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Haverhill Prepares for Virus Surge Among Homeless ‘When It Happens;’ First Responder Help

By **John Lee Grant** | April 2, 2020



Haverhill City Councilor Timothy J. Jordan. (WHAV News file photograph by Jay Saulnier.)

An unused wing of a local hotel and a former school soon to undergo renovation are among options available should a “surge” of the coronavirus move through Haverhill’s homeless population.

Recognizing the virus could spread quickly in such close quarters such as at Emmaus House and Mitch’s Place in Haverhill, Councilor Timothy J. Jordan Tuesday night called for the city to be prepared if outside agencies need help.

“We need to have a plan in place for, as when I’ve spoken on multiple occasions with Emmaus’s executive director Jeanine Murphy, in her words, when it happens not if it happens,” Jordan said.

Mayor James J. Fiorentini told the Council he has secured an empty wing at the Best Western hotel and a potential alternative. "They have agreed that if there is a problem at the Emmaus House, that we can move people up there. We also have a backup to the backup in the person who has bought St. Joseph's school and is remodeling it has said that we can house people there. He's working with the archdiocese, I don't think he's closed on it yet, for them to turn the heat on."

Jonathan Cody of Atlantis Investments recently received approval to convert the former Catholic school into 36 market rate apartments.

Other councilors raised suggestions ranging from using the high school gymnasium to closed college dorms. Councilor Joseph J. Bevilacqua also floated the idea of creating a makeshift village in one of the city's parks.

"One of the ideas that I've been thinking about is to do what the city of Lawrence did during the recent gas disaster and that is they took a city park and they brought in trailers and they housed people that were forced to leave their home and they lived in the trailers in a very safe, clean environment," he said.

The mayor responded he has a possible line on some large tents that could be set up for that purpose and would try and get that ball rolling.

Councilor Michael S. McGonagle also expressed concern over the possible need for housing for first responders. He explained such responders would not wish to return to their homes and risk infecting their families after working on the front lines

Councilors voted unanimously to also send a letter to Gov. Charlie Baker asking for a contingency plan for not only Haverhill but the entire county.

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