

IN OUR WORDS

Community Conversations with People Experiencing
Homelessness in Albuquerque

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Executive Summary

The focus group conversations with people experiencing homelessness revealed many of the same themes that were generated from the Gateway Community Input Session in December of 2019. Specifically, the criteria that respondents felt were important in making a decision about a site location showed consistency with the four themes that were generated at the December community input session. First and foremost, individuals participating in focus groups stated concern for their safety and security. It was clear in the data that respondents felt vulnerable on the streets. While the majority of respondents felt unsafe, female respondents in focus groups felt particularly vulnerable. Other criteria that were important to participants include ease of access to services, including retail services, and ease of access to transportation.

Focus group participants prioritized medical care, job training and employment services, healthy food and exercise, and activities for youth as services that they need to support their needs. A case management/case worker approach, where a professional provider connects individuals to the services they need was a popular model among focus group participants. Moreover, access to mental/behavioral health services and small group support classes for substance use were often cited in the data.

The most prominent theme in the data regarding location was that geography matters. The proposed sites that were the furthest distance from the downtown core of the city were soundly rejected. These sites include the Westside Emergency Housing Center and Montessa Park. The reasons included, lack of access to medical services, lack of transportation options, and lack of basic amenities. The majority of respondents support the Former Hospital on Gibson location because it meets the criteria that they stated was important to them. The other two locations near downtown (2nd and I-40, UNM Health Sciences Center, South of State Laboratory) received mixed support among focus group participants. For those that supported the two locations, close proximity to a hospital and central location were the primary reasons cited. Among those who did not support the sites, the primary reasons were lack of transportation and safety and security of the neighborhoods. Specifically, participants spoke about the lack of safety in and around the 2nd and I-40 site location.

Introduction

During the month of January 2020, five (5) focus groups were conducted with people experiencing homelessness at four (4) site locations in the Albuquerque area. The goal of the focus groups was to get unique insights from distinct populations of people experiencing homelessness (women, families, unsheltered population, racial/ethnic populations) at locations that these individuals regularly access. Moreover, the focus groups were designed to bring voice to a population that is vulnerable and highly-stigmatized. Each focus group was facilitated by two facilitators with one facilitator guiding the conversation and the other taking notes and asking clarifying questions. Focus groups ranged in duration from 30 minutes to 1 hour based on the size of the group and the level of engagement in each group.

A qualitative research design was used to assess attitudes and behaviors of people experiencing homelessness with the intent of using the information collected to inform a site location for a proposed Gateway Center. Further, the feedback provided by participants will be used to inform the types of social services needed to help people experiencing homelessness move on a continuum from crisis to self-sufficiency.

The history of qualitative research in the United States is rooted in early sociology and anthropology (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2010). Qualitative research is an umbrella concept used to explain the meaning of social phenomena through various forms of inquiry in naturalistic settings (Merriam, 1998).

A focus group is a process of collecting information from a small group of people (Creswell, 2012). Focus groups also provide a cost-effective and time-efficient way to collect information from a number of participants. Focus groups can yield valuable information relative to the interactions among participants and can provide deeper meaning to themes observed in naturalistic settings.

Staff at each location assisted with the recruitment of participants for each focus group. Each focus group was recorded, with the approval of participants, to ensure accuracy in the analysis of the data. Bus passes and food were also offered to incentivize participation.

A total of fifty-six (56) individuals participated in focus groups at the four locations referenced in the table below.

Table 1: Focus Group Location, Target Population, Date and Number of Participants

Focus Group Location	Target Population	Date	# of participants
Westside Emergency Housing Center (WEHC)	Women	1/14/20	9
Westside Emergency Housing Center (WEHC)	Families	1/14/20	8

Focus Group Location	Target Population	Date	# of participants
Albuquerque Opportunity Center (AOC)	Men	1/16/20	5
Albuquerque Healthcare for the Homeless (AHCH)	Unsheltered (While this was a target population, many participants had visited an Albuquerque-based shelter at some point)	1/24/20	19
First Nations Community HealthSource (FN)	Native American	1/29/20	15

Reading this Report

The purpose of this qualitative research is to bring critical voices to the conversation around housing and services for people experiencing homelessness. It is not meant for the reader to draw broad generalizations for all people experiencing homelessness. Further, findings in this report should be balanced with other data sources, including the recent Gateway Center Online Survey and the Gateway Center Community Input Session data that the City of Albuquerque has collected over the last 90 days.

