



February 16, 2021

The Honorable Nathan Fletcher
Chair, Board of Supervisors
County of San Diego
1600 Pacific Beach Drive, 3rd Floor
San Diego, CA 92101

The Honorable Todd Gloria
Mayor
City of San Diego
202 C Street, 11th Floor
San Diego, CA 92101

Downtown Homelessness

Dear Chair Fletcher & Mayor Gloria:

We are writing to you on behalf of Downtown's small businesses and business districts, its hospitality and restaurant industries, and as representatives of our nonprofit sector, service providers, educators, essential workers, and residents. As we work together to reimagine the future of Downtown, we are cautiously optimistic that the heart of our city will re-emerge from the challenges of COVID-19 as an economically prosperous and culturally vibrant urban center amid a tech boom and flourishing blue economy. This will create better opportunities for the entire region, ranging from quality jobs, more housing options, and a stronger tax base to support all of our communities. Unfortunately, one of the critical hurdles facing Downtown's recovery and quality of life are impacts related to homelessness, particularly those suffering from severe behavioral health issues, and those who use homelessness as a guise for criminal activity. This impacts not only the lives of our unsheltered population but also poses a severe threat to public safety, public health, environmental health, and economic recovery efforts at a time where many businesses are clinging to survival.

We applaud you for your commitment to the Housing First model and support recent efforts to develop and operate additional supportive housing elements; however, much more must be done to address the unique set of challenges we face to meet the outsized need in Downtown, including Little Italy, and our surrounding neighborhoods. We are reaching out in the spirit of collaboration to ensure we work together to restore confidence in our urban center. We encourage your consideration of the following, in order to advance that shared goal and stem the volume of incidents that many in the Downtown community encounter on a daily basis.

On behalf of our residents, businesses, and workforce, we ask that you implement the following recommendations:

- 1. Conduct government-funded outreach fairly, focusing on the areas of greatest need:** The deployment of City, County, San Diego Housing Commission (SDHC), and Regional Task Force on the Homeless (RTFH) outreach workers and contracted vendors should be data-driven, ensuring the areas of greatest need receive the most resources. Criteria should include the number of unhoused individuals and behavioral health-related calls for service. This will ensure that outreach workers are not being deployed arbitrarily (i.e. by City Council District or the unincorporated area).
- 2. Emphasize collaboration:** “Operation Shelter to Home” resulted in a remarkable level of communication across agencies and service providers to best serve unsheltered clients. This same spirit of collaboration is being fostered Downtown to ensure outreach is being conducted efficiently. Monthly coordination meetings should be expanded to include the City, RTFH, SDHC, County Behavioral Health Services, and providers servicing Downtown and the surrounding areas (i.e. Downtown Partnership, PATH San Diego, National Alliance on Mental Illness San Diego). This will ensure outreach is being conducted efficiently and will allow for client handoffs between entities specializing in the most appropriate services for any given circumstance. For instance, many outreach workers are not equipped to respond to the level of behavioral health-related incidents, extreme mental distress and intoxication they encounter too frequently. With a greater coordinated presence of County Behavioral Health Services, through these meetings outreach workers will be better trained in de-escalation tactics and will have a point of contact on the ground to hand clients off to.
- 3. Deploy and triage crisis response units in Downtown:** In recent months, incidents related to drug use, intoxication, and extreme mental distress have grown exponentially. The City, in conjunction with County Behavioral Health Services, is in discussions around the development of crisis response teams. As part of this development, a triage system for residents and business owners to report individuals in distress should be incorporated. Currently, only 9-1-1, 2-1-1, and phone numbers for the San Diego Police Department (SDPD) non-emergency and the Downtown San Diego Partnership Clean & Safe dispatch exist as 24/7 hotlines readily available to Downtown stakeholders. Despite the best intent of the public servants and staff behind those numbers, none of these options elicits an appropriate response to the unique needs of individuals in crisis. Bringing more specialized teams online with a dedicated number or the ability to triage from 9-1-1 will allow for more individuals to get the appropriate help they need. Until a new number is created or integration with 9-1-1 is possible, we offer the Downtown Partnership Clean & Safe’s hotline as a pilot in the 275 blocks of concentrated population they serve. Additionally, Downtown Partnership Clean & Safe

ambassadors are in the field 24/7 and can easily and proactively report individuals in crisis before they become a danger to themselves or others.

- 4. Expand the definition of “gravely disabled,” and employ conservatorship as permissible under California state law:** As noted above, we have seen a sharp increase in behavioral health-related incidents, drug use, and intoxication where individuals are a danger to themselves and others. These individuals often will not accept services due to extreme mental illness or substance abuse. California law allows for the use of conservatorship once an individual has been placed on eight temporary, involuntary psychiatric holds (5150) in one year. Although we would argue the threshold of eight 5150 occurrences is high, we have yet to see an accurate accounting as to whether conservatorship is being employed at all under existing state law even within the eight-occurrence threshold. Additionally, we have concerns regarding the tracking of 5150 holds by individual and the sharing of this data across other agencies for appropriate tracking. For instance, when responding to an individual in crisis, is the responding entity able to accurately decipher how many 5150 calls the individual has elicited throughout the state? Sadly, many individuals in dire need of care are left to die a slow death on our streets, while others consume vital civic resources - like SDPD, Fire-Rescue, Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and hospital stays that further constrain our healthcare system – without getting any closer to the care they really need. Individuals are often held for treatment and observation before being discharged and left to repeat this cycle all over again. We ask you to consider implementing processes and systems to ensure greater accountability as far as tracking 5150 holds per individual and explore the potential for programs like San Francisco’s “Housing Conservatorship Program,” which expands the City’s authority to seek court supervision of those who are unable to care for themselves. We also ask that you direct the City and County government affairs departments to advocate for expanding the definition of “gravely disabled,” at the state level to include serial instances of intoxication and drug use. These recommendations must be carried out in conjunction with greater investments in psychiatric care facilities, including a plan to expand inpatient psychiatric hospitals so that sick individuals have a place to receive the care they need. It should be noted that SDPD 5150 calls for service increased by 20% in 2020, compared to 2019. Without action, we may see a further increase in 5150 calls for service, which may result in additional loss of life and the proliferation of psychosis on our streets.

