

August 30, 2021

The Honorable London Breed
City Hall, Room 200
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102

Mary Ellen Carroll, Director
Department of Emergency Management
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Sent via electronic mail

Re: Shelter Self-Referrals

Dear Mayor Breed,

We are a broad-based group of community organizations, professionals and activists concerned with the hopeless situation our unhoused neighbors and loved ones are facing in the streets today. We believe that the Shelter in Place (SIP) hotels should remain in operation and people should be moved into them from the street. We also believe that if a congregate shelter is able to safely operate under COVID-19 guidelines, then it is critical that the City reinstate a system where individuals can self-refer into a shelter facility — be that safe congregate, safe sleeping villages, or SIP hotels. Currently, thousands of individuals living outdoors and in the streets of San Francisco have no self-directed pathway into the shelter system, and must rely on a centrally-controlled system that is inaccessible to those who desperately need them.

The 311 shelter reservation system that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was established in 2014 under Mayor's Office of Homelessness Director Bevan Dufty. The system was designed based on extensive input from shelter seekers and users, and a broad consensus process was carried out with technical assistance from 311 management. Unhoused people had great agency and buy-in to the approach as it accommodated individual needs, allowed for consumer choice, and was simple to access, allowing interface both by phone and at drop-in centers. Before the system was in place, unhoused people spent about nine hours on average trying to access shelter and had to travel to multiple access points to improve their chances of securing shelter. The 311 system also addressed the long-standing shelter vacancy issue —which always occurs when the city restricts access to beds to particular entities such as the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT). Before the pandemic, thousands of people accessed shelter

through this system each year. Currently, the City's single adult congregate shelter system has been operating at less than 80% occupancy for three months.

The Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing's current policy is to maintain the centralized placement system for the foreseeable future. The City's justification for doing so is based on the limited "capacity" of City personnel and the policy decision to maintain open shelter beds for the City's prioritization of SIP hotel closures and tent encampment resolutions.

The current centralized placement system is failing. The process routes some unhoused people into shelters from SIP hotel closures, Healthy Streets Operations Center (HSOC) tent encampment "resolutions," hospital discharges, and HOT referrals, but the current policy fails to serve the unhoused community at large. Rather than providing a workable system to help people out of homelessness, the current system serves the policies of removing the visibility of homelessness and "fiscal prudence."

The undersigned individuals and organizations call on the City to reinstate a policy of self-referral for people experiencing homelessness as soon as possible. Emergency shelters are not a solution to homelessness; however, providing an accessible path into shelter for all who wish to pursue it is imperative for our unhoused community.

We thank you for your consideration and look forward to working with you in finding and implementing solutions.

Sincerely,