

“Central in the City” Advocates in State Senate for Supportive Housing

For months throughout the never-ending Covid crisis, a steady number of unsheltered people have made their homes in tents on the sidewalks along the Martin Luther King Drive side of Central Church. In time, sanitation, garbage, drugs, and safety became pressing issues for both the church and the neighborhood. Recently, following advance warnings, the city removed those living in this “urban encampment,” and provided assistance to all who wanted to move into nearby shelters or other accommodations.

The increasing visibility of tent encampments around our church and elsewhere throughout the city hasn’t escaped the attention of our state legislators. While it is good that the issue of homelessness has finally gained the attention of the state legislature, their response is troubling.

Earlier this year, during Georgia’s 2022 General Assembly, bills on homelessness were proposed in both the House and the Senate. One disturbing bill (SB 535), inspired by the ultra-conservative Cicero Institute based in Texas, was submitted by Senator Carden Summers (Dist. 13), proposing that municipalities in Georgia be required to create state-sanctioned encampments in selected areas of the city, where people can live with water, toilets, and security for up to six months. Similar legislation promulgated by Cicero has passed in Missouri and other states.

The bill further proposed that sleeping on the streets or in other public areas would become illegal--a Class C misdemeanor, punishable by a penalty of \$5,000 and/or a month in jail, after at least one warning by police. Further, the bill provided that cities refusing to enforce encampment bans would no longer be eligible to receive certain state funds for fighting homelessness, possibly crippling many non-profit organizations funded by the state to provide services for those who are homeless.

SB535 failed to pass in some measure due to the strong resistance from citizens involved with the non-profit community. In lieu of SB535, the Senate passed SB659, establishing a “Senate Study Committee on Unsheltered Homelessness” which is commissioned to report its findings and propose new actions when the Senate reconvenes in early 2023.

That Study Committee convened at the Capitol on Thursday, August 4, to hear presentations by six invited speakers, including representatives of several state agencies, Partners for Home, and the Cicero Institute, and to hear testimonies from numerous homeless advocates who wanted to be heard.

With the support of Central’s Session earlier that week, Gary Cornell, Kristeen Sorrells, Jerry Miller and Lee Carroll of the “Central in the City” team at Central, attended the day-long

hearing. Gary Cornell testified in behalf of Central Church, telling the story of Central's long history of serving the poor, encouraging the State to resist strategies such as those proposed in the failed SB 535, and advocating instead for more generous public support for supportive housing facilities, strengthened mental health programs, and more addiction treatment facilities.

He concluded his statement by pointing to the findings of numerous research projects which show that placing people in supportive housing can significantly reduce the overall cost to taxpayers of caring for those who are homeless, in contrast to ignoring their needs for housing and continuing to pay for their health care, emergency services, policing, imprisonment, and other expenses.

[To clarify, *affordable* housing is generally understood as government-subsidized housing that requires no more than 30% of the family's income. *Supportive* housing is affordable housing that provides supportive social and/or medical services. Supportive Housing may be either short-term (limited time in the residence) or long-term (no time limits).]

In addition to Gary's testimony, Jerry Miller, President of the Capitol Hill Neighborhood Development Corporation (CHNDC) also addressed the Committee. CHNDC is a cooperative venture of Central, Trinity UMC, and the Catholic Shrine—the three congregations located on Capitol Hill. Jerry reported on current efforts to develop *Trinity Central Flats*—a 218-unit affordable housing residential and commercial development planned for the corner of Trinity and Central avenues. Pending funding, 20 units in that development will be designated for supportive housing. Jerry advocated for the state to offer more funding for successful supportive housing efforts such as Hope House (treatment facility for addictions) and the future Trinity Central Flats.

“Central in the City,” is a team of Central members dedicated to increasing connections with the community outside of Central and is involved in “advocating among our neighbors and with our state and local officials to address homelessness, affordable housing, the displacement of those experiencing poverty, and related concerns.”

For more information about their work or to become involved, please contact Gary Cornell, Chair of Central in the City, at gary.cornell01@gmail.com.