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homelessness

City manager removes park curfew, seeking to deal with increasing homelessness

Jason Armesto Sep 26, 2023 3



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Week in Review



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City Manager Sam Sanders has removed the 11 p.m. curfew at Market Street Park after being informed at a City Council meeting last Monday that police allegedly mistreated two homeless men there.

The decision is the latest move the city has taken as it attempts to deal with increasing homelessness throughout Charlottesville.



Redelli Banks sits in her tent at Market Street Park in downtown Charlottesville on Friday, Sept. 22, 2023.

CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Tents have been set up in the park in recent weeks, and several people living in them told The Daily Progress they hope Sanders' decision will prevent police from harassing them at night.

That's what happened two weekends ago, when a police officer approached KeMarcus Murray in the park and, according to witnesses, kicked him while he was sleeping.



Rickey Jordan st

“He kicked that boy like he was kicking a football down the field to the other team,” Redelli Banks, who witnessed the incident, told The Daily Progress. “He put his soul into that kick.”

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That was the latest incident. Two weeks prior, after driving by the site in unmarked cars and taking pictures of people residing there, a dozen or so police returned to the site and arrested one man, Roscoe Boxley, for trespassing.



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Banks and Destiny Johnson, who live in a tent on the north side of the park, watched the series of events unfold. They noted that Boxley had a sign by his tent protesting the park’s curfew, and that he was the only person arrested despite not being the only tent on the premises. And as local resident Deidre Gilbert told City Council last Monday, Boxley was arrested while white people sleeping on park benches were not bothered.



Rickey Jordan currently sleeps in a tent at Market Street Park.

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In a Thursday press release, Sanders said both incidents are under investigation.

“I want the City to be a catalyst for change in addressing housing insecurity and homelessness, which is why I am assembling my team to build a long-term strategy,” he added.

Sanders does not believe this is a permanent solution, according to Council Member Michael Payne.

“One of the big conversations we’re having is how do we actually get to the point of making a year-round permanent shelter which obviously doesn’t exist in the community,” Payne told The Daily Progress. “That’s a big priority for Sam Sander and it would have to be done with organizations that have experience with that.”



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Currently, the Salvation Army is the only overnight shelter in Charlottesville and it only has 50 beds.



A sign by Market Street Park in Charlottesville displays the 11 p.m. curfew.
CAL CARY photos, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Captain Mark Van Meter says his organization regularly has to turn people away because the shelter is at capacity. While there is a plan to double the number of beds, fundraising is still underway and the project will likely not be completed for another two years.

But Van Meter views council's decision to approve the expansion as evidence that the city is not turning a blind eye to homelessness.

"I am very hopeful that Charlottesville does take a keen interest in its citizenship," he told The Daily Progress. "They are really trying to get their hands wrapped around the issue they see in front of themselves."

The decision to remove the curfew is being welcomed by the people living in the park.

"We don't bother anybody, we make sure it's clean, we're respectful, we don't cause problems," Banks said.



Tents set up at Market Street Park.
CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Johnson explained that she and others gravitate to the parks because they are not welcomed anywhere else.



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“Any other place we’ve tried to find shelter, whether it’s for rain or any other situation, police get called and kick us out. So the only place left is the public park system,” Johnson said, adding that the homeless are treated like “a contagious disease.”

Banks, who has lived in Charlottesville her entire life, believes that until the homeless are provided a safe shelter elsewhere, the park should remain open to them.

“If we’re respectful and clean up behind ourselves and we don’t start any trouble, why not?” she asked.

Anna Mendez, executive director of The Haven, a day shelter in downtown Charlottesville, has been advocating for the curfew to be removed for years.

“We are so grateful and thrilled at the decision to end the curfew in the park,” Mendez told The Daily Progress. “The existence or not of a curfew is not something that impacts how many people are experiencing homelessness and likely doesn’t even impact where people experiencing homelessness are hanging out. It’s only putting them at risk of being ticketed or arrested.”



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She does not expect the curfew's temporary elimination to have any effect on the demand for services at The Haven.

"What we do anticipate is people will be able to sleep in that public place without fear of harassment," she said.