- 5. Maintain funding for programs vital to the cleanliness and safety of Downtown:** The City’s “Clean SD” program, which focuses on illegal dumping and trash pickup, is responsible for the removal of thousands of tons of garbage and large items in our streets and sidewalks such as couches and refrigerators. In a down budget year, we know difficult decisions lie on the horizon. We urge you to maintain funding for Clean SD so our streets, sidewalks, and parks remain free from debris. Additionally, SDPD’s Neighborhood Policing Division (NPD) provides a vital service to Downtown in the form of community-oriented policing and Homeless Outreach Team services. NPD’s progressive enforcement and proven successful programs like the Serial Inebriate Program provide critical alternatives to the criminal justice system for

individuals who have committed lower-level offenses. We urge the continued funding of these programs as a critical component of our collaboration network and a vital resource for Downtown's unsheltered.

- 6. Reduce aggressive and threatening behavior including violence, vandalism, substance abuse, and drug sales:** In recent months, COVID-19 has reduced jail capacity, resulting in the release of incarcerated individuals and emboldening those who use homelessness as a guise for criminal activity. Homelessness is not a crime. To protect people experiencing homelessness, we must reduce opportunities for criminals to prey on the homeless community, often committing crimes without fear of retribution. We urge the City Attorney and District Attorney to jointly focus on prosecuting crimes, including those who most egregiously violated our laws when criminals were not being incarcerated, and ask that the Probation Department report out on efforts to curb homelessness with respect to the mass release of incarcerated individuals in recent months.
- 7. Ensure the safe release of inmates during daytime hours:** Existing law authorizes a county sheriff to discharge inmates at any time during their last day of confinement. By ensuring the majority of discharges are done during daytime hours and providing access to available transportation, rehabilitation, social services, and housing resources upon release, we can better eliminate the pipeline from incarceration to homelessness.
- 8. Emphasize incentives for the creation of more Single Room Occupancy Hotels (SRO) and micro-units:** We recognize the importance of minimizing adverse impacts on the housing supply; however, the current SRO ordinance does nothing to incentivize the creation of new units and, instead, relies on preserving often dilapidated living accommodations. Additionally, the current SRO policy complicates new development by solely focusing on preserving the existing stock. By creating attractive incentives for the development of more SROs or microunits, we could take the pressure off of converting the existing stock and change the paradigm to bring more units online. We urge you to incorporate the Downtown San Diego Partnership's recommendation letter, entitled: *Downtown Stakeholders Input – Single Room Occupancy Hotel Ordinance Amendments (November 10, 2020)*, as the SDHC works to revise the existing ordinance.
- 9. Facilitate the safe deployment of public restrooms:** In 2015, the San Diego County Grand Jury issued "The Ongoing Need for Downtown Public Restrooms." The City and County have since deployed portable restrooms and handwashing stations; however, these restrooms are often used for illicit purposes, namely drug use, drug sales, and prostitution. While additional public restrooms are greatly needed, we recommend the following:

 - All restrooms must include a robust security element to ensure they are being used appropriately

- The appropriate governing authorities should define and impose increased penalties for public urination and defecation as the restroom supply increases

10. Ensure each neighborhood and city does their fair share: Downtown harbors the vast majority of homeless shelters and resources. Unless otherwise supported by the entities herein, any new temporary bridge shelters, treatment centers, day centers, needle exchanges, or applicable facilities should be located in communities, incorporated and unincorporated, at a rate commensurable with the additions in Downtown. We welcome dialogue around our experience and expectations regarding the concentration of homeless resources and services. Please use us as a resource in this endeavor.

The threats posed by our housing crisis, climate change, and mass unemployment can be alleviated by harnessing Downtown's reputation as an easily developable, world-renowned place to live, visit, and do business, all along major transit corridors. However, behavioral health challenges and criminal activity Downtown have reached a breaking point and threaten to drive our once prosperous industries elsewhere. Downtown has all the ingredients to serve as the catalyst for much of the life and activity that will spur our regional recovery. We have no doubt that this area will once again emerge as an economically prosperous and culturally vibrant urban center. However, the pace of recovery will either be bolstered or hindered by how we address these challenges together.

We hope you will consider these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Betsy Brennan
Downtown San Diego Partnership

Chris Duggan
California Restaurant Association

Julie Coker
San Diego Tourism Authority

Jerry Sanders
San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce

Cheryl James-Ward, PhD
e3 Civic High School

Michael Trimble
Gaslamp Quarter Association

Diane Peabody Straw
East Village Association

Marco Li Mandri
Little Italy Association

Haney Hong
San Diego County Taxpayers Association

Joyce Summer
Cortez Hill Active Residents Group

Reed Vickerman
New Children's Museum

Eric Jones
Columbia Foundation

Shawn Loescher, EdD
Urban Discovery Academy

Kathleen Hallahan
East Village Residents Group

Namara Mercer
Hotel-Motel Association

Greg Block
City Center Business Improvement District

cc: Hon. Stephen Whitburn, City Council, District Three
Tamera Kohler, Chief Executive Officer, Regional Task Force on the Homeless
Rick Gentry, President & CEO, San Diego Housing Commission