

Class proposes new department for those who help homeless community

Homeless:

CITY By Jamie Berry

Transcript Staff Writer

An eighth-grade class is offering a proposal to the city council that they hope will help those who help the homeless.

Kenady Maynard's Alcott Middle School fifth-hour U.S. history class, working with Generation Citizen, would like Norman to have a department or sub-department within the city for organizations that help the homeless. Generation Citizen is an organization that ensures that every student receives an effective action civics education.

Class members Charles Zacher and Matthew Ely said the class of 28 students decided to tackle homelessness and discovered that the bulk of funding for homeless services comes from outside the city.

“We believe with some

See **HOMELESS** Page A2

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From **Page A1** hard work we are able to change this,” Zacher and Ely wrote in an email. “If a new department is made, then it could have many positive impacts on the community. ... We also think that if we raise awareness we could have community members help to support us, which could help sway decision makers to fund homelessness.”

The students said many organizations that help the homeless offer more than meals and a roof to sleep under for a night. Other services include either temporary or long-term housing and teaching life skills.

“With the help of the public and the City of Norman government, we can help change the lives of the homeless. ... and the endless family line of homelessness could be ended. We must be the ones to pave the path forward,” Ely and Zacher wrote.

Mayor Lynne Miller said some of the students involved in the proposal spoke to her briefly after a city council meeting.

“I look forward to meeting and hearing their ideas,” Miller said. “I’m always encouraged to see civicminded young people.”

Norman, however, isn’t passive when it comes to helping those in the homeless community.

Michelle Evans, city of Norman homeless program coordinator, said the city is the lead agency in a continuum of care that covers Cleveland County, which includes about 40 agencies. The COC receives \$410,000 from federal and \$165,733 from state.

“This money is dedicated to helping the homeless,” Evans said.

She said every state is required to have a COC and Oklahoma has eight, with Norman ranking the fourth largest.

Evans wrote in an email that the COC is a program designed to promote community- wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness, provide funding for efforts to quickly rehouse homeless individuals and families, promote access to and effect utilization of mainstream programs by homeless individuals and families, and optimize self-sufficiency for these individuals.

Evans said she has had her position since the city created the post six years ago, which shows how proactive the city has been in addressing the issue of homelessness.

She said Norman’s homeless program has an 85 percent success rate and is used as an example statewide and nationally.

Evans said the clients usually present themselves to the COC, or COC members find them at one of eight to 10 large homeless encampments in Norman.

She said these encampments aren’t safe due to the living conditions and also scare some residents. Evans partners with Norman Police Lt. Cary Bryant at these encampments.

Residents can call the Norman police or Evans to report sightings, so the COC and Norman police can step in and help. Evans is available at 366-5434 or michelle.evans@normanok.gov.

She said they don’t want to criminalize those in the homeless but instead want to offer them assistance.

Evans said Norman has seen an uptick in the homeless community over the last two years, but she believes it’s because more are becoming homeless and more are moving here because of the services offered.

Evans said some people in the homeless community have told her they moved to Norman because they know Norman will take care of them.

Also, a homeless resource expo is hosted every quarter in Norman, allowing those in the homeless community access to services and any paperwork they may need to gain services and employment.

Evans wrote that since 2015, 62 veterans and 130 chronic homeless people have been housed throughout Norman and the county.

Within the city, Evans said she works directly with grants manager Lisa Krieg. However, she regularly meets with the COC members and discusses cases, focusing on housing first. Once someone in the homeless community has their own home, which they usually obtain through partner agencies, some other elements can fall into place.

She said sometimes the meetings will last several hours, and in emergency cases, members will literally meet for as long as it takes to get a client housing.

She said the COC hosts a quarterly gathering for residents to ask questions and help come up with solutions to help those in the homeless community, but not many people come.

She said she appreciates the eighth-graders being interested and getting involved in finding solutions. However, having a designated department wouldn’t change as much as having more residents involved in helping efforts to end homelessness.

“It’s going to take all of us,” she said.

Social Security Administration Public Affairs Officer Jose Olivero helps get money squared away during the Homeless Resource Expo Tuesday at Norman Public Library Central.

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