The number of people in Charlottesville who have fallen into homelessness has grown by 25% since 2018, Anthony Haro, executive director of Blue Ridge Area Coalition for the Homeless, told The Daily Progress in August.

The decision to keep the park open at night has already irked a number of residents in the city.

In one email sent to Sanders, a resident described his decision to "give the park over to the homeless" as "a travesty."

Mendez counters that neighbors should take time to meet the homeless, and offers that they can do so by volunteering at The Haven.

"It really saddens us when the focus of our community conversation seems to be more on outrage at people having to observe individuals experiencing homelessness rather than where we think the outrage should be placed, which is at the fact that in one of the wealthiest areas of Virginia, homelessness continues to exist," she said.



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Tents set up at Market Street Park.
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Ricky Jordan has lived in Charlottesville since 2009 and purchased his tent two weeks ago. He told The Daily Progress that while he has injured feet, he hopes to find a part-time job that allows him to provide for himself.

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“Because if I was in a different position and I could help you, I would,” he said, removing his sunglasses. “Your son, your kid, your mother. I would try to help the best way I can, man.”

After that, Jordan walked away. He said he was about to cry.

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NONPROFITS

Charlottesville Salvation Army falling short on fundraising

It's alarming news considering the increase in demand for local Salvation Army services

Emily Hemphill Dec 31, 2023 1



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Trips to the grocery store during the holiday season are marked by one distinct and familiar sound: the ringing of Salvation Army bells.

The international nonprofit's Red Kettle Campaign has stationed volunteers in commercial districts in cities nationwide, ringing their bells and collecting donations in red kettles, for more than a century. The campaign got its start in San Francisco in 1891, when it raised funds to feed the city's poor.



POLITICS

Salvation Army closes in on plan to double beds at homeless shelter

Jason Armesto

It is considered one of the more successful fundraising campaigns in history, and certainly one of the most well known, but the Charlottesville Salvation Army branch is struggling.

The local Salvation Army said it is \$17,000 short of its campaign goal of \$110,000 this year, which is also \$10,000 less than the group received during last year's drive.



The Salvation Army's Red Kettle Campaign has been in operation for more than a century.
SALVATION ARMY

"There are a lot of homeless people out there, and we need to keep our doors open," development director of the Charlottesville branch James Battaglia told The Daily Progress. "A lot of them are just unlucky, and it's hard to get back on their feet, so it's critically important that we can help them."

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It's alarming news considering the increase in demand for the Salvation Army's services, as the only year-round, overnight shelter for the homeless in the city amid an uptick in homelessness in Charlottesville and the surrounding area. The 58-bed shelter this year has said on multiple occasions it has run out of space.



LOCAL NEWS

I'm going to die out here': Homelessness is on the rise in Charlottesville

Haley Sandlow

But the decline in philanthropic support is not unique to Central Virginia, as Salvation Army chapters across the country are reporting a drop in donations in recent years. The organization's signature fundraising event raised \$126 million in 2019, but only \$102 million in 2022.

Multiple factors could be contributing to the decline, including a pandemic that rattled the economy and the declining popularity of physical cash. The Salvation Army said it has made efforts to adapt, providing new ways to donate digitally through Apple Pay, PayPal or Venmo, even text donations.



One of the bedrooms in the Salvation Army shelter on Ridge Street in Charlottesville is seen on Wednesday, July 12, 2023.

CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Battaglia said the Charlottesville chapter has suffered from a lack of volunteers, particularly during "the holiday's heavy shifts."



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“We’ve also been down in food donations, so we had to buy more food than normal,” said Battaglia.



LOCAL NEWS

The homeless population in Charlottesville has grown, but its shelter space has shrunk

Jason Armesto

Despite the shortages, the faith-based group is still operating all of its services and managed to feed roughly 270 people on Thanksgiving, according to Battaglia.

“We really pulled it together at the last minute,” he said.



A rendering of the proposed new Charlottesville Salvation Army facility on Ridge Street.
CITY OF CHARLOTTESVILLE

While cash gifts may be hard to come by, newly purchased goods for the Salvation Army’s Angel Tree drive came in abundance this year. Battaglia said he personally signed at least 600 letters thanking donors for the 1,000-plus gifts that were donated for children whose parents are unable to afford Christmas presents.

