Such assistance may include, but is not limited to, information about or transportation to a shelter, food pantry, or other place where resources are made available to assist the indigent and unhoused”.

John Andrew, City Attorney, said we try to mirror our criminal ordinances to state statute – this ordinance would do that. According to the ordinance, Andrew said the first offense must be a warning. A citation may only be issued if any assistance is refused. Andrew said he thinks this will help drive more people to assistance.

Williams asked why the imprisonment period is for so many days while the fine is only \$50.

Andrew said the penalty provision mirrors state law.

Lam noted that the ordinance states a *maximum* penalty of 15 days – this just gives a limitation on the number of days a person could potentially serve.

Chairman Harris asked if we could do public service as well.

John Ratliff, City Manager, said the judge has that discretion.

Ronald Dimmit, Lawton Police Department, asked what officers are to do if no availability is found to provide people with assistance.

Andrew said because these people have not refused services, a citation would not be issued.

Dimmit asked if we need to have a set location to take these people to.

Andrew said this is something we probably need to figure out internally as a policy.

Hampton said he recently spoke with officer Dimmit, and they think we need some type of community service (e.g. picking up shopping carts) tied to the homeless community so it brings awareness to them of what their community is doing to our community, in a sense.

Hampton noted that not all Wards deal with a lot of homeless people. Hampton said he has a lot of businesses in his Ward. Hampton said he’s had some businesses that have had violent altercations with homeless people. He said they’ve also been having issues with homeless people sleeping behind businesses, panhandling in their parking lots and urinating and defecating on their property.

Taylor said she knows there are a lot of homeless people in Ward 5 – this will be highlighted in her report. However, Taylor said she doesn’t believe the citation will be able to solve any of the issues at this time.

Hampton said he thinks it will make a statement to the community of what the City of Lawton will and will not accept.

Taylor said this ordinance is about camping – what Hampton is talking about is regarding issues that businesses are facing due to the people experiencing homelessness. She doesn’t think this

ordinance is going to affect the issues going on in Ward 5. However, Taylor said the Housing Task Force Outreach Team is in Ward 5 the most working with the homeless.

Hampton said he appreciates that. He was simply sharing situations that he's having to deal with that he does believe touch on this ordinance in that some of the homeless are camping out at businesses for an extended period of time.

Taylor asked for clarification on the definition of camping as outlined in the ordinance.

Lam said camping means to, "to reside or dwell temporarily in a place, with shelter, The term "shelter" includes without limitation, any tent, tarpaulin, lean-to, sleeping bag, shanty, bedroll, blankets, or any form of cover or protection from the elements other than clothing".

Williams said she's been having issues with the homeless around Discount Foods at 13<sup>th</sup> Street and Lee Boulevard. She said it's affecting the businesses in this area – customers are afraid to go inside the stores.

Ratliff said he would like to see a subparagraph "D" added that talks about exceptions for authorized camping activities such as Scouts and other organizations. He said he's seen similar exceptions carved out in other municipal ordinances that are anticamping inside city limits.

Lam asked if we have something in City Code stating that there are places designated for camping.

Christine James, Planning Director, said there are designated locations, but they are out at the lakes, which is outside of city limits.

Ratliff noted that the City of Lawton still owns property at the lakes. He said people do occasionally camp out at Elmer Thomas Park, which has required a waiver.

Dimmit noted that you have to have a permit to camp at the lake, which means you can still illegally camp there.

Dimmit said officers can't write a ticket to the homeless – all they can do it take them to jail. He asked if this ordinance is suggesting that officers can now start writing tickets to the homeless.

Lam asked Dimmit where this policy came from.

Dimmit said officers do not have the means to fine the homeless (e.g. no mailing address).

Ratliff said this would be a practically issue – there is nothing in law that states officers have to do things this way. He asked Dimmit if he was referring to some sort of policy.

Dimmit said it is what officers have been doing for the last 19 years.

Andrew said he gets the reasoning behind it because there is no way to follow up, but the city does have a right to issue citations to the homeless. Andrew said the city would just have to change their procedure.

