



LETTER TO THE COMMISSION

LTC No: 26-031

TO: Honorable Mayor and Members of the Fort Lauderdale City Commission

FROM: Rickelle Williams, City Manager *RW*

DATE: February 4, 2026

SUBJECT: Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Quarter One Update on the City's Homeless Response

The purpose of this Letter to the Commission (LTC) is to provide the City Commission with an update on the City's efforts to address homelessness. As the City of Fort Lauderdale continues to prioritize a comprehensive and compassionate response to homelessness, this LTC provides an overview of the first quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 highlighting the significant progress made in implementing new strategic initiatives approved in the FY 2026 Budget. Subsequent updates will be provided through a monthly LTC.

Expanded Team & Intensive Outreach

A critical part of the City's enhanced strategy is securing additional resources to engage individuals experiencing homelessness where they are out in the community. Building on the foundation established in the last quarter of FY 2025, the City formed a Homeless Outreach Progressive Engagement (HOPE) team by merging the Police Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) and Fire Rescue Emergency Medical Services (EMS). The HOPE team provides enhanced, unified, and integrated response through a multidisciplinary response unit designed to address those experiencing a complex behavioral health crisis and high-need community members in real time. This integrated team operates with a public safety and public health framework, combining law enforcement, EMS, behavioral health, and case management. Through intensive outreach, EMS conducts proactive visits with homeless individuals, to high utilizers of EMS, and those with complex health needs. This restructuring ensures that services from initial engagement to housing placement are coordinated and seamless, with our team operating across three (3) integrated focus areas: Street Engagement, Intensive Outreach, and Program Services.

Hiring of Park Rangers and Case Managers: To enhance resources available to the City staff tasked with addressing homelessness, the City reclassified five (5) existing vacant positions and moved two (2) filled positions into the homeless response program.

As part of the seven (7) staff additions to the restructured response, the City has hired one (1) Park Ranger who is embedded with the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT). Two (2) additional Park Ranger positions are in the recruitment process. Furthermore, two (2) positions within the Police Department were reclassified to serve as Case Managers and are in the recruitment process. The two (2) case managers will join the Housing and Community Development Division (HCD) within the Community Services Department (CSD) to work alongside medical and mental health professionals on the Intensive Outreach team to ensure comprehensive, sustained support.

Streamlining Service Delivery and Partnerships

The City's homeless response strategy relies on strong partnerships and efficient program management to move people from crisis to stability. These partnerships are exemplified through our Community Court program, service provider contracts for emergency shelter beds and addiction recovery treatment, safe parking providers, and grant funded support to housing providers.

Community Court: The success of the Community Court program continues to grow. This initiative addresses low-level misdemeanor crimes and municipal ordinance violations by connecting participants to tailored social services, case management, and treatment in lieu of incarceration. Community Court also provides anyone in need with direct access to critical social and health services by assembling providers in a single location each Wednesday starting at 9:00 am. The Community Court Coordinator oversees the program and curates providers to ensure the most needed services are available which include housing, health, substance abuse counseling, transportation, and nutritional support. The Community Court Coordinator is aligned with the Housing and Community Development Division, which optimizes case tracking, coordination, and the linkage of participants directly to housing resources.

The Caring Place and Fellowship Recovery Community Organization Contracts: The City continues to rely on contractual relationships with essential community service partners to ensure a full spectrum of shelter, meals, and supportive services are available to those in need. Key contracts with organizations like The Caring Place and Fellowship Recovery Community Organization ("Fellowship") remain vital. Staff are working closely with these community service partners to ensure our resources are strategically aligned to facilitate success for persons sheltered with both entities. Doing so will be a function of soon-to-be-hired Case Managers.

Safe Parking with Hope South Florida: The City Commission budgeted \$200,000 in FY 2026 to fund a safe parking program. Throughout the first quarter of the fiscal year, City staff have engaged with two (2) service providers that are interested in establishing a safe parking program. Staff intend to bring a not-for-profit grant agreement with

LifeNet4Families before the City Commission in March 2026. It is expected that the funds will be used to expand the capacity and services of an existing safe parking program that is focused on serving families. Tangentially, the City has also partnered with Hope South Florida to support the Broward County funded Safe Parking Program. The Safe Parking Program is a significant initiative launched on December 15, 2025, aimed at assisting families that are experiencing homelessness and living in their vehicles. The program provides a safe, secure, overnight parking location along with essential on-site case management to facilitate participants' transition into permanent housing. The City's collaboration is focused on establishing a strong exit strategy by granting participants direct access to City housing assistance programs. The City and Hope South Florida will monitor and evaluate the County-funded Safe Parking Program to identify best practices and areas for improvement, ensuring effective use of City funds. The evaluation will take place three (3) months after the program's rollout, scheduled for March 15, 2026.

