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## Live Well holds public forum on homelessness

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PITTSBURG, Kan. — Late Tuesday morning, Live Well Crawford County (LWCC) hosted a public forum at Memorial Auditorium in Pittsburg, inviting those who have experienced homelessness, those who are currently homeless, those that may soon become homeless, and those who advocate for them.

"We are here to listen," said Brad Stroud, executive director of LWCC. The public forum encouraged those who have been or currently are homeless to share their experiences with community members and advocates to help with decision-making about what to do to try to better their situation.

Live Well recently received a \$35,000 Communities Organizing to Promote Equity (COPE) grant through the University of Kansas and decided to host the event to get ideas about helping the homeless by asking the homeless what they need.

With Matt O'Malley, LWCC's director of outreach and development, acting as a facilitator, those gathered added to an existing list of priorities for the homeless that included access to food and hygiene products; access to medical, mental health, and addiction services; and access to storage and transportation services.

Discussion immediately began with the idea of creating an overnight facility so people can get out of inclement weather, which would be properly staffed by trained personnel, with access to showers and something to sleep on — a bed, cot, or mat, it didn't matter. Any shelter needs to be a structured environment, be safe, and have space for families, event attendees said.

Suggestions of buying and renovating any one of a number of abandoned buildings were discussed, but O'Malley and Stroud pointed out that \$35,000 only goes so far.

Many of the people in attendance heard about the forum through contacts at the Community Health Center of Southeast Kansas (CHCSEK), some saw it on flyers at Walmart, and others only heard about it through the grapevine only a couple of hours beforehand.

Facebook and Twitter posts aren't effective because most homeless people don't have unlimited access to the internet or even a device to connect to the internet. Communication is very much by word of mouth. Flyers posted at locations frequented by those in need, such as Walmart, CHCSEK, various pavilions and picnic shelters around the city, churches and charity organizations, are the best method of communication, event attendees said. One gentleman suggested advertising on local radio stations.

24-hour restrooms were another suggestion. According to the people present, the city locks public restrooms after hours and during the winter. Leaving these facilities unlocked would be a big help to the homeless, giving them a brief respite from the weather and a place to clean their face and hands.

Event attendees also said that issues with low-income housing need to be addressed. Many of those present were frustrated by application fees of \$25 or more with no guarantee of approval. Vouchers for housing or hotels are often not honored, and being on any kind of probation, no matter how minor the offense, is grounds for disqualification.

Several said that the word "homeless" needs to be redefined as more than just sleeping outside for a night. The current definition, according to those present, excludes anyone who has a roof over their head. One man said he was declined services because he slept in his car and was not considered homeless; another said he was declined because he was couch-surfing among friends.

Many of the homeless people at the event said they have appointments to keep. Some are for medical reasons; others are financial or even job-related. Those with children cannot always have their kids tag along with them but need some sort of temporary child care so they can take care of business without worrying about their kids, they said.

Drawing the discussion to a close, O'Malley asked those present to vote on their top six priorities of the 17 listed. After two rounds of voting, the group narrowed the list down to the six biggest priorities. Acquiring an overnight shelter topped the list, followed by 24/7 restrooms, transportation, food and hygiene, and resource sharing.

Stroud said this meeting was about setting priorities based on input of those who need it most. No decisions were going to be made Tuesday. Stroud also acknowledged there is only so much that can be done with \$35,000, which means an overnight shelter is probably not happening in the near future.

"There are too many stereotypes about the homeless," Stroud said. "And they are all virtually untrue." While there are some who are voluntarily homeless, the vast majority are not, said Stroud, adding that they were put in this situation by circumstance.

A later meeting, still to be scheduled, will be held at the Pittsburg Public Library to determine which of the six items are to be prioritized based on need and availability of funds.