The annual Red Kettle Campaign is not the only time the organization will be asking for community support in the new year. The Charlottesville Salvation Army is preparing to launch a new capital campaign in mid- to late 2024.



CHARLOTTESVILLE NEWS

With homelessness rising, Salvation Army seeks to add more beds to shelter

Jason Armesto

The Salvation Army building, which has stood on Ridge Street for 60 years, is planning for an overhaul that will expand it into a 47,000-square-foot, four-story building with enough space for 100 beds and seven transitional apartment units. The remodeled structure will also include a multipurpose space for community events and classes. The nonprofit group’s administrative offices will be moved as part of that transition, though a new location has not yet been identified.



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“I think it’s going to be a banner year next year because people are going to notice what we’re doing with the new building and still providing services,” said Battaglia. “It’s going to be a great year — a challenging one, but a good one.”

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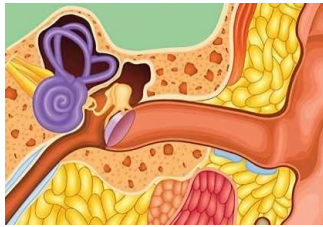
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HOMELESSNESS

The homeless population in Charlottesville has grown, but it's shelter space has shrunk

Jason Armesto Nov 16, 2023 1



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Charlottesville has a homelessness crisis on its hands: The city's unhoused population has grown but its shelter space has actually shrunk over the past year.

The number of people in Charlottesville who have fallen into homelessness has grown by 25% since 2018, according to Anthony Haro, executive director of Blue Ridge Area Coalition for the Homeless, which coordinates and leads collaborative efforts to address homelessness.



One of the bedrooms in the Salvation Army shelter on Ridge Street in Charlottesville is seen on Wednesday, July 12, 2023.
CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

But the options for the homeless are few: an overnight Salvation Army shelter on Ridge Street with limited beds, the Haven day shelter on West Market Street which cannot legally operate at night and the seasonal beds provided by People and Congregations Engaged in Ministry that are only open during the colder months.

But things seem to be changing, according to city and shelter officials, as the public pushes Charlottesville to open up more space and reconsider housing regulations.

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Benjamin Perez, who is homeless and has been on the streets for 15 years, sits next to his belongings at Market Street Park in Charlottesville on Saturday, Oct. 21, 2023.

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At the Haven on Monday night, directly across the street from Market Street Park where a homeless encampment sat for days before the city cleared the space in late October, shelter leaders hosted a 90-minute information session for the public on what the city and its residents can do to get people off the streets and into a bed.



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Executive Director Anna Mendez presented a slideshow that featured data on Charlottesville’s shelters and unhoused population.

And she explained what the Haven’s housing programs have tried to do to get people off the streets.

“By far the biggest challenge for all of the programs in our housing department is that demand far exceeds the Haven’s capacity to address,” Mendez said. “Every month we have a finite bucket of homelessness prevention funds.”



POLITICS

Market Street Park homeless encampment cleared without incident

Jason Armesto

Those buckets usually dry up quickly, with a high demand for housing in the city and Albemarle County. The Haven’s programs are time limited, so while they can help people on the verge of homelessness or find a home for people who have recently been evicted, the help is only temporary.

“There are not enough post-program supports in existence in our community,”

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There are also not enough shelters. While the Salvation Army on Ridge Street provides a year-round overnight shelter to people in need, not everyone is eligible for a bed. And even then, it is at capacity virtually every night, leaving some eligible people searching for other options.



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While seasonal shelters exist, such as those provided by PACEM, they still don't satisfy the need for more beds. In fact, one slide Mendez showed said that Charlottesville's shelters actually have 33 less beds now than this time last year.



Anna Mendez, executive director of the Haven day shelter in Charlottesville, speaks to the public at an information session on homelessness on Monday, Nov. 13, 2023.

CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

The city does not have a year-round “low-barrier shelter,” meaning a place that unhoused people can stay without having to pass a drug test or other requirements.

