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Dear City Council Members,

The purpose of this letter is to serve as both informational and an invitation to meet to discuss its contents. The Salvation Army and our partners are committed to serving the unsheltered population with respect and dignity, aiming to work with the city and other stakeholders to ensure the helping process is executed with those we serve in mind. To our surprise and much disappointment was a significant lapse in communication between the city and sheltering agencies, like The Salvation Army, which has led to poorly thought-out plans being put into action, high concern for those who are housed at the Econo Lodge and for what will soon be the reality for those unsheltered in La Crosse when that project concludes.

In June 2021 agencies were made aware of a city plan to allow homeless individuals to camp at Houska Park. This decision was made very quietly, with a small group of people. The alert that was given out stated things such as, "There were many informal discussions that took place in arriving at the decision to allow this," "The biggest detractor for this plan is that there is no concrete plan for how this all comes to an end," and "I believe Jay told me that people are welcome to head to Houska immediately. Again, there will be no formal announcement so this will all be word of mouth." This was especially concerning for us as a sheltering agency we were not part of the conversation or given an opportunity to express the many dangers to this plan would create for our homeless.

That same July multiple agencies, to include The Salvation Army, approached Mayor Reynolds with joint concerns surrounding Houska Park stating, "with the loss of one of our own clients and numerous stories from others of the danger and violence happening in our own city, we concluded that we must request a meeting with you as soon as possible." During the meeting that followed the agencies were asked to put together a proposal for alternative ideas, which we did. Our offer was for nine months of sheltering to be opened up from September 1 to May 30th, 2021, and included intensive case management supports aimed at housing as many clients as our agencies could before the winter months. This plan was roughly \$340,000 and would have effectively provided shelter for everyone who was unhoused at that time. As you know the city made no action on this proposal and resulted in what they know would happen, "no concrete plan for how [Houska Park] would come to an end."

In the Fall of 2021, the City of La Crosse made a request for proposal (RFP), seeking assistance with winter sheltering based on a hotel based sheltering model. A response to this request was due within a week, by October 29. Our agency, along with five others began working on a proposal to submit, which required significant time, resources, and effort to prepare a proposal that was evidence-based and practical. When preparing the proposal and finally submitting the document, we trusted that we were participating in a standard process the city and funders use to ensure the awarding of funds remains transparent and ethical. Thus, giving everyone a fair chance at being awarded the project.



A joint proposal that included The Salvation Army was prepared and submitted by October 29. We were successfully awarded the contract by the city and given a commitment for the contract on November 5. Following the standard procedure, regarding the RFP process it went on to be successfully processed, including the city's approval for funding. This was approved the following week. The agencies immediately began work to execute on the contract after being awarded. This required a coordination of staff from six agencies, hiring personnel and purchasing supplies and equipment for the opening of Econo Lodge in less than two weeks.

The group was informed, in conversation with Diane McGinnis, City of La Crosse City Planner, that we were the only party to submit a proposal in response to the city's RFP. This information came as a shock for us, as we believe it is optimal to have multiple proposals looked at to facilitate critical analysis and promote governmental responsibility. Given the late notice to submit an RFP and the time other groups had to prepare their proposal, it led to some confusion to know we were the only group to submit one. Regardless, the six agencies continued to prepare for the execution of the accepted contract as of November 11, and we remained on schedule to open the Econo Lodge operations on November 15, in line with the City's direction.

Then, this group was informed on November 12, one business day before the scheduled launch of the program, that the city was considering another proposal. The same day, the city retracted its earlier commitment of the contract awarded to our group, and indicated uncertainty about the contract being re-awarded to us. Diane McGinnis and Jay Odegaard were informed of the last-minute change, with the resulting challenges and our incurring substantial costs. A defense was made for the proposal we submitted, centering a proactive, intensive case management approach. The strategic plan was designed to avoid a burden on existing assets, and permitted case management and housing needs channeled through an intake process that would individualize needs to facilitate security - prioritizing the needs of families with children and individuals with different types of disabilities including those with addiction.

In our experience we know that not every individual is ready or able to stay in a certain living situation. Our proposal was intended to provide the necessary intensive case management with wrap around supports, assessing every individual and their circumstances to connect them with the right program and services for optimal success. Coordinated entry was key to ensure a successful program at Econo Lodge while preparing individuals on site for housing by the end of the contract.

Karuna Housing, an agency that was not part of our six-agency coalition, was eventually awarded the contract for winter sheltering services. Karuna Housing did not submit an RFP. Knowing they did not submit an RFP, we are concerned about the process that was followed and the ethics and adherence to standard procedure, especially with the allocation of federal funds for the contract. While we acknowledge Karuna sent a prospective on using the Econo Lodge as some type of permanent supportive housing project with the idea of the city purchasing the property, the newly formed agency did not submit an official RFP.

