

Aubrey Mann

Creative Placemaking Final

Wichita KS

I have chosen Wichita, Kansas for my community. This is where I grew up and it's somewhere who has changed quite a bit since I left. A few things I have noticed that have become issues in the community are the downtown area and all the buildings that are just sitting there empty now and the unhoused population growing and not getting the assistance they need. The United Way's point-in-time count recorded 702 Unhoused individuals in Wichita.¹ For the United Way homelessness is defined as living in shelters, transitional housing or conditions not meant for habitation, including on the streets. This definition does not include people who may be living in motels or "couch surfing" by staying with friends. So, the number of unhoused people in Wichita is probably much larger than what was recorded in that study. I think there is also an increase in substance abuse in the city and a rise in mental illness episodes and a real lack of services to help people which leads to more police involvement in these situations.

Wichita has a population of 392,878 people. The race demographics are 71% White, 10.8% Hispanic, 10% Black, 4.6% Asian and 3.6% Other races.² The Metro area population is as high as 647,919 and that includes several suburbs. It's the largest city in Kansas and it's located in Sedgwick County and is in the South-Central part of the state. It is known as the "Air Capital of the World" because of the aircraft manufacturing companies that came to set up business. The city became a large aircraft production hub and is home to two airports and an Air Force base. There are also several universities in the area, the largest being Wichita State University. The percentage of people in the city that is a high school graduate or high is 88.2% and those with a bachelor's degree or higher is 30.5%.³ According to USD 259, the Wichita school district the current graduation rate of students is 80.4%.⁴ The median house value is around \$145,300⁵ however, with the recent housing bubble I would say that median number is much higher at the moment. The median gross rent is around \$856 a month. The median household income in the city is \$56,374 a year, however, the percentage of people living in poverty in the city is 15.2%.⁶ As of February 2023, the unemployment rate in the city is at 3.4%. Recent years I have noticed that Wichita has started building out closer to the surrounding suburbs instead of repurposing or restructuring current areas. Aside from the downtown area that has become somewhat of a ghost town the west side mall is becoming obsolete and the south side is falling apart as well. Many businesses have closed recently, and those buildings are just being left empty.

¹ Basore Wenzl, Polly. "Wichita's Homeless Population Grows to Highest Number in 12 Years." The Wichita Beacon, 25 Apr. 2023, <https://wichitabeacon.org/stories/2023/04/21/wichita-homeless-count-shows-increase/>.

² "Wichita, KS." Data USA, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/wichita-ks>.

³ "U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Wichita City, Kansas." *Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/wichitacitykansas>.

⁴ "District Snapshot / District Snapshot." District Snapshot / District Snapshot, <https://www.usd259.org/domain/954>.

⁵ "U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Wichita City, Kansas." *Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/wichitacitykansas>.

⁶ "Wichita, KS Economy at a Glance." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.ks_wichita_msa.htm.

For this project I thought a lot about what I heard my family and friends talk about what this city needed and how they don't venture downtown anymore and how I have noticed the long line at the Lord's diner soup kitchen downtown. Something I would need to do before I start my project would be to meet with people in the Wichita community and particularly the unhoused community. I think the harm reduction center with counselors available is absolutely needed but it might be interesting to hear if the culinary program or arts programs are something they way or need. If the community agrees with this plan, then a group or board will be created made up of people in the community and would be involved in every step of the process to make sure the project is benefiting the community and not going off into a different direction. The first step of the project is building trust with the unhoused community and listening to their concerns and experiences. Once that has happened then we move to getting the infrastructure in place to put this into action.

My plan would be to take one of the buildings in downtown Wichita that is no longer in use and repurpose it for a community type center focused on harm reduction, mental health and support for the unhoused. I would like to have a harm reduction area that focuses on education and support for those who are using substances. There would be a safe injection site, and a syringe exchange where they can exchange used needles for new ones. They would offer HIV and Hep C rapid testing as well as vaccinations. There would be substance test kits and overdose reversal supplies available. Mental Health and Addiction Counselors will also be available to assist those who are seeking help of any kind. Support groups will be available as well as educational workshops. The counselors will be there to give referrals for treatment, connection to health care and other services or advice needed. Artists will be a part of this group when deciding on what murals will be put on the outside and what is needed inside not just to function but to give the space a sense of comfort for those who might not have it. We will work with the artists leading the classes about what they need in terms of space, materials and curriculum. What are some goals do they want to achieve with the classes and how can we support that. Same with the culinary program working with culinary professionals leading the classes on what they need and how do they want us to support them in their curriculum.

The artistic aspect that will be incorporated will be the culinary program There will be a focus on bringing in culinary professionals to teach classes to people starting with basic cooking techniques and up to teaching people how to work in a professional kitchen. The hope would be to teach people skills that can move them into a job at a restaurant or simple skills that they can use in their homes to eat in a more sustainable way for them. The food from the professional class will go to the Lord's Diner, which is a soup kitchen located downtown that feeds the local unhoused community. The Lord's Diner has two locations and three trucks that help feed people in need. The food from the basic cooking classes will be taken home by the students for them to eat or share as they please. I think there should also be classes that focus on ingredients that are common as food banks or are lower in price and how they can be elevated or changed so someone isn't eating the same thing over and over. Food is essential for survival but that doesn't mean that it can't be elevated so everyone can enjoy it at any income level. Aside from the culinary side there will be art classes of different types offered for people to come in and learn and create. These will be led by local artists and volunteers and will be different art mediums. The focus for these classes will be basic techniques and a chance for people to explore their creative side in a space where they can feel safe. Art has been proven to increase mental health and is a great tool to help people with feelings, thoughts and experiences in a healthier way. We want to use these classes as an escape for anyone who needs it. I would like to use these classes as a way to start building relationships with the community such as those who are unhoused,

battling addiction or substance abuse or people with mental illness that are struggling to get the help they need. This will hopefully make them more comfortable to reach out if they need help or want some of the other services we offer.

The goal of this center is to give a judgement free zone for people that some in society look at as problems. These classes and areas will be open to the public and there will be no requirement to use our other services in order to take these classes. This center is meant to treat humans as human beings with respect and compassion. I believe I will know this is successful with three main factors, partnerships, reduction in police involvement and reduction in overdoses. The partnerships that I think will make us successful are the Lord's Diner, Wichita State University and their homelessness task force, Safe Streets Wichita, Food Pantries, Local restaurants and trade schools. There are so many church led homeless shelters and resources and I know there are some unhoused people that have issues with them, so I want to create a space absent from the church. Reduction in police involvement is a big one for me to show that we are successful. So many times, the police are called on unhoused people, mental illness related incidents or substance related events. We would like to start building rapport with the community so they we can help those with substance abuse and those with mental illness so they can seek support from us and cut down on the police. The goal would eventually be to work with a task force that comes in when incidents occur and come from a more compassionate place to get them help instead of just arresting them and causing further trauma. Reductions in overdoses is an outcome I can see becoming apparent faster than the others. Our goal is to focus on prevention and action when it comes to overdoses. Teaching safer injection and drug consumption as well as testing the drugs that are being consumed will hopefully reduce the number of overdoses. But also teaching action and what can be done when an overdose happens is key to minimizing death from overdose.