Opinion: Homelessness in Austin - A way forward

By Philip R. Berber

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None of us want to see the homeless on the streets of Austin. Many have voiced their fear, concern and anger following recent changes in a city ordinance that allows the homeless to sit, stay and have tents in public places. This has amplified the visibility of homelessness on our streets and created a backlash. Tents and cardboard makeshift coverings are springing up and appearing more than ever. As a result, the shock and dismay felt by local residents is completely understandable.

Currently, Austin has 2,200 people living on the streets. There are over 6,000 in cities like Las Vegas, Boston, Phoenix, Washington, D.C. and San Jose. Seattle has 12,000. That’s what we need to avoid. Austin can significantly reduce both its homeless population and public dollars spent on homelessness by learning from these cities. What worked and failed? What are the most effective strategies and policies?

“Housing First” is a proven approach that redirects and invests funds from supporting the homeless on the streets to getting them off the streets. It offers permanent, affordable housing and the supportive services needed. It has been successful in many cities in the U.S. and abroad.

Additionally, it’s also going to take a public-private partnership of leaders and organizations committed to and experienced in reducing homelessness. We need to bring together the City of Austin, the business community, property owners, real estate developers, homeless agencies and nonprofits, as well as the philanthropic community and faith-based organizations.

The city has already removed 680 veterans from the streets. This success serves as a perfect example of what can be achieved when the city partners with local organizations and stakeholders. The city also recently announced plans for a 100-bed shelter in South Austin and it is looking for additional potential housing throughout the city. It is proposing $62 million for homelessness in next year’s budget, an increase of $17 million.

Austin also has a deep and committed group of homeless agencies. Mobile Loaves & Fishes, Caritas, LifeWorks, Front Steps, SAFE, Foundation Communities, Salvation Army, Green Doors, St. Louise House and ECHO are prime examples. All of them bring experience and have played an important role in housing and sheltering homeless people. More than ever, these agencies and leaders will need to collaborate.

Community First Village is a community of tiny homes and RVs in East Austin that has helped over 200 people come off the streets by offering housing and support. Visitors are coming from the U.S. and abroad to learn how this innovative organization has built this supportive and expanding community for the formerly homeless. It plans to add 300 more housing units, and recently revealed an ambitious plan to expand further. Community First has the potential to reduce Austin’s homelessness by half! They are a key component to reducing homelessness in Austin – and garner private and philanthropic support.

Next month Austin welcomes Lori Pampilo Harris, the city’s newly recruited homeless strategy officer. In a similar role, she helped Orange County, Fla., reduce homelessness from 2,900 to 1,200 in three years. In Orlando, the “Mayor’s Housing First Initiative” was central to their success, resulting in savings to Orlando of almost $20,000 per homeless person annually.

It’s more cost-effective to house the homeless than provide the police, medical, judicial and emergency services required on the streets. Now is the time for people, plans and resources to come together to reduce homelessness in a sustainable way, for the well-being of all Austinites. It won’t happen overnight, yet there is a path forward – and a will and way to get this done.

Berber is the founder and chairman of Glimmer Austin, a local family foundation focused on alleviating and breaking the cycle of poverty.