

Homeless Concerns in the Kingwood Area

It is understood that there are questions and concerns relating to homelessness. There is a misunderstanding relating to the homeless population and the community. This is the reason why the Kingwood Division scheduled Sergeant Espinoza from the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) as the January 2021 guest speaker. During that meeting Sergeant Espinoza spoke for approximately 1.5 hours on everything related to HPD's interaction and response to the homeless community.

As you are aware, there is a plethora of information that was covered during that meeting. There is not enough time in the meeting to restate what Sergeant Espinoza covered in the meeting. I will provide some highlights of the meeting.

- Being homeless is not a crime. Many citizens have been adversely affected by COVID-19
- Treatment and assistance to the homeless is available. This is completely voluntary and cannot be forced on anyone
- There is mental health and substance abuse nexus associated with the homeless population

It is difficult to gauge the amount of individuals suffering from mental health issues. This is due to the amount of individuals that either do not seek treatment or are unable to seek treatment. The National Institute of Health conducted a study. The findings of the study, "found that approximately 6% of Americans are severely mentally ill, compared to the 20-25% of the homeless population that suffers from severe mental illness. Furthermore, 45% of the homeless population shows history of mental illness diagnoses." (Kim, 2017).

Homeless Actions

The homeless population in Kingwood is no more dangerous than any other person. At the end of the day a homeless person is a person. The do not attribute additional violent crimes that another person might. The homeless community is approachable but often keep to their selves. A vast majority of the homeless have gone through significant attempts to remain separated in the woods/forest. Will a homeless person randomly attack someone unprovoked? It is possible, but it is possible for a regular citizen to do the same thing. Are there any reports of a homeless person attacking anyone? The simple answer is no. There are no reported incidents of this occurring. The same thing regarding robbery or any other violent crime.

Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) and Enforcement.

The Houston Police Department Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) is a unit inside the Mental Health Division. The HOT is currently staffed with one sergeant, six HPD officers, and Harris Center case managers. In addition to HOT, the HPD Differential Response Team (DRT) enforces municipal ordinances. The enforcement of municipal ordinances facilitates cleaning up a homeless encampment. There are multiple moving parts regarding

cleaning up a homeless encampment. Officers need the assistance of business/property owners to remove/clean-up an encampment.

How does a business/property owner assist HPD? They assist by maintaining up-to-date Trespass Affidavits. Why does HPD need an up-to-date Trespass Affidavit? The Harris County District Attorney's office wants this on-file to prosecute for Criminal Trespass. This document also gives the officer's authority to act on their behalf. Without the effective consent of the business/property owner Officers are unable to remove the individual.

Rumors

There have been multiple complaints to the Kingwood DRT office regarding homelessness in the Kingwood area. I strongly encourage citizens to contact HPD when an issue occurs. We have experienced, on numerous occasions, where citizens do not inform HPD about an issue. The citizens have conversations amongst their selves and rarely include HPD. This causes several issues. The first issue is that there may not be an issue but merely the perception of an issue. This occurs due to gossiping about a situation and not knowing all the facts.

As an example of something inflating is during this past winter storm. I received a text message that was circulating throughout the Kingwood communities. Fear sets in and people begin spreading false information. People were circulating a picture message. The message stated, "I just got this text from a friend – Just got word from Police Sargent in Kingwood – water plant by East End park just blew and they are shutting off the water. Fill your bathtubs now!"

I personally looked into this rumor. I drove to the East End water plant. Council member Dave Martin had just arrived at the location to investigate the same issue. We arrived and found the plant was working as designed. Here is what happened for that incident. Earlier in the day, around noon, a valve was leaking. Maintenance was performed on the valve and relieved the pressure. The valve was fixed and placed back in working condition. There was no information spread by any HPD Sergeants or supervisors. Approximately six hours later that picture message began circulating like wildfire. The Kingwood Station began experiencing numerous phone calls about the issue.

Council member Dave Martin and I published accurate information in an attempt to stop the rumors. If HPD had been initially approached about the concern, the rumor would have been put to rest and not spread to cause fear. With that being stated, it appears we are experiencing the same issue pertaining to the homeless population. In the January PIP meeting, Sergeant Espinoza explained how Houston receives new homeless people. There are several cities that find it is easier and cost effective to bus homeless population from their city to another.

