

Pamela S. Ulmer

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Name: Joel Ballew, Open Doors Executive Director

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Agenda Item Number: 6B

Comment:

Since 2007 Open Doors (formerly HARTS) has faithfully served the City of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County as the only provider of low-barrier shelter services for those in our community who are experiencing homelessness. During the coldest months of the year, this humanitarian service ensures that those in our community without a home have a clean, warm, safe place to sleep. Without debating the causes of homelessness or the worthiness of those seeking those services, it is clear that basic human compassion calls for us to provide, as a community, ongoing low-barrier shelter services. The basic foundation of a bed, simple hygiene supplies, and a meal is a crucial first step towards finding stability for some of the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens. The Board and leadership of Open Doors has in the past, and continues to affirm its commitment to this end.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant many changes for our collective life in ways we couldn't anticipate. This was true for the operations of human service providers like Open Doors as well. Given new challenges and constraints to keep those seeking shelter safe and healthy, the leadership of Open Doors worked to adapt, draw on community partners support, and seek out new and creative ways to rise and meet new expectations and needs. The past year has been not simply a time of change for Open Doors, but in many ways a complete transformation. The pandemic has highlighted the need for, and support of, establishing a permanent shelter location that will be unaffected by similar future crises. This need was first met through utilizing facilities at James Madison University and next through a generous lease agreement with Red Front Properties. In addition to providing a location for low-barrier shelter for the past 12 months, Open Doors has also been enabled to offer a location for food distribution in partnership with the Arc of Harrisonburg and Rockingham, a community vaccination site for those who are homeless, staff and volunteers of other agencies who offer homelessness services, as well as an ongoing location for healthcare consultation provided by The Suitcase Clinic. A permanent location for low-barrier shelter services provides the basic service, but it also enables an expansion of the capacity for associated services aiding those in our community who need access to them.

The Board leadership of Open Doors has committed itself to pursue identifying and purchasing a property that can adequately meet the current and future needs of the nonprofit. To this end, several options have been investigated that could adequately meet this need. One such property is currently the focus of a concerted and productive conversation aimed at a successful purchase. This location provides an existing structure that would include office, storage, and work space as well as the opportunity for healthcare consultation, transitional housing, and additional future expansion possibilities. The identified property also includes an adequate acreage for construction of a permanent shelter as well as convenient access to associated services for those experiencing homelessness without being in immediate adjoining proximity to residential neighborhoods. The purchase of property is the necessary next step in Open Doors' ability to continue to expand its capacity to meet the low-barrier shelter needs of the City of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. This expansion and new direction is directly connected to the response required to the COVID-19 pandemic and the new parameters required to safely provide shelter services. The ability to offer year-round, uninterrupted, low-barrier shelter services is now a central priority for Open Doors. The past year has meant exponential budget growth, nimble on-the-fly adapting, and rising to meet unanticipated new realities. Throughout that time, Open Doors, with the

support of the City of Harrisonburg, County of Rockingham and its citizens, has risen to meet those challenges. It is clear that the community supports this important humanitarian service with its time, donations, funding, and support. The ability of Open Doors to utilize the CDBG-CV funds under consideration for the purchase and operation of a permanent low barrier shelter location will meet the new requirements and expectations given the current pandemic, but also be a benefit to the community given the possibility of future unforeseen crises.

On behalf of the Open Doors Board of Directors, I affirm our commitment to a continuing partnership to provide year-round, low-barrier shelter services, and respectfully submit this request for consideration as a recipient of the \$326,630 designated as a part of the CARES Act round three of CDBG-CV funds.

—Joel E. Ballew, Open Doors Executive Director

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