STAKEHOLDER PRIORITIES & COMMUNITY NEEDS

REIMAGINING ACDC Initiative

Connecting previous decriminalization research with the Program Workgroup Progress Report

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INTRODUCTION
Reimagining ACDC Initiative

• In May 2019, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms signed legislation creating a Task Force to reimagine the use of the Atlanta City Detention Center (ACDC) into a **Center for Equity**.

• The Mayor’s Office engaged a team of graduate students from Georgia State University to research decriminalization efforts in the United States, completed in May 2020.

• The current project began in June 2020 as an extension of the previous research, to connect the research findings with the Task Force’s **Program Workgroup Progress Report**.
INTRODUCTION

We utilized the top four program priorities identified in the *Program Workgroup Progress Report*:

- Justice Reform
- Employment & Financial Empowerment
- Housing & Homelessness
- Health, Mental Health, Substance Abuse (Health & Behavioral Health)

We searched for organizations with expertise in these areas, either through advocacy or providing services.

Source: Program Workgroup Progress Report
INTRODUCTION

Of nineteen organizations identified, we were able to schedule and conduct thirteen interviews over two weeks.

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We conducted *one additional interview* to gather historical information about the sobering center that existed in Atlanta in the 1980s.

In addition to this interview, we conducted a search of newspaper archives for articles related to the center. **The goal was to gather information about the operations, successes, and struggles of the “Detoxification Center.”**

Source: *Atlanta Constitution*, February 15, 1980
INTRODUCTION

Project goal: gather information from community stakeholders to identify service gaps and solutions for the community.

Sample of questions utilized in interviews

- What do you believe are the most urgent challenges you see in your area of expertise the City of Atlanta should be trying to solve with the Center for Equity?
- What other unmet needs does your organization find among the community you serve that your organization is unable to address?
- What are the barriers that individuals might experience that prevent them from accessing the services you provide?
- What are your thoughts about having a sobering center in the City of Atlanta?
- Does the community you serve experience driver’s license suspensions or revocations? How does that experience affect their ability to utilize needed services?
- Have you found that arrest warrants for failure to appear in court impact the community you serve? If so, how?
STAKEHOLDER PRIORITIES

Housing & Homelessness
Employment & Financial Empowerment
Health & Behavioral Health
Justice Reform
HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

• The most frequently cited priority for the Center for Equity was **affordable and accessible housing**.

• Stakeholders described a need at every point in the housing spectrum, from emergency shelter to permanent housing — however, the focus was on **permanent affordable housing**.

• Conversations about housing centered on the **barriers to housing** experienced:
  • The cost of living
  • Prohibitive housing requirements (i.e. income requirements, credit and background checks)
  • Stigma associated with homelessness, poverty, and behavioral health needs
Jeff Smythe of HOPE Atlanta said:

“There are challenges that paralyze our ability to quickly move people out of distress and into stability, which has a lot of expenses and consequences on a lot of systems across the city. It has criminal justice implications. It has hospital and healthcare implications. It has mental health implications.

So the sooner that we can get someone stably housed, the better the results for all of us as a city. As a community.”
EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL EMPOWERMENT

• After housing, the most broadly touched upon priority concerned economic mobility, income inequality, and access to higher wages through employment.

• Stakeholders in this program area focused on racial equity and economic mobility.

• Conversations centered on the barriers to employment experienced, including:
  • Lack of stable housing
  • Lack of government identification documents
  • Criminal records

• Needs discussed included job training, education, and social support
HEALTH & BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

• Access to health care and behavioral health care is a significant need in the community.
• Current programs and strategies need **expanded capacity**, particularly for crisis services and detoxification centers.
• Stigma associated with behavioral health struggles was a **barrier to housing and employment**, as well as a **barrier to accessing treatment**.
• **Peer support** was an important part of behavioral health treatment, particularly for individuals in recovery from a substance use disorder.
• Support for **integrated health and behavioral health model** as a strategy to reduce stigma and normalize behavioral health treatment.
• Stakeholders in health and behavioral health identified the *overlapping nature* of behavioral health, housing instability, employment, and criminal justice system involvement.

Dr. Steck of *Grady MAOT Clinic* said:

“We talk about recovery, not just abstinence, because you can be abstinent from a substance and your life can still be in shambles. *Recovery takes into account getting a spiritual component to your life; a job, housing, and engaging meaningfully with society.*”
JUSTICE REFORM

• Several stakeholders were primarily concerned with addressing the **criminalization of poverty** and **criminal justice system involvement** among those who have experienced marginalization and disenfranchisement.

• Stakeholders focused on the opportunity for **culture change** - moving toward building **equity and social inclusion**.