Busing

Houston has received several homeless people by means of the bus. People arrive downtown by a bus. They have nowhere to go and remain homeless downtown. The city of Houston does not have a policy of busing people out of the city. There is no busing system that transports homeless people into the Kingwood area. Metro has one Park-and-Ride location off of W Lake Houston Pkwy. It should be noted that the Metro facility is enforced by the Metro Police Department.

Metrics

The Metro Police Department and Houston Police Department do not share incident reports or statistics. As you know the Kingwood DRT unit provides monthly crime statistics. We obtain the statistics from our reporting database. We read through every reported Part I incidents. We have not found any reports within the last nine months involving a homeless suspect. There is no known data that we have that shows if a homeless person is responsible for a specific crime. Since there is no way to track this information, I do not know what percentage of the crime they may/may not be responsible.

It is not possible to track the percentage of crime in correlation to the homeless population. Although I am unable to provide a specific number I can emphatically state that this number is extremely low. Based on the reports, it appears they would be responsible for less than 0.01% of the Part I Crimes. I have checked with the Kingwood Division Priority Investigative Unit. They conduct follow-up investigations on crimes committed in the Kingwood area. The PIU does not have any current cases involving a homeless person. They are also unaware of any previous cases involving a homeless person.

Homeless Population

Another question that may be asked is the amount of homeless population. The actual number of homeless population is unknown. There are several variables that affect the population. This includes people coming and leaving the Kingwood area. Another reason is there is no census done for the homeless population. We have encountered several individuals within the homeless community. As mentioned earlier, people have encountered hard times since COVID-19. We investigated a homeless complaint. Our investigation led to the discovery of a couple. The couple both worked as a waiter and waitress. They fell on hard times and could no longer afford their rent/mortgage. They were still employed and saving money to improve their housing situation.

HPD offered to provide shelter and assistance to the couple. The couple declined assistance because it meant they would be separated at the shelter and likely unable to find each other again. It should be noted that being homeless is not a crime and assistance is only voluntary. There have been other instances where a citizen reported a homeless person. HPD investigated the report and found the homeless person was a few miles into the woods. It was extremely difficult in locating the individual.

We have identified homeless individuals but they are not placed into or tracked into any database. There is a database for when someone is given a warning for trespassing. The database is for personal identifiers such as name, date of birth, or Texas Driver License number, but not for being homeless.

Lawsuits

There have been past lawsuits over enforcement towards the homeless population. In Tammy Kohr Et Al v. City of Houston, “The ACLU of Texas filed a lawsuit on behalf of three homeless Houstonian plaintiffs adversely affected by the city’s camping and panhandling ordinances. Taken together, these ordinances illegally deprive homeless Houstonians of shelter, infringe on their right to free speech and ultimately constitute a criminalization of homelessness itself. Shortly after this lawsuit was filed, the court entered a temporary restraining order to stop the city from ticketing or arresting unsheltered homeless people for using tents. Even after the court lifted the order, the city has maintained an internal order instructing police officers not to enforce the camping ban” (Tammy Kohr et al v. City of Houston, 2017).

In August 2019 the ALCU withdrew participation from the case. For this reason there is a procedure and process that HPD Officers follow. This is the reason why the Kingwood DRT officers work with business owners in maintaining up to date Trespass Affidavits on file. We strive to be transparent with incidents involving the community and public safety. We ask that we are included in future conversations from community members if there is uncertainty.

Conclusion

In conclusion the Kingwood DRT/Community Service unit is available to assist the community. We strive to provide open communication and are available to schedule further discussion if needed. Although this document contains several key points for homelessness it will not cover everything. If there is additional question or concern, please contact our office to schedule a meeting. I will discuss highlights of this document and January 2021 PIP meeting at the upcoming Public Safety Meeting.

Sincerely,

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References

Kim, M. (2017, July 31). *Mental Illness and Homelessness: Facts and Figures*. Retrieved from Students in Mental Health Research: <https://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hcht/blog/homelessness-and-mental-health-facts>

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