

Sebastopol has faced challenges in effectively addressing homelessness, with past initiatives failing to yield positive outcomes.

Failures of past initiatives:

Previous programs, including moving the Morris Street encampment into Horizon Shine, and the WCCS outreach coordinator have not successfully reduced homelessness in Sebastopol and have led to a dramatic increase in unhoused homelessness and resulting increases in crime and public safety issues.

The homeless population is shifting from the County into Sebastopol, the one city in the county without any available services.

The city has contracted for a coordinator for approximately 5 years. Since 2022 the unhoused homeless count in Sebastopol increased 170% from 40 individuals to 108, all unhoused. At the same time the number of unhoused in the county decreased by 24%. In 2022 2% of the homeless of the county lived in Sebastopol and in 2024 that increased to 7%. The population of Sebastopol is only 1.5% of the population in Sonoma County.

It appears the efforts by WCCS, and the county (Elderberry) are actually encouraging the homeless from across the county to move into Sebastopol. ***If WCCS was a true partner, they would bring these statistics to the attention of the city and city council and propose actions to reverse the growth of homeless people in Sebastopol.***

Limited outreach capacity:

The WCCS outreach coordinator's efforts will have a minimal reach going forward, with case management limited to just 32 individuals annually, despite a reported 108 unhoused individuals in 2024.

Increased police responsibility:

The Sebastopol police have been heavily involved in managing the growing homeless population. Prior to Elderberry being repopulating, the police reported spending 50% of their time on homeless issues.

A report in the Sebastopol Times described a police officer contacting each of the local homeless almost daily to track location and welfare. With Elderberry, now the demands of the police are very high. In the past the WCCS outreach coordinator reported improved reach by riding with a police officer one day a week.

No accountability:

Currently, the city literally has the highest rate of homeless people per population of any city in the County. We have no department officially assigned responsibility for developing a plan and implementing it to reduce the number of homeless people unhoused in the city.

The City Council, as a budget mechanism, moved the grant for the outreach coordinator from Non-Departmental Expense to the police based on the fact that the police were interacting with the WCCS coordinator when no other city employee or city council member provided oversight.

Need for new approaches:

There is a proposal in the staff report to think out of the box. Why not spend the \$40,000 to train officers who are already spending 50% of their time on homeless? The tools to help them assist the homeless and ultimately attempt to reduce the number by helping them to find services not available in Sebastopol.

City Council should also establish an ad hoc to address homelessness. Two council members are already our point people with the county. Adding the police chief to this team would help to organize the city's efforts.

This would also assign the responsibility for developing a plan to address our homeless problems. The staff report suggests that police outreach efforts could be improved by providing officers with better training to engage with the homeless population, which would allow for more constructive interactions beyond simply moving individuals along.

Already, we know our police officers have more reach and regular contact with our homeless population. Providing training to deal with homeless issues gives officers new tools that they can use more often than a homeless coordinator. Tools could include techniques to get individuals with mental health issues critical service. Other tools could include de-escalation techniques. Officers can be trained to understand what resources are available in the county when they find individuals that are ready to accept services.

It is time for the city to establish a plan for managing the homeless population in the city. The county is having great success. The number of unhoused homeless was down 24% since 2022. Recent reports state the county's homeless population is down another 23% in the last year.

It is time for the city to try a different approach. Let's fund police training.