

Grumet: Austin needs more than \$0 for cold weather shelters



Bridget Grumet

Austin American-Statesman

Published 9:00 a.m. CT Feb. 16, 2022 | Updated 3:03 p.m. CT Feb. 16, 2022



Sometimes you can accomplish a lot with a zero-dollar budget.

Consider the roomy cabin that Tyler Wing built at a homeless encampment in Southeast Austin, using only salvaged materials.

The walls are made of wooden boards and corrugated metal. Sheets of vinyl siding create the roof. A plywood floor rests on joists fashioned out of salvaged

lumber, cleverly built to keep Wing's belongings from getting soggy when it rains.

“This is going to be plush carpet,” Wing told me, gesturing to the floor, envisioning what comes next. “Furniture, art on the wall — you’d be amazed at the things people throw out.”

Wing, 48, said he acquires all this stuff by dumpster diving, which is also how he makes his living. He sells his best finds at a flea market in Kyle.

When I met him during a recent visit to several encampments, Wing was working to insulate his cabin, hanging layers of blankets over the walls. A faux print cowhide adorned the west wall.

The star feature, though, was the indoor fireplace, framed with cinder blocks and an overturned wheelbarrow. Wing created a ventilation shaft with rounded pieces of blackened scrap metal.

“This fireplace is money, as long as you get the smoke out,” Wing said. A small pile of ashes quietly attested to a recent, successful test fire.

A different story at cold weather shelters

I found a wealth of ingenuity on tight budgets at some of the homeless encampments I visited recently. The last place I expected to find a lack of resources for the unsheltered was at Austin City Hall, where the council has put a record \$142 million toward addressing homelessness over the past two years.

Yet as my colleague Nicole Foy recently reported, exactly zero of those city dollars were budgeted for cold weather shelters, the temporary safe havens for those living on the streets when temperatures fall below freezing.

For years, the city largely relied on churches and other faith-based groups to run cold weather shelters. Those volunteers provided hot meals and a warm place to sleep in repurposed sanctuaries and community rooms. With that aid taken care of, the city focused its spending — including the bulk of that \$142 million over the past two years — on longer-term efforts to help people exit homelessness.

But COVID-19 disrupted that arrangement.

“Most of those churches elected not to participate (in cold weather shelters) at this time, at least not at the higher, elevated (COVID-19) risk levels we are seeing right now,” Dianna Grey, Austin’s homeless strategy officer, told City Council members at a workshop this month.

That has forced the city to step up and provide cold weather shelters, using federal dollars and staff from other departments.

At the same time, getting people into those shelters has become even more challenging since voters last year restored the homeless camping ban, pushing many people who are homeless away from the central city and farther out of sight. Homeless advocates say that has made it harder to find people and connect them to services.

Grey believes the church groups will resume offering cold weather shelters once the pandemic fades. But I hope this moment forces the city to recognize it needs to provide greater leadership, communication and coordination on cold weather shelters, regardless of how many other players are at the table.

More coordination needed here

During the cold snap earlier this month, about 500 people came to city shelters — only a fifth of the unsheltered population in Austin. We need to do better. As we saw during the 2021 winter storm, people who stay in the bitter cold face the very real risk of dying or losing feet or toes to debilitating frostbite injuries.

Some homeless advocates believe they could encourage more people to go to cold weather shelters if:

- Buses picked up people directly from such facilities as the Mosaic Church's Charlie Center and the Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center, which serve hundreds of people a day.
- The city had more pickup locations around town instead of expecting people to find their own way to a shelter intake center near downtown.
- Transportation to shelters remained available even if bad weather prompted Capital Metro to cancel regular bus service.
- The city coordinated with well-funded mutual aid groups, which have carried out their own robust efforts to get people into hotel rooms when it's freezing outside.

- Officials made earlier decisions on shelter openings and improved the communication with service providers and homeless people. Several church-based homeless aid programs close around 1 p.m. Providing earlier notice would give them more time to spread the word and help their clients plan to get to a shelter.

All of this planning and coordination needs to be someone's job at City Hall. And it doesn't happen with a zero-dollar budget.

Using federal coronavirus recovery dollars, the city intends to hire a temporary "emergency plans officer" to improve the city's shelter plans, drawing on the lessons learned from the 2021 winter storm. That's a start.

"We are really at a point of reconsidering whether our cold weather shelter plan reflects where we are as a community, with the size of our unsheltered population and many of the chronic conditions that we see in the unsheltered population," Grey told council members.

I appreciate the fact that city officials have focused heavily on housing services, the long play in tackling homelessness. But the events of the past year have shown us why we also need to support basic humanitarian aid in the coldest weather for the most vulnerable among us.

Before you can get someone off the streets and into housing, you need to make sure they make it through the night.

Grumet is the Statesman's Metro columnist. Her column, ATX in Context, contains her opinions. Share yours via email at bgrumet@statesman.com or via Twitter at [@bgrumet](https://twitter.com/bgrumet).