Chairman Harris asked Andrew to investigate how the police department's procedure of taking the homeless to jail was established.

Andrew said he will find out.

Chairman Harris said it's his understanding that if a clothed person lays down and goes to sleep on someone's property, it is *not* considered camping.

Lam said this would be considered loitering – not camping.

Andrew said this could also be considered trespassing. He said there's not really a loitering statute, but there is a trespassing one.

Simms asked if a person laying down somewhere with a blanket when it's cold outside would be considered camping (because of the blanket).

Andrew said according to the ordinance, this would be considered camping.

Taylor said some of the community service needs to go towards helping pick up trash within the City of Lawton.

Chairman Harris said the City of Lawton has regulations for community service.

Andrew clarified that state statute only covers state owned land.

Hampton asked Dimmit if he feels this ordinance would be enforceable for the police department.

Dimmit said absolutely – the biggest hurdle on our end will be manpower.

Andrew said his hope is that the city never prosecutes anyone on this – we're not trying to criminalize everything but rather drive people into getting the assistance they need.

Dimmit said he is worried there will not be enough room in the shelters for these people.

Taylor said we will never have enough room at the shelters. She noted that resources are more than shelters.

Andrew said the only other solution would have been for the city to have a set piece of public property to send people to stay. The city would have to first designate which area(s) this would be.

Lam said this ordinance doesn't require officers to transport the homeless. The ordinance states that, "...assistance may include, but is not limited to, information about or transportation to a shelter, food pantry, or other place where resources are made available to assist the indigent and unhoused".

**Motion** by Hampton, **Second** by Harris, to recommend to the City Council approval of the proposed ordinance, with the amendment to add a subparagraph "D" addressing authorized camping activities on public property. **AYE:** Taylor, Hampton, Hankins, Harris, Simms, Williams. **NAY:** None. **MOTION PASSED.**

2. Discuss the possibility of placing QR codes on the panhandling signs that are being installed through the City of Lawton and take action as deemed necessary.

Chairman Harris said Tanna Vu approached him highlighting that these signs are encouraging people to give to charities, but it doesn't tell them where to go to do this. Chairman Harris said

the QR Code could lead citizens to a list of charities they can donate to. He said the QR Code could also provide a link to a list of the services we'd like the homeless to go to.

Chairman Harris said if it's established that you will be able to donate by scanning a QR Code, then we would need to determine who will handle the money and/or designate where the money goes.

Taylor said the Lawton Housing Resource Center will not be the ones to handle the money.

Hampton asked staff to look at how other municipalities might be incorporating QR Codes in a similar way.

Dimmit said it would be nice to see the QR Code provide a link to a list of the services we'd like the homeless to go to.

Ratliff said this is a great point, but he's wondering if the QR Code will be large enough to scan if you're sitting in your vehicle at a stoplight.

Vu said when she was at United Way, she created a QR Code that hyperlinks to a list of community resources broken down by category.

Ratliff noted that the panhandling signs that are being installed are not for the homeless – they're for the citizens to encourage donating to charities. He's concerned citizens will not be able to scan the QR Code from their vehicles.

Chairman Harris said this might cause a distraction for drivers.

Ratliff said this would be a potential public safety concern, but it would be no worse than people stopping to give money to the homeless.

Colin Henderson, member of the community, said he is a servant of Jesus and a street minister in the community. He thanked the Committee for letting him speak. He suggested the city share a flyer with information about the campaign on social media and let the community circulate it.

Ratliff said the QR Code could be released to the public if the City Council approves the ordinance.

Heath Want, Fire Marshall's Office, suggested the city use the billboard at NW Sheridan Road and NW Cache Road to post a QR Code that's large enough to scan from vehicles.

Taylor noted that billboards are expensive.

Ratliff recommended that the Committee direct staff to come back with a plan on implementing QR codes at different locations throughout the city to either accompany panhandling signs, or to use other alternatives as recommended.

Tony Garibay, Fire Marshall's Office, suggested the city utilize digital marquees within the community to display the QR code.