The Process

Consistent with the Gateway Center Community Input Session, participants gave input on the proposed *location* for the new center and the *services* that they believe to be essential to support the short and long term goals of people experiencing homelessness. The sessions began with a conversation on *criteria* that individuals perceive as important to consider when deciding on a location for the proposed Gateway Center. The facilitators shared the four criteria themes that emerged from the Gateway Center Community Input Session to get feedback from participants and to stimulate dialogue. The four criteria include:

1. Low impact on neighborhood
2. Ease of access to services
3. Ease of access to transportation
4. Safety and security for all

The following section lays out the key criteria that focus group participants cited as critical to making decisions regarding the location of the proposed Gateway Center and the services provided both onsite and within a broader system of support.

Key Criteria for Proposed Site

When thinking about a site, it is important to have a nuanced understanding of the safety concerns and accessibility needs of people experiencing homelessness. As you will see in the following paragraphs, safety and security, access to services, and ease of access to transportation are the major concerns of this highly-vulnerable population. It is also important to note that access to services extends beyond social services. Access to retail services, such as a Dollar

Acronyms: WEHC (Westside Emergency Housing Center); AOC (Albuquerque Opportunity Center); AHCH (Albuquerque Healthcare for the Homeless); FN (First Nations Community HealthSource).

Store and fast food restaurants are really important. Moreover, having easy access to a bus line that has frequent stops is vital for a population that is highly-mobile. For these reasons, a centralized site that meets several of these criteria is an important consideration for people experiencing homelessness.

Overall, there was alignment in the focus group data with the four (4) themes that emerged from the Gateway Community Input Session listed above. However, there was more emphasis on three of these themes based on the lived experience of people experiencing homelessness.

Safety and security for all

“I just got sexually assaulted by several males, and I reported them. That’s an issue being a homeless female and asking for places to stay, and becoming a victim and having them not do anything about it. I think that’s the number one concern when it comes to being female—younger female. I had to use the bus stop to go everywhere I needed to go and I would see ‘him’ and his friends every single day.”-Female respondent, Westside Emergency Housing Center (WEHC) Focus Group

As evidenced in the quote above, living on the streets for a young woman can be extremely dangerous. In fact, many of the respondents suggested that every day can be a matter of life or death. Another female respondent at the WEHC added:

“When females are out on the streets, I feel like when you ask for help, you don’t get it, or you don’t have the resources you need. I feel like I’m at risk on the streets, so if I get kicked out of the shelter, I’m back on the streets where I’m not safe.

Women were not alone in their concern for their overall safety on the streets. This male respondent from the First Nations Community HealthSource (FN) focus group spoke of the constant anxiety of having to “watch your back” when living on the streets:

“Being homeless, you’re always looking over your shoulder, and you can’t let your guard down, and if you do let your guard down, they’re going to hit you or they’re going to kill you or whatever.”

When it comes to protections against violence, respondents across groups expressed feelings that local law enforcement did not always adequately protect them. Examples provided by participants included:

“We are tired of police harassment!”-Male respondent, Albuquerque Opportunity Center (AOC)

“APD shot our best friend and that’s not really cool.”-Male respondent, FN

Feeling safe can make a significant difference as people experiencing homelessness move on a continuum from basic survival to self-sufficiency, as evidenced by the quote below from a male respondent at the AOC.

“If you can come in someplace and have a safe place to stay, it revives you to try to do something better.”

These responses indicate that regardless of location, ensuring the safety and security of the Gateway Center will be very important.

Ease of Access to Transportation

Living a highly-mobile lifestyle without reliable transportation presents significant challenges for people experiencing homelessness. The need for decision-makers to take this into account when considering a location for the proposed Gateway Center ranked as a high-priority for participants in this study. The geographic isolation of the WEHC presents challenges for sheltered individuals as evidenced by this quote from a female respondent:

“Like we’re out here in the middle of nowhere, and God knows when the bus is going to take us to town, to take us to appointments.”

