

NEWS

Topeka JUMP calls on city to commit \$5 million to Housing Trust Fund; deputy mayor proposes \$1M

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Topeka JUMP organizers during the annual Nehemiah action event on Monday asked city leaders to place \$5 million into the Housing Trust Fund.

They walked away with a commitment from the deputy mayor to find a way to put \$1 million in the fund instead.

The Nehemiah this year focused on mental health response and addressing Topeka's housing problems. More than 1,000 attended the event at Washburn University's Lee Arena, organizers said.

Deputy Mayor Spencer Duncan said \$5 million wasn't a realistic goal.

"Then you need six votes and you don't have six votes for \$5 million," Duncan said. "I believe \$1 million is a realistic goal."

With \$250,000 already in the trust fund through a stream of private donations, Duncan said the city would work to find a dedicated revenue stream for the future of the trust fund. Some in the audience cheered Duncan's statement.

Topeka JUMP urged city leaders to move away from private donations.

Mayor Mike Padilla was asked if he would be a "champion for people who lack safe, affordable housing."

"I will commit to my continued advocacy for the Housing Trust Fund and that is my promise to you," Padilla said.

More: Affordable rent is out of reach for some in Topeka. Here is what some are doing to fix it.

What is the Nehemiah action event and what did Topeka JUMP seek?

May is mental health awareness month, and Topeka JUMP also sought improvements to be made at Valeo Behavioral Health for people who need care.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness, NAMI for short, identifies six tools that a city can have for effective crisis response, adding that Topeka has five of the tools.

Melanie Odum, a co-pastor at Gods House Church, represented NAMI. Odum said Topeka doesn't have enough crisis stabilization units, which are specific facilities of 16 beds or less designed to care for those who need more support than a normal response team can provide.

More: Family to Family class 'best-kept secret' in Topeka. NAMI offers free mental health tools.

Valeo health board member Dick Kline, who is the county's former corrections director, said this is a countywide issue.

"And man, when I look across this room and I see all of you who are willing to stand up and jump for justice over this, my heart is filled," Kline said.

Kline committed to three requests:

- Valeo will apply for a crisis intervention certification.

- Valeo will develop a plan to create more crisis intervention beds in its existing crisis stabilization unit.

- Valeo will join Topeka JUMP on May 25 to launch the work.

More: Shawnee County's Montara area is a food and resource desert. This group is trying to help.

What are next steps for Topeka JUMP and the city regarding housing trust?

Terry Canady is a pastor from the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ in Topeka. He said he and others are frustrated with how the city has handled funding for the Housing Trust Fund.

Until now, the city has relied on private donations to keep the housing fund afloat. Canady said that isn't an effective trust fund model and must be addressed.

Other cities that use a housing trust fund work in the opposite of what Topeka does, he said. Public money goes in first, followed by private donations from housing developers.

"Some officials have called for Topeka JUMP to place money in the Housing Trust Fund," Canady said. "And to that we say the city budget is our money. The budget is supposed to prioritize the most critical needs of people in our city."

Duncan said the city will present its findings at an August meeting. He said the process has hoops that need to be jumped through.

"This fall, the policy and finance committee will hold meetings to come up with ways that we can find that million and an ongoing revenue source and make a recommendation from that committee to the city council, hopefully by the end of the year," Duncan said.

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