

St. Vincent de Paul Church  
120 N. Front Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

June 10, 2008

To: Baltimore City Division of Homeless Services [BHS]  
From: St. Vincent de Paul Park Working Group [PWG]  
Re: BHS Request to St. Vincent to Reconsider Position on Use of the Park by  
the Homeless

This document constitutes St. Vincent's response to this request.

Basis of BHS Request

BHS implemented the *Housing First* client vulnerability evaluations in St Vincent's park on May 21-22, 2008 and reported these results at the regularly-scheduled joint BHS-PWG Meeting on May 22:

(1) Based on vulnerability index evaluations, the proportion of the homeless staying in St. Vincent's park in the most vulnerable category is the highest among all the US cities so far evaluated through the Common Ground initiative. This index in combination with continuing exposure to the elements correlates with a five fold increase in mortality risk.

(2) The conditions in the park, particularly owing to unrestricted donations of food and clothing and uncontrolled access to alcohol and drugs, constitute a form of enabling based on the lack of incentive the conditions produce in the residents to improve their circumstances.

Based on (1) and (2), the Baltimore Homeless Services told St. Vincent's that the Church should reconsider its position on the park and recommended again that St. Vincent close the park. BHS suggested that St Vincent's identify another method for helping the homeless. Further, BHS cautioned St. Vincent's that once the sixteen "most vulnerable" from the park area are housed, no preferential treatment will be given thereafter to any homeless persons staying in the park. In effect, although St Vincent's views the park as a "gateway" to services, this is not a model the city can support.

St. Vincent Response

We held three meetings and seriously and comprehensively considered the BHS request arguing the pros and cons of the entire scope of available options. We will not close the park but we will take measures to regain control of the park to improve its condition and we will explore a more active role in behalf of the homeless. A point-by-point response follows.

*The conditions in the park constitute a form of enabling.*

St. Vincent's intended the park to be a place where the homeless can rest undisturbed, can safeguard their few possessions and documentation, and access outreach services provided by the city and other agencies. Over the years, our parish has lost control of the park and serious problems have evolved: (1) health risks from uneaten food and rat infestation and human waste; (2) community risks from the social integration of substance-using and drug-dealing individuals; and (3) the erosion of the park as "green space" due to resident trash and the previously-noted risks.

Actions to date and current activities:

The parish has responded to the park's deteriorated condition by establishing a Park Working Group [PWG] to address these problems and to collaborate with BHS in its *Housing First Initiative*. In the first four months of operation, the PWG has negotiated MOUs with BHS and with the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, Inc.; dismantled the park structures and cleaned the park; identified seed funding; recruited and hired a park manager; developed a program and submitted four separate funding requests; and is currently developing park policies addressing order, safety, and donations.

We believe that the implementation of the new restrictions on the availability of currently uncontrolled food and clothing donations and the enforcement of the existing prohibition against ramshackle shelters should make staying in the park less convenient. In addition, St. Vincent will meet with the Baltimore City Police Department to explore options to reduce the drug abuse problem thus improving neighborhood safety.

New plans for which we are seeking funding:

Individuals who are paralyzed in their decision-making need help in breaking free to change their behavior. Establishing policies and enforcing structural change in the park are likely to provide the circumstances for that important movement to happen. However, most people also need assistance in weighing the benefits and risks of behavioral change and contemplating their options. Case managers skilled in motivational interviewing (MI) can assist in this process. The city has noted that intensive efforts in the park will cease with the placement of the current sixteen residents. We therefore are seeking funding to provide these services directly and exclusively to the St. Vincent park population.

*The park residents are among the most vulnerable ever encountered in Common Ground city evaluations.*

The implication appears to be that staying in the park has made the residents this sick. If these homeless are institutionally adverse and refuse city shelters, it is not clear to us that making them sleep in doorways and alleys will make them better. We are

establishing park policy that will require shelter in Code Blue weather.

More importantly, however, the vulnerability evaluations in the park do not represent a random sample of the city's homeless population nor do they provide a valid comparison to others similarly entrenched in other places in the city. Further, the city's plans to re-survey the homeless in early 2009 with the same methodology used in 2007 (viz. an anonymous prevalence survey without vulnerability evaluations) will not provide the city with the person-based data determining individual trajectories that are critical for sound program evaluation, efficient resource planning, and ultimately public accountability.

New plans for which we are seeking funding:

St. Vincent is exploring the strategy being employed by Washington DC to activate a coalition of churches to assist in conducting the full vulnerability evaluation city-wide. We have included a small funding request for this mobilization in our upcoming application and hope to collaborate more closely with BHS in designing and implementing a more effective survey plan in 2009.

*St. Vincent should explore other ways to help the homeless population.*

In recommending this course of action to St. Vincent's, BHS indicated the need for "starter kits" and mentoring support for the newly-housed formerly homeless. This need in conjunction with the information that the case managers to be hired as part of the HFI are not yet in place is of concern to us. St. Vincent believes so strongly that this kind of early and intensive support to individuals with continuing mental health and substance use problems is the *sine qua non* of the HFI model that we required it in our MOU with BHS.

We perceive a chronic state of crisis management at BHS and the enthusiastic "can-do" spirit with which the program was presented to our church community last January seems to be scaling back in our private meetings. While we applaud Mayor Dixon's commitment and endorse the 10 year plan, we acknowledge the current economic downturn and its impact on available resources in the face of growing need. Having been witness to the reaction of the Jonestown community to the temporary shelter placement, we also appreciate the stress under which BHS operates in trying to hold things together until the 10 year master plan is fully underway.

New plans for which we are seeking funding:

Given this, we have considered that establishing a coalition of churches to assist BHS in addressing some of the support services needed by the newly housed would be useful. Many churches have small programs (indeed we are identifying that many of these programs are focused on our park). We therefore are seeking foundation funding to

establish this coalition with the specific purpose of (1) providing the “starter kits” (pots/pans, dishes, sheets, towels, cleaning supplies, furniture) and possibly mentoring in finances and housekeeping; (2) assisting in surveys as above; and (3) allied with others, advocacy in behalf of the homeless at the municipal and state levels.

Finally, we have been encouraged by our collaboration with BHS to date. We trust it can continue with the same good faith exhibited so far and trust that we can get beyond the unfortunate coverage of the past few days. We think this may be an opportunity to enter into a fuller partnership with a more substantial mission.

We look forward to a full discussion of our proposals.