It is important to restate that we were not in favor of moving all the unsheltered individuals from Houska Park into Econo Lodge, we were in favor of a scattered site model. Homelessness is a multifaceted issue - one that takes thoughtfulness and education on the topic to appropriately address it. Moving individuals from a park to a hotel does not solve the problem, it merely places people indoors. It is a short-term solution, and there have been too many short-term solutions in a row with no look to the future state of homelessness in La Crosse.

The sudden change of who was awarded the contract resulted in numerous unsettling events to follow. What was intended to be a coordinated move out of the park, turned into people being put on a bus with some of their belongings and everything else bulldozed in front of them. Some people were absent when this happened and literally lost all they owned. The original plan was to move individuals over a course of days, making sure their location placement would be the best fit for their needs. Instead, everyone was moved, and the project became an opportunity for a free hotel with no responsibilities for the whole of the winter months. We saw the number of unsheltered individuals increase by 60 percent including some who were not category 1 homeless. Which again, shows the need for individualized case plans, not a one size fits all approach. It can be assumed that the process that went forward did not improve the issue of homelessness in La Crosse, but further traumatized our unsheltered population, especially those who worked with our agencies leading up to the events. Prior to the park evacuation they became aware of the approved RFP plan our group began to put into action, but that is not what they experienced.

While the Karuna Group has served the city defined purpose of managing the warehousing of the homeless, under Karuna Housing management, we have concerns surrounding the accuracy of coordinated entry data as well as the safety of clients at the hotel. Our concerns come from firsthand reports of individuals previously sheltered at Econo Lodge, who describe rampant drug use, violence, sex trafficking, drug trafficking and other disturbing events. We feel these reports have legitimacy due to the same experiences of individuals when they were occupying Houska Park. Needless to say, there were many frightening conditions that have been told to us. This context is important to mention to make future corrections and implement some safeguards that ensure the safety and security for the unsheltered population, whatever location is chosen. We encourage city council members to visit the Econo Lodge and see for themselves the condition of the facility and living environments for the unsheltered population.

The Salvation Army continues to serve as advocates and a resource to our unsheltered neighbors. We continue to provide a temporary shelter to clients in need and meals (3 times a day, seven days per week, all year round). Meals are provided to individuals who live on site and community members who stop at the "to-go" window. There are staff members on site, 24/7 ready to address any need that may present. The Salvation Army has skilled case workers that provide our clients with resources that serve them in a holistic way. The efforts of The Salvation Army are focused on providing and preparing individuals to exit shelter and live independently, sustaining themselves. The Salvation Army has the following concerns for future projects, given the information that we have currently:

Concerns for the Maple Grove Hotel:

- Lack of transparency in the process.
 - Little input from agency nor community members.
- Location is far from service providers.
- There is no operational plan for the location.
 - How will this project get funded for the next few years?
 - Operation costs for a year; ~2.1 million
 - Staffing, meals, etc.
- Dangers of the high traffic/access to transportation.

- Who will be placed at this site?
 - Open to everyone, with the addition of pallet shelters.
- What happens to this location 2-3 years from now?
 - Will the pallet shelters be removed?
- What is the plan for the current residents?
 - Will they be evicted? Thus, furthering the number of individuals who are homeless?
- Maple Grove will not be ready by April 1.

Concerns with upcoming RFP:

- Lack of adherence to standard RFP policy and procedures; due to prior experience.
- The dollar amount hasn't been set
- Plan might be predetermined.

The details in this letter again are to provide context and perspective from our agency's view, and allow for understanding regarding the pointed questions and dialogue surrounding the current plan to address the homelessness problem in La Crosse. We still have some reservations due to the past lack of transparency leading to this point in time, which is understandable given the interference experienced with the last project. We are willing to work with the city, but we do not want to invest significant time and resources if the plan is already pre-determined. Please trust that our agencies have the awareness and education in this area of service to offer informed and evidence-based practices to guide the efforts of the city, and ultimately the execution of similar projects.

The primary concern and efforts of The Salvation Army will continue to encompass the wellbeing and safety of all people who are unsheltered in our community. We are passionate about the work we do and the opportunities that lie ahead of us. It is imperative that the city work alongside agencies like ours to ensure we together are doing our best for our neighbors who are unsheltered. We invite you to our facility for a tour and a friendly discussion to learn more about the multitude of programs and services we provide, and explain our long history of commitment to those most in need.

Sincerely,



Major Alan Hellstrom
Corps Officer