Mendez said that's actually what the Haven was originally intended to be.

“Ultimately, NIMBYism is what resulted in the city of Charlottesville telling the community group that was trying to launch the Haven, ‘You can use this building on 112 W. Market St., but you can only do it between the hours of 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.’ So nobody can sleep here,” Mendez said.

The Haven was told it could only provide daytime shelter services. And even then, those services were relegated to the basement of the building.



POLITICS

Charlottesville to reimpose curfew at Market Street Park

Reynolds Hutchins

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But Mendez added that the city appears to be having a change of heart.

“Some of the voices that were loudest in opposition to the Haven offering overnight shelter are now some of the loudest voices in favor of it,” Mendez said. “That has been an interesting switch.”

Even so, any conversations about The Haven being used as a shelter are very much in their infancy. It would take time and money before the organization could begin housing people overnight.



Anna Mendez, executive director of the Haven day shelter in Charlottesville, speaks to the public at an information session on homelessness on Monday, Nov. 13, 2023.

CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

“The Haven being an overnight shelter could very well become a part of the long-term plan for addressing the needs of the people experiencing homelessness,” Charlottesville City Manager Sam Sanders told The Daily Progress in a statement. “At this time, the ability to do so appears connected to the provision of a tax exemption, which is not something Council does.”

The Haven does not actually own the building at 112 W. Market St. Because of that, Mendez said Monday its ability “to invest in any capital needs or renovations is limited, nor can public funds be used to improve or renovate a building that is not owned by a nonprofit.”



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unilaterally.”

Currently, the organization is funded by private philanthropy, as well as the local, state and federal government.



CRIME

Police call allegations of assault against homeless man 'unfounded'

Jason Armesto

The Haven views homelessness as a housing issue. “The solution to homelessness is housing,” reads part of its website. That means in order to reduce homelessness, more housing is needed, which would be made easier with relaxed zoning regulations. Not just in the city, but the county too.

“That is going to require our city and county leadership to figure out what can we do with zoning to allow the development of more units, and what can we do with zoning or tax credits or other incentives to help private developers keep at least some of their rents at the HUD benchmark for fair market rent,” Mendez said.

That benchmark is determined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Although Charlottesville receives rental subsidies from the federal and state governments, those subsidies cannot be used on any units that exceed HUD’s fair-market rent.



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Mendez has previously told The Daily Progress she supports the city’s proposed rezoning plan, which includes incentives for developers to include affordable units. Critics, however, say the incentives will not work.



Anna Mendez, executive director of the Haven day shelter, and Ocean Aiello, community engagement coordinator for the shelter, answer questions from the public at a public information session on homelessness in Charlottesville on Monday, Nov. 13, 2023.

CAL CARY, THE DAILY PROGRESS

Natalie Oschrin, a wedding sales manager at Pippin Hill Farm & Vineyards in North Garden who will join City Council in January, was among those in the audience on Monday night. Afterwards, she told The Daily Progress that rezoning would be an important step in fixing the city's homelessness crisis.

"Homelessness is an issue that is on people's minds right now. But it's also something that is chronic that we have yet to deal with on a long-term basis," Oschrin said. "It's something that I think we can make strides towards solving with the upzoning and providing more housing across the board."

And she added that subsidy programs can only go so far if there is a limited housing supply.

"If there's plenty of vouchers to be given out but not enough places for folks to use those vouchers, there there's still going to be a wait list," she said. "So increasing supply helps at every level of affordability."



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POLITICS

Racists remarks flood Charlottesville City Council meeting

Jason Armesto

Steven Johnson, co-chair of urbanist advocacy group Livable Cville and a UVa professor, was also in attendance Monday. His group pushes for more housing, better urban planning and more reliable transit in the city. Like Mendez, he said he believes homelessness is a housing problem.

"The housing-first model says the best way to get people to be stable in their life is to give them housing first, and then they can take care of issues of sobriety and mental health and issues that may be impeding their ability to have full-time employment," Johnson told The Daily Progress after the meeting. "So that's what's important. To stay focused on how we can get people into housing."

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