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Mayor Announces Homeless Initiative

By Dan McKay*Copyright © 2011 Albuquerque Journal Journal Staff Writer*

Chuck Mader smiled immediately and said it sounded like a great idea. A block away, John — who wouldn't give his last name — said he'd certainly sign up if asked.

"I would do anything to get off the streets," said John, who's 27 and homeless. "All I need is a job."

Chuck and John had just been told about a \$500,000 initiative announced by Mayor Richard Berry, who wants to provide housing vouchers and other help to 75 of Albuquerque's most vulnerable homeless people.

The project, "Albuquerque Heading Home," will seek to find homes, perhaps even permanently, for people at risk of dying on the streets. At least two people froze to death in Albuquerque parks last year, city police said.

"These are the homeless who don't ask for help or don't know how to ask for help," Berry told reporters, nonprofit leaders and others Thursday, as he announced the program at City Hall.

Jeremy Reynolds, founder and chief executive of the Joy Junction homeless shelter, was skeptical. The program "sounds suspiciously like a roundup," he said, that will just move the homeless out of Downtown.

Berry said that's not the case. It's a real humanitarian effort that will also save money, he said.

"We're not a sweep-it-under-the-rug administration," Berry said.

The homeless people enrolled in the program will be given vouchers to pay for rent at an apartment or a case manager will otherwise arrange for housing of some kind. Participants could stay in the home as long as they comply with their lease agreement and don't cause problems. That means that a homeless alcoholic could keep drinking, as long as he or she was still a good neighbor.

But each person will be handled individually, so the conditions and requirements will vary, depending on the person. Private case managers will work with each participant, and some people may be required to pay for a portion of their housing at some point, officials said.

"There are strings attached," Berry said. "This isn't a free ride."

The 75 housing units are expected to cost about \$515,000, \$138,000 of which will come from the U.S. Veterans Administration. The rest is available in the city's budget for Family and Community Services, Berry said.

Business leaders and representatives of nonprofit groups appeared at the mayor's news conference to speak in favor of the plan.

Berry acknowledged that much of the initiative centers on taking advantage of programs already in place.

Lisa Huval of the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness said she expects the program to be effective and merit expansion, based on the experiences of similar programs in other cities.

"We know this works," she said.

During the week of Jan. 30, hundreds of volunteers will look for homeless people near underpasses, on the Fourth Street pedestrian mall, in the bosque and elsewhere. The volunteers will interview them and try to develop a list of the most needy and how to reach them again. They will contact the homeless person later to enroll them in the program if selected.

The city will work with nonprofit groups to identify the 75 participants.

It will look for people who have been homeless for years, not just temporarily. Only about 20 percent of the homeless fall into this category, Berry said. Recent estimates of Albuquerque's homeless population range from about 3,000 to 4,000 people.

Some of these people are constantly consuming public resources, he said. "Down and out" calls cost taxpayers at least \$644,000 last year, or about \$178 for each rescue response, the city said.

Berry also highlighted a 2006 story in *The New Yorker* magazine about "million dollar Murray," a homeless man in Reno, Nev., who ran up a huge medical tab. Berry said getting people off the street may save money.

Reynalds, who attended Berry's news conference, distributed a two-page written statement criticizing Berry's plan. He said substance-abuse counseling should be required.

Otherwise, Reynalds said he is concerned "the program is just a way to push the homeless out of Downtown and into other low-income areas of the city."

Several homeless people interviewed by the Journal expressed optimism. Some were suspicious that the city just wanted them moved out of the Downtown area, but the reception was mostly positive.

"It's a good idea," said Mader, who was smoking a cigarette on Civic Plaza with a friend. "I know a lot of people who'd take advantage of it — yes, sir, myself included."

He said he had been homeless since 2000 because of financial trouble, girlfriend problems and alcohol. Mader said he doesn't drink much nowadays.

John was talking with a group of about a half dozen people on Fourth Street when he heard about the project. He said being homeless has provided him a new perspective on homelessness.

"It's not just people who are drug addicted or lazy," he said. "It's people with real problems or issues."

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