Support Programs: The City utilizes several targeted financial programs to provide crucial housing support and transition individuals and families out of homelessness. The State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP) Program-funded Rapid Re-housing program, administered by the Housing and Community Development Division, allocates \$30,000 to offer immediate assistance by covering first month's rent, last month's rent, and security deposits. To qualify, applicants must meet the legal definition of homelessness under Florida Statute—residing in a shelter or a place not meant for human habitation—and fall within Low to Very-Low Income brackets. Most importantly, the program specifically targets individuals or families who possess an independent income sufficient to sustain monthly rent and utilities without ongoing subsidies once initial relocation costs are covered. Participation also requires the selection of a unit within Fort Lauderdale city limits that meet basic habitability and safety standards.

For longer-term stabilization, the Tenant-Based Rental Voucher program—administered by H.O.M.E.S., Inc. with \$400,000 provided by the City—supports ongoing rent assistance for twelve (12) months for households referred through the Homeless Continuum of Care, specifically for those whose last address was within City limits. Additionally, the City allocates \$3,178,988.94 via Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS (HOPWA) funds to provide essential move-in assistance, project-based rental assistance, and utility deposits for eligible households that include a member who is human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) positive.

Engagement and Housing Resource Utilization

In Quarter One of FY 2026, the HOPE team made 910 individual contacts, demonstrating a proactive presence throughout Fort Lauderdale's high-traffic corridors. By prioritizing 'hot zone' saturation and rapid response to community complaints, the team maintained a consistent operational tempo, ensuring that street-level engagements were both frequent and strategically targeted to areas of highest need.

Community Court serves as a vital entry point for individuals seeking assistance. The data below reflects the high volume of engagement and the conversion of those who walk into Community Court into formal service provider referrals during the First Quarter.

Total Walk-Ins	958
Service Referrals Provided	629
Notices to Appear (NTAs) Written	54
Notices to Appear (NTAs) Fulfilled	27
Program Graduates	15

Approximately sixty-five percent (65%) of all walk-in engagements resulted in direct service provider referrals during this quarter.

Throughout the First Quarter, staff closely monitored the utilization of the twenty (20)-bed emergency shelter allocation provided by The Caring Place to ensure immediate housing resources remained available for those in crisis. The quarter began with peak demand in October, when an average of thirteen (13) beds were occupied. This was followed by a notable decrease in November 2025, with occupancy dipping to seven (7) beds before rising again in December to nine (9) beds. On average, the City maintained a forty-eight percent (48%) occupancy rate across the three (3)-month period.

Policy and Regulatory Environment

Food Sharing and Social Service Event Permits: Staff are working with the City Attorney's Office to develop a revised ordinance that protects First Amendment rights while implementing reasonable time, place, and manner regulations necessary for public health, safety, and park conservation. The proposed regulations will establish a streamlined permit process for larger outdoor social service events and will incorporate new regulations designed to manage the impact of frequent services on public spaces and neighborhoods. These regulations focus on setting appropriate separation distances between events, establishing a necessary residential buffer, and creating a limit on the frequency of large group feedings by the same organization in the Downtown area. The revised policy will also clearly outline essential operational standards, such as required sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Panhandling Signage: To mitigate the negative impacts of panhandling and to provide clear information to both residents and visitors, the City has initiated the creation of informative signage. These signs will be installed in key areas known for high foot traffic and frequent panhandling activities. The strategically selected locations include main intersections and downtown areas where the visibility and effectiveness of the signs will

be maximized. The signage will educate the public on ways to contribute to long-term solutions rather than giving directly to individuals on the street by directing them to the City's webpage: ftlcity.info/panhandling, which lists opportunities to support homeless service providers link. The signs are currently in the final design phase, with installation expected in spring 2026.

If you have any questions, please contact Porshia L. Garcia, Director, Community Services Department, at PGarcia@fortlauderdale.gov or 954-828-5249.

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