Ratliff said he will look into this.

**Motion by Hampton, Second by Williams**, to direct staff to come back with a plan on implementing QR codes at different locations throughout the city for the purpose of helping

charities, providing services for the homeless and assisting enforcement. **AYE:** Taylor, Hampton, Hankins, Harris, Simms, Williams. **NAY:** None. **MOTION PASSED.**

3. Receive a report from Bernita Taylor regarding the Lawton Housing Resource Center and provide direction to staff.

Taylor gave a report regarding the Lawton Housing Resource Center. A copy of the report may be obtained from the City Clerk's Office upon request.

Taylor said MIGHT purchased a GIS system for the Lawton Housing Resource Center to track data related to the individuals they've come in contact with. She said the report details the location of where the contact was made, the person's name, where they are from and what they discussed with the person.

Taylor said the role of the Prevention Team, which is ran by Tanna Vu, is to keep people from being evicted. In Vu's statistical report, you will find the date that her Committee met, how many people were in attendance and what organizations were represented. You will also find in the report how many people received evictions and how many hearings there were. Defaults mean they didn't show up to their hearing and they were automatically evicted. The goal of the Prevention Team is to come up with a way to work with sheriffs and legal aid to touch these people before their hearing date to avoid them being evicted for not showing up. Vu's next meeting will be held on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Taylor said the Post Care Committee collaborates with the Comanche County Health Department and the Comanche County Memorial Hospital. Taylor said that from November of 2023 to date, 105 patients have been discharged from the hospital with no place to go and while they were still in need of medical care. The Post Care Team is trying to catch these people as much as they can to get them as much help as they can to prevent them from being released to the streets while still in need of medical care.

Taylor discussed the Mental Health & Case Management Team. This Committee last met in August. She said each Committee needs case managers in mental health. She said this team is trying to make it where we can refer people to case managers.

Hankins asked if they need more case managers.

Taylor said it's not so much that we need more case managers, but we need a way for them to better collaborate with people experiencing homelessness.

Taylor said they have developed a website for the public to use for the purpose of helping the city better understand the homelessness situation in our community and for a means to discuss possible solutions. She said the website is almost ready to be launched. She said they would like for the website to be shared on the City of Lawton's website. Taylor said she will send staff a link to this website.

Taylor said Vets for Life came in during their last meeting. They are working with agencies to create a "virtual booth" where people can visit to get information on all available resources.

Taylor said they are in the process of requesting funds and drawing up the contract to purchase property at the Roosevelt School. She said this project will cost \$3.5 million. \$827,000 will come from the City of Lawton, and the rest of the money will be raised. She said they will be looking at a lot of funding sources. Taylor said they really want this to be a community thing. All the resources will be in this one building and will remain open during normal business hours on the

daytime side of the facility. Taylor said the Resource Center will also house a shelter that holds two beds for people discharged from the hospital who are still in need of medical care as well as ten rooms to house families of 6-8 people. Taylor said there will be security at the facility.

Taylor said operational costs will probably be around \$120,000 per year. She said the plan for later down the road is to have tiny homes behind the shelter for transitional housing. This way, people can move from the shelter to transitional housing before setting them up with a permanent residence.

Chairman Harris asked if drugs and alcohol will be tolerated.

Taylor said no – if someone has a drug or alcohol related issue they need to go to rehab.

Colin Hendersen asked if citizens will still be able to gather together in public spaces and pray.

Andrew said the ordinance says nothing about this.

Hendersen asked what would happen if several people who looked homeless were sleeping outside of the library at 1:30AM.

Dimmit said officers would respond to the location and offer them shelter and resources.

Hendersen said what if they asked to stay.

Hampton said he's sure the police officer that came to check it out would take all things into consideration. He doesn't believe anyone's rights would be violated.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

**Motion** by Hampton, **Second** by Hankins, to adjourn the September 4, 2024 meeting. **AYE:** Taylor, Hampton, Hankins, Harris, Simms, Williams. **NAY:** None. ***MOTION PASSED.***

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 4:05 PM.