



CITY OF NORMAN, OK
CITY COUNCIL OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE MEETING
Municipal Building, Executive Conference Room, 201 West Gray, Norman,
OK 73069
Thursday, June 12, 2025 at 4:00 PM

MINUTES

The Oversight Committee of the City of Norman, Cleveland County, State of Oklahoma, met in Regular Session in the Executive Conference Room in the Municipal Building, on Thursday, June 12, 2025 at 4:00 PM, and notice of the agenda of the meeting was posted at the Norman Municipal Building at 201 West Gray and on the City website at least 24 hours prior to the beginning of the meeting.

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Heikkila called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m.

PRESENT

Mayor Larry Heikkila, Chair
Councilmember Ward 4 Helen Grant

ABSENT

Councilmember Ward 1 Austin Ball
Councilmember Ward 7 Stephen Holman
Councilmember Ward 8 Scott Dixon

OTHERS PRESENT

Councilmember Ward 3 Bree Montoya
Ms. Shannon Stevenson, Assistant City Manager
Mr. Rick Knighton, City Attorney
Mr. Anthony Purinton, Assistant City Attorney
Ms. Shaakira Calnick, Internal Auditor
Mr. Hudson Harris, University of Oklahoma Student Government Association
Ms. Kathy Hammans, Admin Tech III, City Clerk's Office

AGENDA ITEMS

ITEM 1: PRESENTATION OF A REPORT ENTITLED "A PLACE TO CALL HOME: A COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PLAN FOR NORMAN'S PERMANENT SHELTER" BY THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION.

Hudson Harris presented findings on behalf of The Home Together Initiative, a year-and-a-half long, student-led, (University of Oklahoma Student Government Association), research and advocacy project focused on housing insecurity and vulnerable populations in Norman.

Key points from the presentation included:

- National housing insecurity trends: rent outpacing wages, limited federal assistance, and new construction trends favoring higher-income developments.
- Disproportionate impacts of housing insecurity on Black, Latino, Native American, and female populations.
- Norman-specific data (2024): housing costs are 38% higher than Oklahoma City, and 20% above the state average.
- Housing wage in Norman: \$19.91/hour needed to afford a two-bedroom apartment.
- Rent spikes since 2023: 18% for studios, 9% for two-bedroom units. Median rent: \$15,600 annually.
- One-third of Cleveland County residents are rent-burdened; the burden is highest among Black and Native American populations.
- Homelessness snapshot (2024 Point-in-Time count): 91 unsheltered, 128 sheltered. 85% are long-term homeless; 52% are chronically homeless.

Definition of Homelessness:

- *Long-term homelessness:*
Defined as being without a stable home for approximately six months to a year. Individuals in this category lack consistent shelter over a significant period.
- *Chronic homelessness:*
Refers to individuals who have experienced long-term, inconsistent housing.
Example: If someone has only been housed for 1–2 years out of the past 10, they are considered chronically homeless.

This population faces increased difficulty in achieving stable housing due to factors like:

- Job insecurity
- Inability to receive mail
- Difficulty accessing services

Current Shelter Capacity in Norman

- Total beds available: 245
- A Friend's House (Norman City): 52 beds
- Shelters near capacity: Most existing shelters are operating near or at full capacity.

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Main Barriers to Housing:

1. Land Discrimination
 - Landlords often refuse federal housing vouchers.
 - Common concerns: Lack of ROI (return on investment), perception of tenants as untrustworthy.
 - Requirements such as ID and large deposits are standard but pose significant barriers.
2. Lack of Identification (ID)
 - Many unhoused individuals do not have a valid ID, making it difficult to secure housing or services.
3. Criminal Records
 - Individuals with felonies often face major housing discrimination.
 - Landlords prefer tenants without criminal backgrounds, especially in high-demand markets.
4. Limited Case Managers and Social Workers
 - Social services cannot keep up with demand.
 - Lack of support leads to increased instability, especially for those with substance use issues or mental health needs.
5. Transportation Challenges
 - Bus System Improvements: While helpful, limitations remain:
 - Animals: Homeless individuals often own pets, which are not always permitted on buses.
 - Carts: Personal belongings stored in shopping carts (often considered stolen) cannot be brought on public buses.
 - Walking: Often the only reliable method of transport for the homeless community.

