To: Honorable Mayor and Members of the City Council  
From: Commission on Disability  
Submitted by: Alex Ghenis, Chairperson, Commission on Disability  
Subject: Providing Wheelchair Charging Opportunities for Homeless Individuals

RECOMMENDATION  
Adopt a Resolution directing appropriate City staff to develop policies which will provide accessible, reliable opportunities for homeless individuals with disabilities to charge power wheelchairs. Staff is directed to research existing conditions of homeless individuals with disabilities; barriers to charging power wheelchairs; related consequences; and potential City actions to provide accessible, reliable wheelchair charging. Request that staff assemble a policy to be reviewed and implemented.  
(Motion to approve item as amended, July 10, 2019, Motion: Walsh, Second, Weiss, Ghenis; aye, Singer: aye, Smith: aye, Abstain: None, LOA: Ramirez, Absent: Leeder)

FISCAL IMPACTS OF RECOMMENDATION  
Providing reliable wheelchair charging will almost certainly save the City money overall through reduced costs from emergency personnel, medical services and similar expenses. The money that the City grants to Easy Does It Emergency Services (EDI) for transportation, wheelchair repair, etc. will be able to be better used by EDI and thus better serve its clients, Berkeley’s residents with disabilities (whether housed or homeless). The various options for providing reliable wheelchair charging will surely have different fiscal costs and benefits, which may be determined by appropriate city staff.

CURRENT SITUATION AND ITS EFFECTS  
There are multiple City and community-based efforts to address the larger situation of homeless individuals such as the Homeless Services Panel of Experts created pursuant to Measure O. This panel and other groups including the Berkeley Commission on Homelessness and Commission on Aging have raised concerns about wheelchair charging and other issues affecting homeless individuals with disabilities. At least several dozen, and possibly over 100, of Berkeley’s homeless individuals use power wheelchairs to navigate their surroundings. When these wheelchairs are charged, their owners can navigate Berkeley to acquire much-needed goods, meals, and services. Proper mobility can also support circulation, skin integrity, etc. by allowing individuals to get out of beds/encampments, sit upright and move around. When wheelchair batteries drain to empty, individuals may become stuck in sidewalks or...
crosswalks, requiring assistance from strangers or paid city staff to move them to safety; this can potentially be extremely costly in cases when emergency personnel are required. Batteries must also be regularly charged to continue functioning, so individuals who are unable to charge batteries risk having non-functional wheelchairs. Easy Does It Emergency Services (EDI) – which partly operates using city funds for transportation and wheelchair repair – has committed energy, staff time, transportation services and wheelchair repair resources to maintain functioning wheelchairs for the homeless population, charge them as needed, and sometimes provide transportation to stranded individuals. EDI’s costs could be drastically reduced if individuals had proper access to charging stations and could keep their wheelchairs working properly.

Berkeley’s homeless residents live in a diverse range of circumstances. Some live in well-managed encampments while some are in unorganized encampments and others live alone. There is also a range of capabilities regarding self-care influenced by health, substance use, personal capacities, etc. These and other factors mean that there may not be a “one-size-fits-all” solution to providing reliable charging, but that does not negate the City’s responsibility to seek out a better course-of-action.

Some potential policies may include but are not limited to: keeping wheelchair chargers at homeless shelters and/or other public buildings, ensuring that certain outdoor power outlets are turned on and uncovered, at least at designated times; providing reliable electric power at recognized homeless encampments with wheelchair-using residents; working with city staff, volunteers, or other stakeholders to manage charging “boxes” at designated public outlets; and actively communicating with the homeless community about charging options and locations.

The Commission’s recommendation supports the Strategic Plan Priority of championing and demonstrating social and racial equity.