For a young man that is only 17 years of age, the thought of parenthood could be overwhelming. The idea of parenthood when you are houseless, have no transportation, and have an extended family that are also experiencing homelessness can seem like an insurmountable challenge:

“It’s hard for us to get around, my girlfriend is pregnant right now and it’s hard for us to get to her OB appointment. They are all the way across town. She has to leave on the first bus just to get there on time.”

For families that have school-aged children, getting from the shelter to the school also presents significant challenges:

“I have really long walks from the dropoff point to my child’s school. I literally have to walk 5 miles to get my child to school.”

Long commutes to access services, such as medical appointments are also a major concern. Additionally, the basic dignity of being able to enjoy simple things, like a cup of coffee, are compromised when you do not have the freedom associated with living in a walkable community or easy access to public transportation:

“It’s difficult to live life on our terms because we are always rushing to get on the bus. We can’t get up and enjoy a cup of coffee. We hope we get on the bus in the morning because they are always so packed.”-Female respondent, WEHC

Ease of Access to Services

Consistent with the feedback from the Gateway Center Input Session, participants in focus groups expressed a need for a shelter where services are easily accessible both onsite and offsite. Many of the respondents prefer services, particularly social services, to be available on site.

“No matter where it goes (Gateway Center), if services aren’t available, it’s just gonna be another shelter where people come to sleep, and it’s not gonna do anything to change anything. It’s just gonna be another revolving door shelter that’s not gonna help. People need services where they’re at!”-Male respondent, AHCH

“Every big city has a shelter that has job resources available on site. Instead of going to 20 different places, you have them all right there.”-Male respondent, AHCH

Moreover, many of the participants in the study suggested that a proposed shelter needs to have easy access to retail services, such as supermarkets, laundromats, fast food, and clothing stores. As you will see later in the report, participants in this study will use these criteria often when rating the feasibility of proposed site locations.

Services

This section of the report outlines the social service needs of focus group participants. The section begins with the prominent themes from the data and will conclude with a comprehensive list of needed services cited in the data.

Medical Care

Across all groups, the most common theme related to services was access to medical care. Within the broad scope of services under *medical care*, the most cited need was access to mental health services.

“There’s no access (to mental health services). I’ve had plenty of reasons that I would have to be at facilities like that. There needs to be a place to start. If a man can get a little bit of support in that area, maybe he’ll want to get his ID, maybe he’ll want to get his GED or do whatever he needs to do.”-Male respondent, AOC

Respondents spoke of the need to have access to these services onsite and liked the idea of a case worker providing basic intake and care coordination at the site. Additional medical care services that were cited in the data include 24-hour nursing services, vision, primary care, emergency care, substance abuse treatment, case management, and natural, homeopathic treatment options including medical marijuana.

Job Training and Employment Services

Another major theme that emerged from the discussions on services was the need to provide job training and employment services at the proposed Gateway Center. Respondents spoke of the need to access technology on site and to have assistance with finding jobs, preparing a resumé, and job placement services.

“We need to have a computer lab where we can find jobs and get help with a resumé”
-Male respondent, WEHC

Further, respondents at two sites liked the idea of day labor programming to earn money. In both instances, individuals cited the Better Way program as a program they would like to see return. Another respondent liked the idea of hiring individuals at the shelter if they met certain conditions.

“Hire some of us that can pass drug tests to work at the shelter”-Male respondent
AHCH

Activities for Youth

The need for positive, prosocial activities for youth emerged in several of the focus groups. Afterschool programs provided on site to assist young children at the shelter with their homework and academic needs was cited often. Additionally, access to fun activities for youth including games was also noted in the data.

“Our kids have nothing to do here. So, even like, having activities so they’re not running amok, because they’re bored.”-Female respondent at WEHC

Additionally, the need for childcare services emerged as a theme in multiple focus groups. Aside from the need to engage children in positive, prosocial activities, many respondents spoke of the need for childcare so caregivers could attend life skills classes, job training, and small group therapy without distractions.

