



File Photo/Staff

According to the most recent Point in Time count, overall homelessness in Dallas and Collin counties dropped by 19% compared with 2021 data.

Dallas homeless response is working

City’s strategy is getting results, but there’s much more to be done

By SARAH KAHN

In the shadows of what *USA Today* recently named the best arts district in the nation, a small group of Dallas residents lived much like a quarter of a million other people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in America right now — in tents under highways, storing belongings in shopping carts, and staying warm around fire pits. One of them, Zephyr, lived in a makeshift home among the trees that was “held together with duct tape and prayer,” he said.

But in early March, Housing Forward, working with incredible partners including Downtown Dallas Inc., the city of Dallas, North Texas Behavioral Health Authority, The Stewpot and others, helped Zephyr and his neighbors move straight from the encampment near Routh Street into apartments. Each of them now has access to “wrap around” services to help them get back on their feet.

“Just sleeping completely out in the open where literally anybody can just walk up to you — it’s unnerving and I’m glad that that’s over,” Zephyr said. “I’m very glad that that’s not a thing anymore.”

This is one example of the work of the All Neighbors Coalition, a group of 150 partner organizations working to solve homelessness in Dallas and Collin counties. Since overhauling the homelessness response system in 2021, the coalition has rehoused more than 10,100 people. The latest Point in Time count, released April 30, shows a 19% reduction in overall homelessness and a 24% reduction in unsheltered homelessness since 2021.

The data shows our strategies are

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Zephyr, formerly homeless

working. Our own eyes tell us there is much more work to be done.

You do not have to go far to see that homelessness remains a major challenge. That is true in parts of downtown Dallas, as well as in neighborhoods throughout Dallas and Collin counties. Local governments, businesses and community members are all searching for a tool to resolve this issue. The good news is, we have evidence for what works.

We’re reporting our lowest total number of people experiencing homelessness, 3,718, in nearly a decade. This is not happening in most other major cities. In fact, last year we were among just 27% of communities that reported reductions in homelessness.

This means the shifts and investments we’ve made as a community matter. We can continue this incredible progress by expanding the tools that have proved to work.

Our goal is to reduce unsheltered homelessness by 50% from 2021 levels, when our transformation began. This will require continuing our pace with a \$30 million public-private investment in housing and services, paired with expanding our Street-To-Home encampment response.

This is a proven model to reduce homelessness and expedite encampment closures by bringing behavioral

health care and rehousing assistance directly onsite at strategic locations. Street-based health care teams, peer specialists, outreach workers and housing providers work daily to support neighbors to move back home, to recover and to stabilize. Over 95% of people engaged say yes to working with us on housing, dispelling a common myth that people living outside are “service resistant.”

This approach also advances racial equity by removing barriers to services and stable housing that perpetuate disparities. The most recent data shows that Black households make up 57% of the unhoused population but just 19% of the general population in Dallas and Collin counties — a result of the wide-ranging impacts of systemic racism and inequities.

We acknowledge the communitywide pressure to respond to unsheltered homelessness. Many are in search of strategies that will provide a quick fix. Alternative approaches, however, do not reduce homelessness, are costly, and would take years to develop. Luckily, we have the tools that provide results today to reduce homelessness in public spaces, and to provide a lifeline to people living outside.

In the coming weeks, we will continue to put more details around our expanded Street-To-Home response. Efforts to raise the required \$30 million public-private investment are well underway.

The key to our continued success is to stay the course and focus on the strategies that helped us house Zephyr and more than 10,100 others since 2021.

Sarah Kahn is the president and CEO of Housing Forward.

Leave my pension to the professionals

Texas fossil fuel fealty could cost firefighters and other public employees

By MICHAEL GLYNN

Firefighting is hard work, and it’s rewarding, too, especially in a place like Fort Worth. We help save lives and property, and we strive to provide a sense of security. The people we serve know someone will be there in their time of need.

Yet when it comes to retirement security, I am beginning to wonder if I will be able to count on the same support when my time to retire comes. A political house fire is beginning to rage out of control, and it threatens the security of firefighter families like mine.

Members of the Fort Worth Employees’ Retirement Fund are not allowed to participate in Social Security. So, firefighters and other public servants depend on pension funds. The good news is, after a decade of pension reform in Texas and strong market returns, most public pension funds are much stronger, but there’s a looming threat.

Extremely partisan special interest groups are meddling in the affairs of retirement-fund fiduciaries, to the detriment of public servants, based on perceived threats and fears that investment professionals are veering from their fiduciary duty.

While firefighters like me aren’t directly involved, I paid close attention to the Texas Permanent School Fund decision to terminate \$8.5 billion in investment with BlackRock to ensure compliance with a 2021 investment boycott law. BlackRock was accused of being opposed to oil and gas investments despite its holdings of \$170 billion in energy interests. As to fiduciary duty, PSF CEO B. Holland Timmins acknowledged BlackRock managed funds have provided “very attractive” fees and “strong performance” for the state.