Efforts and Initiatives by Norman:

- Issued 1,250 housing vouchers
- Developed new job programs
- Allocated opioid settlement funds
- Achieved SOAR, (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access & Recovery) certification
- Engaged in ongoing community and city talks

Public Challenges and Community Tensions:

- Rising tension among residents due to perceived lack of space and resources.
- Community frustration: Residents express concerns over visible homelessness and seek solutions that often conflict with the needs of the unhoused.
- Emotional strain and conflict are increasing, with little room for compromise or resolution without broader systemic support.

Community Concerns and Public Sentiment:

- There is ongoing frustration from both community members and service providers.
- The City of Norman has faced criticism in the past, particularly in connection with Food and Shelter, Inc. and other shelter initiatives.
- Residents have expressed discontent with both inaction and perceived poor action by the city.

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Community Concerns and Public Sentiment: *(continued)*

- Some state representatives oppose allowing Norman to decide independently on shelter development.
- The State of Oklahoma has been seen as obstructive toward Norman's initiatives.
- A frequent concern from residents: "There's no place for us."
- Community members are calling for dignity and inclusion in future plans.

City of Norman's Involvement:

- Norman co-leads the Cleveland County Continuum of Care (CoC) alongside Thunderbird Clubhouse.
 - The CoC is a coalition of 20+ organizations (e.g., Salvation Army, Transition House).
 - These groups support vulnerable populations through services focused on:
 - Mental health
 - Shelter
 - Substance abuse recovery
 - Clothing & religious support

Key Accomplishments:

- In 2018, Norman achieved functional net-zero veteran homelessness.
- Participation in Built for Zero and 100,000 Homes Campaign.
- 426 chronically homeless individuals were housed because of coordinated housing efforts.

Current Shelter Facilities:

- A Friend's House Shelter
 - Location: 109 West Gray Street
 - Opened: 2020
 - Average capacity: 56 beds per night
 - Current beds: 52 (Operated by City Care)

Housing & Support Programs:

- Housing Choice Vouchers
 - Benefited individuals with steady jobs and low income.
 - Helped provide rental assistance and stability.
- ESG (Emergency Solutions Grants)
 - Used for rapid rehousing and homelessness prevention.
- COVID-Era Rental Assistance
 - Offered between 2020–2022 to support tenants at risk of eviction.

Community & Government Efforts:

- Impact Highlights:
 - 24 guests secured Social Security Insurance Services (SSIS)
 - 95 housing referrals
 - 300 advocacy logs
 - 30 ID vouchers issued
 - SOAR (SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access & Recovery) Certification achieved
 - Transition House
 - Responded to 427 calls/visits
 - Receives a \$75,000 grant annually

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Current Community Engagement Initiatives:

- One Norman Task Force
- Beautification Job Program
- ID/Birth Certificate Events
- Felony Referrals Coordination (via OKC)

The public has identified several key priorities for addressing homelessness in Norman:

1. Year-Round, Low-Barrier Shelter
 - 24/7 access
 - Minimal entry restrictions
2. On-Site Wraparound Services
 - Mental health services
 - Addiction recovery
 - Job support programs
3. Facility Design
 - Clean and safe
 - Trauma-informed design principles
4. Transparency and Inclusion
 - Inclusive planning process
 - Centering the voices of individuals with lived experiences
5. Access to Basic Needs
 - Consistent access to food, shelter, hygiene, and support networks

Overview of Shelter Site Discussion:

- Griffin Memorial Land (owned by Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services):
 - This is the best proposed site due to location, proximity to downtown, access to transit, and existing infrastructure.
 - Historically used for mental health and behavioral services.
 - Over 20 acres of land with existing (but aging) buildings.
 - Tree line separates it from nearby residential areas.
 - Renovation and funding needed for usability.
 - Uncertainty remains regarding cooperation from the state agency that owns the land.

