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Region struggling with homelessness

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BY AMY FLOWERS UMBLE

If local governments in the Fredericksburg area don't deal with homelessness, they could face higher crime, more demand on social services and mental health crises.

"The fact of the matter is, this is a humanitarian issue. This is pretty serious," said Fredericksburg City Councilman Marvin Dixon. "In some ways, we're going to pay one way or another."

He spoke during a regular George Washington Regional Commission meeting Monday evening when members discussed the area's loss of money from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The Fredericksburg area Continuum of Care--a group of social services agencies dealing with homelessness--recently lost about \$122,000 in HUD money. The agency denied the grants for two main reasons: problems with the grant application and the area's lack of services for the homeless.

"They are grading us--as a region--from homelessness to getting a house," said Matt Kelly, chairman of the GWRC and a city councilman.

The CoC group received a HUD grant last year to start a program to better track the homeless and the services they use. HUD almost requires localities to run the Homeless Management Information System, Kelly said, so it is a blow to lose the money to run it in its second year.

But Bob Wilson, director of GWRC, said the group can keep the program running by rearranging the money from the previous year. Most of it was earmarked for programming but could go to keeping the part-time staffer the GWRC just hired to run the homeless information system.

The group is applying for an amendment to that grant to reallocate the money. In the meantime, Wilson said, the GWRC must decide what to do about homeless services.

"Frankly, our programs are well behind our neighbors to the north," Kelly said.

And because the area doesn't have the services, it will continue to receive low HUD rankings, which will



Homeless people line up to enter Micah Ecumenical Ministries' cold-night shelter hosted at the Bragg Hill Family Life Center when it's below freezing. Some other area shelters and programs have lost federal money.

affect future grants.

The GWRC can look into contacting state politicians for help or could even decide to take over the CoC, Kelly said.

Dixon said area localities have stepped up to give more money to Micah Ecumenical Ministries--which runs the cold-night shelter for the chronic homeless--and wondered how much more they should do.

Wilson said he knew local governments are strapped for cash now.

"It's about the worst time, I think, this could've happened," he said.

The discussion comes just days after the area's annual homeless count. The numbers won't be available for weeks, but those who serve the homeless expect the tallies to be up this year.

Amy Flowers Umble: 540/735-1973

Email: aumble@freelancestar.com

The area's Continuum of Care applied for grants through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

HUD rejected more than \$500,000 in grant requests from the Fredericksburg area CoC. About \$117,000 of that is renewal money--grants the area had already received and expected to get again. That includes about \$60,000 for Hope House, a shelter for women and children, and about \$60,000 to the George Washington Regional Commission to run a computer program to better track the homeless and the services they receive.

--Amy Flowers Umble

ABOUT THE CoC

The Fredericksburg Area Continuum of Care is a group of social services agencies, nonprofits and Fredericksburg city staff who meet to discuss homeless issues. For details, visit fredcoc.org.

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