BACKGROUND
In early 2019, the Commission on Disability was approached by multiple homeless and disability advocates concerned about the lack of available options for homeless power-wheelchair-users to charge wheelchair batteries. Public outlets near sidewalks, which used to be a main option for charging wheelchairs, have increasingly been covered up or turned off in recent years. Building owners/operators turn away individuals attempting to use indoor outlets. There are no reliable outlets near encampments, and none have been made available despite multiple requests. Charging “boxes” – which convert outlet AC power into DC power for battery plugs – are not available at homeless shelters or in reliable locations, even though nearly all wheelchairs use the same power converters.

The Commission on Disability held several discussions to explore concerns and opportunities for providing wheelchair charging opportunities for homeless individuals. The Commission did not endorse one specific course-of-action, but rather wishes to request that appropriate city staff prioritize this concern and develop a well-designed strategy to ensure that homeless individuals may charge power wheelchairs.
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY
Providing wheelchair charging could lead to related environmental benefits. One main benefit is that regularly charging batteries extends their service life and means that fewer batteries must be produced and disposed of, which both have environmental externalities. Secondly, guaranteeing functional power wheelchairs means that fewer individuals will be stranded near encampments, on sidewalks or in crosswalks; this will reduce emissions from fossil-fuel-powered emergency vehicles, wheelchair transportation services, and other services which would otherwise be necessary to bring an individual to safety. Other environmental benefits may exist but are not listed here.

RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION
A significant portion of Berkeley’s homeless population has disabilities, including many individuals who use power wheelchairs for mobility. However, there are extremely limited options for people to charge those very power wheelchairs: public power outlets are increasingly disconnected, covered or otherwise unavailable, and there are limited to no viable outlets at homeless encampments. The inability to charge wheelchairs has drastic consequences for individuals’ health, mobility, safety and independence; it also presents logistical and fiscal consequences for the City of Berkeley, its medical providers and public safety departments. The current situation presents significant challenges and, arguably, an unrecognized crisis for an already-vulnerable group.

Providing opportunities for homeless individuals to charge power wheelchairs will support their health, independence, safety, and overall well-being at many levels, while saving the city valuable resources. There are several potential options for how to better allow for wheelchair charging including but not limited to: coordinating to turn on outlets at or near encampments with homeless wheelchair-users, providing publicly available wheelchair chargers at designated areas, or keeping chargers at existing homeless shelters or public buildings (e.g. senior centers or libraries).

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS CONSIDERED
The Commission on Disability considered developing a specific policy but believes that staff are better equipped to research existing conditions and develop concrete policies.

CITY MANAGER
The City Manager concurs with the content and recommendations of the Commission’s Report.

CONTACT PERSON
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RESOLUTION NO. ##.###-N.S.

WHEELCHAIR CHARGING FOR BERKELEY’S HOMELESS RESIDENTS

WHEREAS, a significant number of homeless individuals in Berkeley have disabilities and use power wheelchairs for independence, health and well-being; and

WHEREAS, there are few to no reliable, accessible locations in Berkeley for homeless individuals to charge power wheelchairs; and

WHEREAS, power wheelchairs must be regularly charged, using a proper power converter, in order to function and for batteries to remain viable; and

WHEREAS, individuals whose wheelchairs run out of power may be unable to access vital areas, goods, and services, and may become stranded, including in the middle of sidewalks or crosswalks, in ways that jeopardize health, safety and well-being; and

WHEREAS, repairing wheelchairs and/or rescuing stranded individuals requires significant resources by emergency personnel and local nonprofits and may endanger their safety; and

WHEREAS, people with disabilities have a human right to health, independence, and mobility, which are often provided by charged and functional power wheelchairs.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Council of the City of Berkeley that the City Manager and other appropriate staff research existing conditions of homeless individuals with disabilities using power wheelchairs, available charging options, and potential actions and policies to provide reliable, accessible wheelchair charging for homeless individuals; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the City Manager and appropriate staff develop actions and policies to provide reliable, accessible wheelchair charging for homeless individuals and return to City Council with proposed policies for further discussion and approval.