II. Case Studies and City Comparisons:

1. Lawrence, Kansas:
 - Created a 175-bed facility with modular, private units (bed, desk, sink).
 - Communal facilities (bathrooms, food services).
 - Low-cost, innovative solution.
 - Good short-term option though not ideal long-term.
2. United Kingdom (Finland Model):
 - 430 individuals housed in apartment complexes.
 - "Housing First" with intensive support services.
 - 70% reduction in visible (rough) homelessness.
 - The program is now being scaled regionwide.

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II. Case Studies and City Comparisons: *(continued)*

3. San Antonio, Texas – Haven for Hope:

- A centralized campus approach.
- 80% of the city's homeless population is sheltered.
- 88% remained housed after one year.
- Achieved an 80% drop in downtown homelessness.
- Estimated \$148 million saved annually.
- Emphasized the cost of ignoring homelessness (public safety, services, business impact).

III. Key Takeaways & Lessons Learned

- Permanent low-barrier shelters reduce unsheltered homelessness.
- Wraparound services increase long-term success and housing retention.
- Housing without entry barriers (e.g., no drug history checks) has better retention rates.
- Infrastructure investment saves long-term public funds.
- Multi-agency coordination and public-private partnerships improve outcomes for both housed and unhoused residents.

IV. Funding Strategies

- Federal Grants (via Continuum of Care - CoC):
 - Require annual reapplication.
 - Include Emergency Solutions Grants (short-term assistance).
 - HOME Investment Partnerships and affordable housing programs.
- State Funds:
 - Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.
 - State Opioid Abatement Funds: Possible for recovery-related services but unlikely for housing directly.
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- Local Strategies:
 - Tax Increment Financing (TIF):
 - Proposed new TIF district in North Main area.
 - A small percentage could fund shelter infrastructure and annual operations.
 - The city retains ownership; nonprofit operates the shelter.
 - Public-Private Partnerships:
 - Similar model to City Care partnership.
 - University of Oklahoma (OU):
 - Largely absent from city engagement on housing.
 - Opportunity for partnership with OU students and departments.

V. Recommendations to City Council:

1. Publicly Commit to a plan.
2. Establish a Strategic Plan:
 - Accept complexity and nuance.
 - Embed evidence-based research.

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V. Recommendations to City Council: *(continued)*

3. Select a Feasible Site by End of 2025:
 - Griffin Memorial Land preferred.
 - Other locations explored:
 - Norman Veterans Center
 - OB1 Assessor Land (also state-owned)
 - Highway 9 sites (private, large parcels)
4. Form a Shelter Planning Task Force:
 - Draw members from Continuum of Care and relevant service providers.
 - Include individuals with lived experience.
5. Develop Funding Strategy Immediately:
 - Prioritize TIF or other recurring funding streams.
 - Explore Capital Stack approach:
 1. Layer multiple funding sources (local, state, federal, philanthropic).
 2. Examples: ARPA, revolving housing funds, Norman Forward II initiatives.
6. Ensure Transparency & Community Engagement:
 - Frequent updates and direct conversations with residents.
 - Combat misinformation and maintain public trust.
7. Integrate Wraparound Services from Day One:
 - Critical for success and retention.
 - Services must be ready before shelter opens.

VI. Role of the University of Oklahoma (OU):

- OU currently does not provide significant housing support or services
- Homelessness among OU's 31,000 plus students identified, especially:
 - Upperclassmen who cannot access campus housing.
 - Limited off-campus affordable housing options.
 - High demand has increased rent and reduced quality.
- Students eager to engage with the city:
 - Volunteerism
 - Research collaboration
 - Civic involvement in planning and communication

The Home Together Initiative believes that everyone in Norman deserves a safe place to sleep, a place to heal, and a place to call home and is ready to help with whatever it takes to reach the goal.

The meeting concluded with Council extending gratitude for the research and effort put into the presentation by Hudson Harrison, University of Oklahoma Government Association.

The meeting adjourned at 5:08 p.m.