

April 24, 2020

Lawndale “Project Roomkey” Update

The COVID-19 pandemic has created extraordinary circumstances that are impacting communities around the world. In response, the City of Lawndale has been actively working to adapt City operations to the current statewide stay-at-home orders while also maintaining essential services such as public safety to protect the health, safety, and welfare of our community.

The City learned recently that the County of Los Angeles had contracted with Best Western Plus South Bay Hotel to temporarily house people experiencing homelessness as part of the “Project Roomkey” program. Project Roomkey, sponsored by the State of California and implemented by the County of Los Angeles, intends to provide shelter for 15,000 asymptomatic homeless individuals most vulnerable to COVID-19 (those 65 years of age or older and those with pre-existing health conditions). The program is being implemented through the claimed emergency powers of the State and County. Individuals began moving into the hotel on Thursday, April 23rd.

The goals of Project Roomkey are worthy, and the City supports the idea and intent behind the effort to house the County’s homeless population as a component of our society’s response to COVID-19. However, the County has been limiting information and entering into contracts with hotels without notifying cities. Indeed, Lawndale City officials were only informed by the County about its plans for Lawndale after the County had signed a contract with the Best Western. The City has been denied any involvement in the development of the protocols, policies and plans by the County regarding how the program will be implemented to ensure that it is in a manner that protects the Lawndale community. As such, the City does not and cannot support the County’s current approach and implementation of this program. The City will continue to fight to have its concerns addressed to protect the community.

Because of this lack of information and coordination from the County, the City was forced to consider aggressive administrative and legal actions to force the County’s cooperation. Because of these efforts, the City was able to engage in a helpful dialogue yesterday with the County of Los Angeles through a process facilitated by a federal judge.

The City has focused on several core demands, including:

- Neighborhoods and businesses must be protected from potential loitering and other nuisances by homeless guests at the hotel
- Homeless guests at the hotel must be repatriated to their respective communities once the program has ended
- The County must pay for hotel taxes
- Lawndale-affiliated homeless individuals must be given first priority at the hotel

On the last demand, after repeated requests by the City, the City was informed yesterday that the County will now allocate 24 rooms for chronically homeless persons currently in Lawndale (approximately 75% of Lawndale’s homeless population – which could be all homeless persons who meet the admission criteria). The City continues to work with the County of Los Angeles to get answers to our questions with a particular focus on security plans, timelines, and the exit strategy for the hotel’s occupants when the Program expires. The City will monitor the implementation of Project Roomkey in several other cities (such as Lomita) where hotels have

been operating over the last two weeks. To date, fortunately, we have not heard of any significant problems in connection with Project Roomkey.

The County continues to seek contracts with low-cost hotels across Los Angeles County with at least 50 rooms to house additional people experiencing homelessness. More hotels in Lawndale may qualify under their criteria, but the City will strongly oppose additional Project Roomkey hotels in our community. The Best Western is Lawndale's contribution to do our part to house at-risk people, but as a small city, Lawndale should not be overburdened for the wider goals of this program. The City calls upon the County to ensure a shared implementation across the South Bay region to achieve the goals of this program. We're all in this together.

Slowing the spread of COVID-19, delivering services to those most at-risk, and getting people experiencing homelessness off the streets are important goals. Like all worthwhile pursuits, achieving success can be hard. The City is working diligently toward this end and in protecting the community.

As residents of Lawndale, you should know what is taking place in your community and the steps the City is taking to protect your quality of life now and in the future. The City has been providing frequent community updates through the COVID-19 portal on our website. These include updates on the Operation Roomkey program. Visit <http://www.lawndalecity.org/HTML/Coronavirus.html#Updates> to get the latest information from the City.