These actions are extremely expensive. Senate Bills 13 and 19, which created this conflict, have cost the state more than \$270 million, according to a study by TXP, an economics analyst group commissioned by the Texas Association of Business.

These bills restricted investment in companies that could be perceived to be anti-fossil fuel. This has created a

blacklist that has limited the number of companies that will issue local bonds.

An earlier study from authors at the University of Pennsylvania and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago estimated the payments on municipal borrowings from the first eight months after the laws passed would cost Texas taxpayers an extra \$300 million to \$500 million. And according to a report by Bloomberg, the ban would cost the state’s fossil fuel industry — the same one these forces say they are trying to protect — \$5 billion in investments.

The restriction of investment options will ripple through public pension programs, too, endangering the retirement goals of current and future retirees from the ranks of police, firefighters, teachers and other public employees. Worse yet, these laws are not based on maximizing returns, but on perceived political positions of large companies. Even a percentage point lost in an annual return could cause major ripples in the long-term health of these funds. The costs from lost returns due to investment restrictions will be paid for by the taxpayers. It’s not difficult to imagine that when that happens, “greedy” retired police officers, teachers and firefighters will be blamed.

In Texas, public servants have earned the retirement benefits they were promised. It’s time to stop interfering with investment professionals and focus on policy solutions that will secure the best retirements for workers in Texas.

For investment professionals, this is not about any particular asset class. No matter which way the political winds blow, it is the investor’s fiduciary duty to prioritize returns for clients. All investment decisions must be made in the interest of the beneficiaries — period.

Every day, I’m proud to be a Fort Worth firefighter. We deliver excellent service, are good stewards of city resources, and we give back to the community. And I’m proud to live in a state where public service is appreciated and where, most of the time, elected officials and their appointees work with us to do the right things. As a fourth-generation Texan, I am also proud to fight to keep Texas as business-friendly as it used to be and to continue to grow the Texas Miracle.

Michael Glynn is a captain in the Fort Worth Fire Department and is president of the Fort Worth Professional Firefighters Association.

No one was arrested for protesting at UT Dallas

University supports free speech, president says, but barricaded encampment was unsafe

By RICHARD C. BENSON

The University of Texas at Dallas is not immune to the controversies that are challenging universities across the country because of the Israel-Hamas war. Despite these challenges, UT Dallas staunchly protects the rights of free speech and free assembly. But while we treasure these rights, they are not without limitation on a university campus.

At UT Dallas, there have been approximately 10 protests related to the conflict since late fall, all of which were publicly announced. While noisy and perceived as antagonistic by some in our community, the

protests were compliant with Texas’ recently expanded free speech laws and did not disrupt university operations.

Until the last two weeks, our students have shown respect for the policies we have in place for assembling on campus. In turn, we have supported their right to express their deeply held convictions.

In the early morning hours of May 1, a small group of protesters constructed a barricaded encampment in the middle of our campus — an action that violated university rules and was done without advance notice or approval. In addition to tents, the barricade included wooden pallets, tires and other impediments to movement

across a main walkway on campus. It was a well-planned, intentionally provocative operation, and it soon became apparent, as food and water were delivered throughout the day, that the organizers were planning to be there for days or weeks, rather than hours.

Beginning at approximately 6 a.m. that morning, university leaders requested the encampment be moved or dismantled. At 3 p.m., university officials followed up with a formal written notice that the encampment was in violation of university rules and must be removed immediately. Although many took the opportunity to leave the encampment, some chose to remain.

After it became evident that those remaining were refusing to comply, university police, in conjunction with other law

The right of free expression, as well as the safety of our community, were both protected on May 1.

enforcement agencies, began clearing the barricaded area. Twenty-one individuals were arrested for criminal trespass, including nine who are not currently affiliated with UTD.

It is important to note that no one was arrested for being a protester. Indeed, hundreds outside the encampment — perhaps having left it seconds before the arrival of law en-

forcement — protested vehemently and continued to do so well into the evening. None of these protesters was arrested. Nor was anyone arrested on May 3 when another protest was conducted in a manner that adhered to state law and university rules.

I understand and applaud the impulse of our students and our community to respond to humanitarian crises taking place across the globe. After all, the entire world is the arena-of-action for our graduates.

Regrettably, the encampment on May 1 differed from all of the protests that came before and after, thus prompting the university’s response. Such an encampment constructed under the cover of night at the center of our campus, impeding faculty, staff and students

from their daily tasks, is not protected by the First Amendment or our speech and assembly policies.

The right of free expression, as well as the safety of our community, were both protected on May 1. As noted, the protest subsequent to the dismantling of the encampment continued into the evening at another location on campus without interference or incident.

I am committed to the premise that no matter where a person stands on any given issue, UT Dallas will continue to be a community that accepts differing viewpoints while remaining a safe environment in which to do so.

Richard C. Benson is the president of the University of Texas at Dallas.