Healthy Food and Exercise

Many of the facilities that we visited, including the WEHC and the AOC allowed limited access to the kitchen for individuals and families in the shelter. In some cases, the only access allowed was to a microwave oven. Because of the limited access, many of the individuals in focus group conversations shared their desire to have a fully accessible kitchen at the proposed Gateway Center where they can prepare healthy meals for their families and other residents at the center. Other respondents suggested having a community garden on site that residents of the center can manage and enjoy the harvest.

“Maybe, we could have people staying at the shelter cook meals for everyone?”
-Female respondent, WEHC

Even with a population that is highly-mobile, access to exercise equipment and fitness classes was a prominent theme in the data. Further, there was a strong desire among focus group participants to include an exercise room at the new facility.

“What’s really needed is an exercise room on site. Maybe, a bicycle or maybe a place where you can just lie down on the floor. They don’t have anything like that in the places I’ve been.”-Female respondent, AHCH

Other Services Cited in the Focus Groups

The following is a comprehensive list of services that were cited in focus group conversations. It is important to note that the following list does not represent themes. Rather, this list represents all of the services that were mentioned during focus group conversations:

Other Services

- **Financial Literacy Classes**
- **Life Skills Classes**
- **Housing Assistance**
- **Transportation to Medical Appointments**
- **Parenting Classes**
- **Group Classes for Substance Abuse (AA model)**
- **Legal Services (Criminal Defense and Assistance with Social Security)**
- **Arts and Crafts**
- **CRA Program (Behavior Modification)**
- **Vocation Rehabilitation**
- **Access to Meals**
- **Access to Telephones (Obama Phones)**
- **Roller Skating**
- **Art in the Streets**
- **Community Connections Program**
- **Case Worker for Addiction Services**
- **Access to Bus Passes on Site**

Other Considerations

Focus group participants overwhelmingly support having access to an onsite laundry room at the proposed Gateway Center site. Additionally, many focus group participants did not like, what they perceived as religious proselytizing that was attached to some of the services that they received. They felt like they should be able to opt-in to religious instruction only if they felt comfortable with it. Finally, many focus group participants stated that at the most basic level, they wanted to feel welcomed by shelter staff and to ensure that shelter staff were adequately trained to meet the diverse needs of people experiencing homelessness.

The next section will focus on themes that arose in the conversations regarding site location. The section will also show where there was alignment and divergence among focus group participants related to the five (5) proposed sites.

Propose Site Locations

As part of the focus group protocols, the facilitators reviewed the five (5) proposed locations for the Gateway Center that were shared at the Gateway Center Community Input Session event. Unlike the larger Gateway Center Community Input event, locations were shared without the benefit of seeing the locations on large maps. However, focus group participants were familiar with the proposed locations and gave nuanced feedback regarding the community assets, or lack thereof, around each site location. The five locations include:

- Former hospital on Gibson (SE Quadrant)
- Montessa Park (SE Quadrant)
- 2nd Street and I-40 area (Downtown Area)
- UNM Health Sciences Center, South of State Laboratory (Downtown Area)
- Westside Emergency Housing Center (Far NW Quadrant)

Former Hospital on Gibson

The majority of focus group participants indicated that the Former Hospital on Gibson is a good location for a proposed Gateway Center. Respondents liked the easy access to medical care, ease of access to the bus line (transportation) and access to amenities as reflected in the quotes below:

“I think that would work perfect. There’s fast food restaurants, there’s a bus stop, you can get the San Mateo bus, it’s right there. There’s a Family Dollar right there, There’s a laundromat. That’s my hood!” Close proximity to the VA. Close proximity to schools.-
Female respondent, WEHC

“Everything is right there in the War Zone, you have First Nations, right there, then you got the Presbyterian thing right there, you got your Walgreens and stuff like that right there.”-Male respondent, AOC

Focus group participants also liked that there are accessible public spaces (parks), schools in close proximity, and an active population that is experiencing homelessness.