• Strategies for culture change
  • Decriminalization of low-level charges
  • Reducing criminal justice system contact
  • Supporting and working with longstanding community-led organizations
JUSTICE REFORM

• Failure to Appear in Court
  • Many individuals served by the stakeholder organizations had warrants for failure to appear in court on low-level charges stemming from poverty, substance use, mental health crises, or other unmet behavioral health needs.
• Aside from decriminalization, another solution discussed by stakeholders was the use of technology for notices to appear in court.
  • Using cell phones is a more reliable way to contact individuals who move addresses frequently, who are unstably housed, or who are currently experiencing homelessness.
  • Expanding the ability to address certain charges online.
FREQUENTLY CITED NEEDS

- Government Services and Programs
- Legal Services
- Transportation
- Childcare
- Food Security and Grocery Stores
- Access to Technology
FREQUENTLY CITED NEEDS

• What are other unmet needs in the community?
  • Accessible government services
    • Social security card
    • Birth certificate
    • Government ID
  • Accessible government programs
    • Housing vouchers
    • Medicaid
    • Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
    • Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
• Strategies for accessibility includes assistance with applications and collocated services
FREQUENTLY CITED NEEDS

- Legal services
  - Driver’s license suspensions
  - Child support
  - Failure to appear in court
  - Guardianship
  - Landlord-tenant disputes, evictions
- Transportation
- Affordable childcare
- Food security and access to grocery stores
- Access to technology
SOBERING CENTER

• Enthusiastic support by the majority of stakeholders
  • Jail diversion allows for **changing the culture of criminalization**
  • Access to **referrals to long-term treatment** for substance use disorder
  • **Harm reduction strategy** that meets a gap in services
• Stakeholders who had experience with the sobering center that used to exist in Atlanta reported positive experiences and stated it **benefitted both law enforcement and the community.**

• Sobering Center needs:
  • Strong connection to longer-term services, such as detoxification centers, peer recovery specialists, and housing specialists
  • Culturally competent services
SOBERING CENTER

• Concerns stemmed from two areas:
  • Health care support
    • Triage process for intake
    • Access to appropriate medical care
  • Jail diversion process
    • Facility should be welcoming and inviting
    • Diversion process should be consent-based
    • Trust in the community as a barrier to its use

• Measuring success
  • Concerns about measuring too much
    • Inherent value in its use as a diversion from jail
  • Diversions from jail and/or emergency room
  • Connections to treatment
  • Patterns of reuse among individuals
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

On individuals and stakeholder organizations
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

- Stress of the COVID-19 pandemic on the community:
  - The pandemic **aggravated previously existing struggles** in housing instability, health and behavioral health, and employment.
  - Some **services have been inaccessible**, such as group recovery meetings and face-to-face counseling for individuals with substance use disorder.
  - Individuals experiencing homelessness **expressed fear of coronavirus outbreaks** at emergency shelters.
  - Individuals experiencing food insecurity reported more **difficulty accessing food**.
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

• The pandemic has been felt by stakeholders’ organizations, who have:

  • **Changed their daily operations** in order to ensure the safety of their employees and the community.
  
  • Attempted to **focus on the changing needs** of the community during the pandemic, such as emergency rental assistance and food insecurity.
  
  • Stakeholders in *housing and homelessness* and *health and behavioral health* reported the **need to stay open throughout the pandemic**, because of the needs of the population served.
  
  • Stakeholders in *employment and financial empowerment* reported **moving more services online** and paying attention to the **changing industries with available work**.
EQUITY & INCLUSION

In program design and implementation
EQUITY & INCLUSION

Stakeholders encouraged the City to:

• Continue **listening to members of the community**, including individuals who might receive services at the Center for Equity.

• Lean on longstanding community-led organizations who have **developed trust and relationships** in the community.

Stakeholders believed these strategies will **improve programs and services** and create trust and a **culture of social inclusion**.
Stakeholders encouraged the City to:

• Prioritize **culturally competent services**, including training service providers to ensure people who experience marginalization are treated with respect and dignity.

• Focus on **accessibility and addressing health disparities and health care discrimination** for Black people, women, and transgender people when designing and implementing health-centered programs and services.
CONCLUSION

Photo: Designing Justice + Designing Spaces
CONCLUSION

Affordable and accessible housing is the most urgent and essential need reported by all stakeholders interviewed.

After housing, stakeholders identified:

- Employment and Financial Empowerment
- Health and Behavioral Health
- Justice Reform

Often discussed as barriers to addressing urgent needs, stakeholders also identified:

- Government services and programs
- Legal services

Strong support for a sobering center as a need for the community, which could serve as:

- Harm reduction strategy
- An important step to change the culture
CONCLUSION

The vision: “one-stop shop”

Monica Johnson of the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disability stated:

“As close to a one-stop shop it can be, the better. One of the biggest barriers to access to care is transportation. If you can make it easier for someone to get all their needs met in one place, that goes a long way in eliminating one of the biggest barriers that exist.”
CONCLUSION

The vision: “one-stop shop”

• Stakeholders described a place for individuals to access the services that will help them find and maintain stable housing, employment, and address their health and behavioral health needs.

• The vision for the Center for Equity is a space that encourages and fosters social inclusion, compassion, and equity.

• With recognition that policies of arrest and detainment aggravates barriers to address these needs, programs and strategies must be developed in recognition of a desire to change and create culture.
CONCLUSION

The City of Atlanta can utilize this information as a starting point, continuing to work with community stakeholders, organizations, and individuals to implement strategies to better serve the community.

Photo: Designing Justice + Designing Spaces
THANK YOU
Q&A

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