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## **Addressing Chronic Homelessness: La Crosse's Role**

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In La Crosse, the issue of chronic homelessness has increasingly impacted both the community and local businesses. Historically, the city's approach to homelessness has been reactive, focusing on short-term fixes. At a recent planning meeting of the City Council held on June 6<sup>th</sup> two concerns were highlighted: first, there is escalating frustration among residents and local businesses due to the rising presence of homelessness and second, the cost of homelessness in the area is significant, amounting to \$3.3 million. Highlighting the critical need to find a long-term solution, a proposal under consideration is the "Housing First" model. Another focus should be permanent housing. Milwaukee is a shining example where a dedicated focus on permanent housing significantly reduced chronic homelessness. To illustrate, data shows that from 2021 to 2022, Milwaukee experienced a decrease in its chronic homeless population by approximately 63%. This improvement contrasts with La Crosse's situation, where the chronic homeless count is slightly higher, about a 16% increase.

### *Net Surplus*

Implementing permanent housing solutions in La Crosse could significantly ease the public burden. Economically, this approach can be more cost-effective than the current fragmented efforts to manage homelessness. Key areas of savings include healthcare services, law enforcement operations, and the provision of counseling services. These savings arise from the decreased need for emergency interventions and the reduced involvement of law enforcement in homelessness-related issues. Additionally, by moving homeless individuals into stable housing, the city can foster a more vibrant and healthy community image. This positive transformation may attract new businesses and residents, enhancing the city's economic vitality. Furthermore, the financial resources saved, and the improved social environment could enable the redirection of funds and attention towards other critical public services. In essence, by effectively addressing the issue of chronic homelessness, La Crosse stands to benefit from both economic savings and an enriched community life, leading to a more prosperous and cohesive city for all its residents.

### *Government Housing Solutions*

The key impediments to long term housing solution are the reality of budget constraints faced by local government and identifying the most efficient use of resources. A promising strategy is the development of a centralized service and housing hub for the homeless. This 'hub' model consolidates essential services and housing in one location, facilitating easier access for those in need. However, this approach might require a significant portion of the budget for construction and operation, potentially limiting funds available for other critical services under the "Housing First" model. Notably, given that this budget is for the initial fixed cost, the pains are likely to be more prevalent in the early years after implementation.

Exploring housing donations from banks is another avenue, but it comes with the caveat that many donated houses may need substantial renovations. Again, these can be viewed as a fixed

cost, reducing their long-term impact on society. A more sustainable alternative could involve converting older buildings into apartment complexes with integrated community centers, aligning with the “Housing First” model. This not only repurposes existing structures but also aids in urban renewal.

Additionally, the concept of tiny homes offers a unique solution. These compact, efficient living spaces can be a cost-effective way to provide housing, though they require thoughtful planning in terms of zoning and community integration. Tiny homes can offer individualized, dignified living spaces, contributing to the diversity of housing options available to tackle homelessness.

By weighing these varied approaches, the city can navigate its budgetary limitations while effectively addressing the chronic homelessness issue, providing a range of sustainable and practical housing solutions.

### *Corporate Social Responsibility*

In addressing chronic homelessness, the government of La Crosse can greatly benefit from forging partnerships with local businesses, a move that can enhance the effectiveness and reach of its budget. These collaborations could lead to a more strategic allocation of resources across various projects. Local enterprises can contribute significantly, either by donating land, providing older buildings for conversion into permanent housing, or sponsoring housing projects directly.

In the endeavor to address chronic homelessness, the involvement of local businesses can extend beyond financial contributions. By offering job opportunities and vocational training to those enrolled in the "Housing First" program, businesses can significantly aid in the societal reintegration of previously homeless individuals. These opportunities are not just about providing employment; they represent a pathway to dignity, stability, and self-sufficiency. Job training and employment enable these individuals to develop skills, gain confidence, and become self-reliant, thereby reducing their likelihood of returning to homelessness. This symbiotic relationship also benefits the local economy, as a skilled and stable workforce is an asset to any community. Moreover, these actions can foster a culture of inclusivity and social responsibility within the business community, enhancing the overall social fabric of La Crosse.

Moreover, with the backing of local businesses, the city's plan could expand its focus to include vital services such as counseling and medical assistance. This collaboration could open avenues for innovative solutions, like implementing a mobile healthcare service where doctors regularly visit residents in the program. Such initiatives could lead to significant time and cost savings, further amplifying the impact of the program and reinforcing the community's commitment to resolving the issue of homelessness.

A prime example of corporate social responsibility in action is Kwik Trip's acquisition of America's Best Value Inn. This strategic purchase is not just a business decision; it will significantly enhance the town's image, especially for visitors arriving via Interstate 90. By repurposing the property, Kwik Trip will demonstrate a strong commitment to the community's aesthetic and social welfare. Further, Kwik Trip's involvement in supporting local initiatives will be evident. By allowing Habitat for Humanity to reclaim usable materials, they will provide

essential support to this key community organization, which aims to offer affordable housing. Additionally, their decision to allow firefighters to use the property for training will serve a dual purpose: it will aid public safety efforts and reduce the costs associated with training exercises. These actions exemplify how a business can contribute meaningfully to the community beyond monetary donations, playing a pivotal role in public service and nonprofit support.

### *Crowdfunding*

Introducing crowdfunding as a solution offers a novel approach to addressing La Crosse's chronic homelessness challenge. By establishing a dedicated crowdfunding platform, the city can not only raise awareness about the issue but also generate additional funds specifically for permanent housing initiatives. This platform serves a dual purpose: it educates the public about the severity of the homelessness problem while actively contributing to its resolution through financial support.

To further encourage community involvement, the city could utilize donation matching. Under this model, each contribution made to the fund would be matched, effectively doubling the impact of individual donations. The matched amount would comprise equal parts from the crowdfunding platform and the city's resources, post the donation collection phase. This strategy not only amplifies the financial contributions but also serves as an incentive for more people to participate in the fundraising effort.

The adoption of crowdfunding is a strategic move that could significantly alleviate the city's financial load in combating homelessness. More importantly, it engages the community directly in the solution, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and action. The success of this initiative could set La Crosse on a path to becoming a model city that has effectively reduced its chronic homeless population and achieved its goal of reaching 'functional zero' in homelessness.

In conclusion, La Crosse stands at a critical juncture in addressing its chronic homelessness issue. By shifting focus from short-term fixes to long-term solutions like permanent housing, the city can significantly reduce the social and financial strain of homelessness. The proposed five-year plan, incorporating strategies like the "Housing First" model, should consider innovative housing solutions such as service hubs, renovated buildings, and tiny homes, to demonstrate a commitment to sustainable change. Also, including partnerships with local businesses and crowdfunding initiatives offer creative ways to amplify resources and community involvement. Together, these efforts represent a comprehensive approach to not only alleviate homelessness but also enhance the overall quality of life in La Crosse, striving towards a future where homelessness is substantially reduced, if not eliminated.