

Beaumont has \$1.2M to ease virus' economic hardships

By *Kaitlin Bain* Updated 11:15 am CDT, Monday, June 15,
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Heeding calls from residents and community leaders concerned about coronavirus' economic fallout, the city of Beaumont is pursuing the allocation of \$1.2 million to help qualifying residents recover.

The majority of the money, \$801,000, comes from the city's allocation of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, said Beaumont Planning and Community Development Director Chris Boone.

He said the city determined it wouldn't need the money to pay for COVID-19-specific medical response, such as establishing medical facilities or conducting public testing. It started looking at the allocation as it could be used to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic.

The other \$400,000 comes from the city's annual federal grant allocation that was being used for a sewer line replacement program.

Because only a small number of people have qualified for the program, the city council authorized city staff to reallocate a portion of that money to respond to homeless issues.

Guidance from the CARES Act was "very specific that the homeless population is particularly vulnerable" to the virus, Boone said.

The CARES-specific money would provide rent and utility assistance to individuals and a donation to local food banks. The city hopes to have that money ready for distribution by the end of this month, Boone said.

The city still needs approval from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to move forward with the program as well as signed contracts with local nonprofits that Boone expects will actually administer the funds.

At this time it looks like the \$500,000 allocation could help about 500 households.

Boone said he expects the households will be eligible for up to three months of rent and/or utility assistance as long as they can prove that the economic hardship is the result of coronavirus.



Captain Jason Moore of the Salvation Army stands in one of the bedrooms of a building in the 1000 block of McFaddin Avenue as city leaders discuss making it into a homeless shelter.... Photo: Fran Ruchalski/The Enterprise

The city is also working to determine whether the money could be used to help people who are behind on mortgage payments as a result of the pandemic.

The city has had preliminary conversations with local nonprofits, but it expects Some Other Place will ultimately distribute at least a portion of the money.

Executive director Paula O'Neal said she's heard rumors that money is coming, but she doesn't know when, how much or what the eligibility requirements will be. At this time, the only money the organization has for its year-round rental assistance program comes from private donations. O'Neal said Some Other Place must stretch those dollars to help the largest number of people possible.

Should the city start a temporary program, she said, she hopes to see a tracking mechanism to ensure people can't double dip with other organizations that might be offering assistance. She's also concerned that people who need the help may not rent from landlords who have experience providing the type of documentation required for federal funds.

"Once we know what we get, if we do get money, we will help as many people as we can," she said. Councilman Mike Getz compared the program to a "Band-Aid" for people who are unable to pay rent or utilities.

Boone agreed, noting that these are unexpected hardships brought on by virus-related blows to the economy.

"That's the idea," he said, "that you're preventing homelessness by providing this."

The city would use \$140,000 for local food banks to distribute food to local families and \$61,000 to help with administrative costs for both programs.

The remaining funds would be split almost evenly between Henry's Place and the Salvation Army to enhance their facilities that serve people experiencing homelessness.

Henry's Place needs foundation repairs, an additional shower and other fixes, O'Neal said.

On any given day, the day shelter sees between 50 and 60 people experiencing homelessness, some of whom stop for breakfast, to wash their clothes or take a shower, among other tasks.

While the building can't be expanded, she said, the requested upgrades would allow it to serve more people.

The Salvation Army would establish a new shelter in hope of moving out of the facility on Interstate 10. That building would then be converted into a Boys and Girls Club, said Capt. Jason Moore. At this time, because of the proximity to the children's center, the organization has to be careful about who can stay at the shelter.

The "new" shelter actually has been owned by the Salvation Army for years. The buildings at 1078 McFaddin were closed in 2004 due to a lack of funding.

It's "continued to be owned by the Salvation Army ... it's basically been in mothballs ever since then," Getz said. "It's persevered amazingly well."

“In fact, when I went in, it’s like they walked out one day prepared to come back the next and just didn’t. There’s still sheets on the beds. There’s beds there. There’s pots in the kitchen.”

Moore wasn’t sure how many people could stay at the facility once renovated, but Boone said there are about 20 rooms. Moore, who said the current shelter could fit about 52 people, expected people would have roommates at the McFaddin shelter.

He said people would likely be separated into three groups: One house for veterans, one for families and potentially the construction of a third structure to have two separate living spaces - one for men and one for women.

Boone said if the city had multiple shelters or the circumstances were different, it might handle the allocation of funds differently.

“But the speed is critical. Because these are the two providers we deal with and we’re aware of their immediate need, we can do that instead of just a broad call,” he said. “We’ve submitted our amendments to HUD in Houston. They’ve been quick to respond recently, so hopefully we’ll get their approval in a week or two and then we’ll work on implementing.”