

Community collaboration aims to address homelessness

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EAU CLAIRE — A new initiative to address homelessness in the Eau Claire area was unveiled Wednesday, with several community and government groups joining in.

The Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce, Eau Claire County Department of Human Services and the Eau Claire City-County Health Department have agreed to collaborate with “key leaders from local organizations, businesses, nonprofits, government agencies,” and people who have experienced homelessness, according to the announcement.

David Minor, the chamber’s president and CEO, said previous efforts “have faced challenges, often due to misalignment and a lack of shared vision. This new cooperative approach is about resetting the conversation and building relationships and strategies needed to create sustainable change.”

The collaboration’s initial meeting took place Wednesday. It included James Mathy, who is Milwaukee County’s housing administrator. In that role he led what Minor called a “successful housing-first approach.”

Elizabeth Giese, director of Eau Claire’s city-county health department, said homelessness affects far more than people often realize.

“Homelessness is not just a housing issue; it’s a public health issue, a workforce issue, and a community-wide challenge,” she said.

Homelessness has repeatedly been in the spotlight in Eau Claire over the past year. In July city parks employees mowed flower beds and removed tables and benches in Wilson Park, which is frequented by homeless people during warmer months, after a person pulled a knife on an employee there.

The collaboration plans to focus on four basic objectives: building a shared understanding of the current reality, collaborating for sustainable and efficient solutions, creating a shared vision for the goals and committing to a new way of working together.

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While officials said the removals were not retaliatory, it sparked a backlash that included city council members who said they were not informed of plans beforehand. The tables and benches returned after a couple weeks.

Last month the Leader- Telegram presented a three-part series on the issue, which included interviews with several people who were or had been homeless. They frequently said gaps in assistance and programs frustrated their efforts to get into stable housing.

Those experiences are part of the reason organizers of the collaboration brought in people with experience being homeless.

“We’re bringing leaders to the table — business leaders, service providers, and, most importantly, those with firsthand experience of homelessness,” said Angela Weideman, director of the Eau Claire County Department of Human Services. “By listening, learning, and committing to work together, we can create a brighter future for everyone in our community.”

