



CONSENT CALENDAR

April 29, 2025

To: Honorable Members of the City Council

From: Councilmember Lunaparra

Subject: Refer \$25,000 to the June 2025 Mid-Biennial Budget Process to Partially Cover Street Spirit's Operational and Programming Costs

RECOMMENDATION

Refer \$25,000 to the June 2025 Mid-Biennial budget process to subsidize the cost of running Street Spirit's drop-in center and vendor coordination program.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS

In the summer of 2023, Street Spirit's non-profit parent organization had a budgetary crisis and pulled all funding overnight. In March 2024, Street Spirit waged an emergency fundraising campaign that enabled its continuation as an independent organization. It has been operating independently under a fiscal sponsor since the spring of 2024, but is still in the early stages of creating a sustainable base of funding that can keep the program alive.

As Street Spirit faces a precarious moment as an organization, our local and regional communities are similarly witnessing unprecedented challenges in the lives of unhoused individuals. With the Supreme Court's *Grants Pass* ruling and the subsequent local and regional policy amendments, the number of places where unhoused people are legally allowed to exist is steadily shrinking. Soon after moving into its new South Berkeley office in February 2024, Street Spirit became a critical resource hub for the neighborhood. As the local policy that governs homelessness becomes stricter in Berkeley, unhoused people rely on grassroots support to navigate these changes and make ends meet.

On average, 70 Street Spirit vendors visit the office each month and that number is steadily growing, according to Street Spirit's data collection. 80% of these people are African American and 76% report being born in Berkeley or Oakland. 88% are over the age of 50, and many are seniors in their 70s. 98% are either currently homeless or have moved off the streets and into housing sometime in the last 10 years. There are also numerous people who visit the office to access resources who are not enrolled in the program.

BACKGROUND

Before Street Spirit was founded in 1995, the *Oakland Tribune* paid homeless people to sell their newspaper across the East Bay. Founders Terry Messman and Sally Hindman believed that the stories published in the *Tribune* were often degrading to unhoused people and felt that there should be a better option for people living on the street: one that uplifts their humanity and gives them space to tell their own stories. In the mid-nineties, the street newspaper movement began to blossom across America and around the world. With the help of San Francisco organizers who started Street Sheet in San Francisco, Messman and Hindman set out to launch a street newspaper for the East Bay.

Now, Street Spirit is an independent, monthly newspaper that has been dedicated to covering poverty and homelessness for 30 years. It is also a vital source of income for the homeless people who sell the paper on the streets of Berkeley, Oakland, and beyond. These people keep 100% of the money they earn selling newspapers and use the funds to cover the costs of essential resources such as food, medication, temporary lodging, transit, and more. Street Spirit provides vocational training for the people in the program, and the South Berkeley office has become a critical resource hub to distribute food, clothing, and hygiene supplies. It also provides unhoused people a healthy social environment where they can sit down and relax.

For homeless newspaper vendors, Street Spirit is an opportunity to rebuild healthy social connections; for their customers, a chance to understand the lives and experiences of a growing population of people living outside. The challenge of homelessness is no longer abstract and intractable when there is a trusted and effective channel of communication.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

Building and nurturing strong relationships with community partners is one of the few proven solutions to addressing the current crisis. For 30 years, Street Spirit has demonstrated unwavering passion and commitment in covering the lived experiences of unhoused individuals. With the new opportunities at hand, the organization is poised to expand its services without increasing its budget. This is possible because Street Spirit is deeply embedded in the community, engaging directly with unhoused individuals every day and understanding their needs firsthand. Through creative problem-solving in an increasingly complex funding landscape, they have remained steadfast in keeping their programs running.

A recent Street Spirit Instagram post sums up the most significant and meaningful interaction Street Spirit enables: “Street newspapers are a quiet catalyst for connection in our hectic, ever-changing cityscapes, and the vendors--the core of the street news operation--each bring different lived experiences to the task of engaging with strangers, making conversation, and forging lasting relationships that begging on the streets and sidewalks”.¹

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION

¹ <https://www.instagram.com/streetspiritnews/?hl=en>

A grant of \$25,000 would provide significant support to the vendor program. While Street Spirit has received grant funding and donations from individuals to support editorial operations, carrying the financial burden of providing resources and programming to unhoused residents of the East Bay has been a challenge. \$25,000 covers half of the salary and benefits cost of the vendor coordinator, who staffs the drop-in center, which is open from 10:00am-5:00pm Monday-Thursday. The vendor coordinator:

- helps both Street Spirit vendors and other unhoused community members utilize our resources, such as free clothing, hot food, coffee, hygiene supplies, a bathroom, bus passes (these are only for SS vendors) and a place to sit down;
- makes sure the space is clean and organized;
- onboards new Street Spirit vendors. This includes walking them through our vendor handbook, doing an intake form, showing them our vendor training video, and providing ongoing vocational training (where and how to sell the paper successfully);
- resolves occasional vendor conflicts with de-escalation methods;
- organizes monthly vendor lunches;
- conducts new vendor outreach and visits The Hope Center twice a month to talk to residents about Street Spirit programming and is currently securing similar outreach projects with the Suitcase Clinic, Downtown Streets Team, and Dorothy Day House;
- organizes and facilitates poetry workshops.

Street Spirit's current structural deficit threatens the unique, life-changing, and individual-centered programming they provide. Supporting this organization impacts all who live in Berkeley by providing the tools and opportunities for people to attain and maintain security. The services and resources Street Spirit provides are vital for helping homeless residents build stability, routine, and relationships that help them transition into housing. This benefit to our community is worth far more than \$25,000; if Street Spirit were to shut down operations, replacing their impact would cost the City of Berkeley exponentially more.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

This recommendation is not expected to have any impacts on the city's environmental sustainability.

CONTACT PERSON

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