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This morning, the City of Fort Lauderdale joined with Broward County government and the Homeless Collaborative in Broward to announce a major initiative to bring an end to homelessness in our downtown.

This partnership represents a thorough, holistic approach to homelessness. We are committed to working together to address this longtime community challenge in the most caring and compassionate way possible. I have high hopes for our success.

We have been planning this undertaking for more than six months with our partners. In putting this program together, we wanted to do our best to get it right. We took our time, we engaged outside experts, and we traveled to communities that have been successful in addressing homelessness. We obtained critical buy-in for our approach in advance. We are determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

For too long, the encampment between the library and Stranahan Park has stood as a symbol of our community's inability to adequately address the issue of homelessness. The people there live in miserable conditions.

Under the initiative launched today, we are helping place them in supportive housing through a rapid-rehousing program. We are combining housing with intensive case management in which individuals will receive assistance in finding work, recovering from substance abuse and overcoming health issues.

Our homeless partnership has identified housing units that are ready to be made available to those in need. For some, the stay may be temporary while they receive job assistance or go through recovery. For others, the housing will be permanent because of physical or mental health issues. In addition, we are committed to family reunification whenever possible and will make every attempt to seek out relatives that can assist.

Both the county and city are increasing how much we spend on homelessness so we can launch this program. In addition, we have received generous support from the private sector. Financial contributors have included AutoNation, BB&T, Bank of America and the Castle Group. While housing is costly, it is less expensive than the current hidden costs of homelessness borne by our hospitals and jails. The program should help reduce emergency room visits, as well as the rate of incarceration.

Communities are often judged by how they deal with their less fortunate. This is the type of humane approach that I've long said is needed. We will help these individuals while also ensuring we have a downtown that is safe and welcoming to residents, businesses and visitors.

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