Montessa Park

The majority of focus group participants did not like the Montessa Park option. The primary reason cited was that it is too geographically isolated, which did not meet their criteria of ease of access to services and access to transportation. The following quote speaks to geographic isolation in general terms using Joy Junction, located in the South Valley, as a reference point:

“As far as location, I would say somewhere where you could just walk to it. You can’t walk out to Joy Junction, you can’t walk out to the Westside, it’s real hard to get there if you miss the shuttles.”-Female respondent, AHCH

Because of the geographic isolation, the site location does not have easy access to the amenities, such as restaurants, and retail stores, nor does it have easy access to schools for families that have school-aged children. All of which were important criteria for participants in this study.

2nd Street and I-40 Area

The 2nd Street and I-40 area location had mixed support among focus groups and their participants. The one focus group that showed strong support for the site was the Albuquerque Healthcare for the Homeless (AHCH) group. One could infer that this particular group shows support for the site because the majority of these individuals already receive services in the area through AHCH. Among individuals in the AHCH group, the following represents some of the reasons they support the site location:

- Centrally located (in the middle of town)
- Proximity to other services
- Access to food and amenities
- High-population of people experiencing homelessness

Both WEHC groups (women and families) along with the AOC group (men) did not like this option. The primary reason cited in the data was safety and security. In other, words many respondents suggested that the area was unsafe.

The FN group was mixed on the site location. The following represents some of the reasons those in support of the location shared:

- High-population of people experiencing homelessness
- Close proximity to the “Train Park”
- Close to Noon Day

For those from FN that did not support this site, the reasons cited were safety and security and a general sense that they did not feel welcome in the area. Several respondents suggested that the community looked at them as a “nuisance” and felt that the community would never support a new shelter in the downtown area.

UNM Health Sciences Center, South of State Laboratory

Results were mixed across focus group for the UNM Health Sciences Center, South of State Laboratory location. The strongest support came from the AHCH focus group. Again, a possible explanation for this is the proximity to AHCH where focus group participants regularly access services. AHCH focus group participants cited the following reasons they felt this site location would be a good option:

- Close proximity to medical care
- Safety of the neighborhood
- Easy access to UNM Behavioral Health

One of the issues the AHCH group had with the site was the potential conflict with neighborhoods. Again, respondents spoke of the stigma associated with experiencing homelessness and how this negative perception leads to feeling unwelcome in neighborhoods like this.

The WEHC women's group liked the idea of the location, but needed more information regarding the precise location.

The WEHC family group, AOC men's group, and FN group had mixed reactions within each group. For those that supported the location, close proximity to a hospital and central location were the primary reasons cited. Among those who did not support the site location, the primary reason was lack of transportation.

Westside Emergency Housing Center

The majority of participants across groups did not like the WEHC option. The primary reason stated in the data was the geographic isolation of the site. The lack of medical and retail services in the area, combined with the fact that the area is too far from the downtown dropoff point contribute to the lack of support for the site location. Many of the focus group participants that have visited the site stated the lack of cleanliness and challenges with service provision contributed to their perception of the site.

Having more than one option to meet the diverse needs of people experiencing homelessness is reflected in the following quotes:

“The Westside shelter should stay open as it is. Need to keep as an option”-Male respondent, AOC

“There should be a shelter for only women, since there are no options for just women.”-Female respondent, AHCH

However, it is important to note that the responses above were derived from the few people that supported WEHC as a viable option. Moreover, their support for WEHC as a site reflects their desire to have multiple sites for distinct populations.

Additional Site Recommendations

The following represents the two additional site locations that focus group participants indicated that they wanted to be considered for the Gateway Center location (very general locations).

- Building across the street from First Nations Community HealthSource
- Directly across the street from Albuquerque Healthcare for the Homeless on First Street and Mountain.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the focus group participants for bringing your critical voice to the conversation. Sharing your lived experience and allowing yourselves to be vulnerable is deeply appreciated. We hope that we adequately represented your voice in this critical conversation.

We would also like to thank the staff at the Westside Emergency Housing Center, Albuquerque Opportunity Center, Albuquerque Healthcare for the Homeless, and First Nations Community HealthSource for all of your hard work to coordinate these sessions and recruit focus group participants. We could not have done this without your support.

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