



An Alternative to Incarcerating the Homeless

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In many jails, especially those in the metropolitan Northeast and the lower third of the United States, including such “palm-tree-and-golf-course-circuit” States as California, Texas, and Florida, homeless individuals make up a significant portion of overall jail populations. In fact, many jails often function as the largest homeless shelters in their respective communities, a factor that compounds jail overcrowding problems.

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The advent of the “low-demand” homeless shelter concept (sometimes called “first-step programming” or “courtyard”), however, is proving to be very effective in reducing the number of chronic homeless and serial inebriates in the general jail populations. Additionally, the use of low-demand shelters creates major cost savings with regard to homeless individuals while providing a significantly more positive enforcement alternative for “quality-of-life-ordinances” violations. Furthermore, when first-step programs are operated holistically, they significantly reduce the recidivism rate of homeless individuals.

Challenges of Incarcerating the Homeless

Criminal justice and correctional officials have long struggled with how to handle chronically homeless and inebriated individuals. Placing nonviolent chronic homeless individuals in jails for quality-of-life ordinance violations not only overloads the entire system (e.g., policing, jails, courts, probation, parole), it does nothing to address the root causes of homelessness.

Exacerbating the overall challenge is the fact that jails are not suited to address the core issues of homelessness, such as sleep deprivation, addictive disorders, mental health challenges, job training/placement, life skills, dental care, and primary medical care. Because these issues of homelessness are not addressed effectively, homeless individuals are cycling through jails, emergency rooms, and the streets.

At first glance, it is understandable why mayors, city councils, and city administrators want to place homeless individuals in jail, yet over and over again this technique has proven to be ineffective. Incarceration for violating quality-of-life ordinances provides only very short-term relief, generally no more than 6 to 12 hours per arrest. Furthermore, such incarcerations increase the operating costs of jails and consume much-needed bed space.

First-step Programming and Low-demand Shelters

A low-demand shelter is best defined as a “first-step” off-the-street program for nonviolent homeless men and women who do not have to be alcohol or drug free to reside there. Communities that employ low-demand shelters have seen great success in decreasing the number of homeless individuals in jail. Additionally, well-run, low-demand shelters have been able to “graduate” high numbers of individuals from the streets back into society or into a better living arrangement.

At first, many aspects of a low-demand shelter may seem counterintuitive, but on a closer look they prove to be grounded in common sense. To be successful, low-demand shelters should embody five core principles:

- Low-demand shelters should be operated 24/7. Being open only as an overnight emergency shelter or only during the day as a dayroom will not reduce homelessness, but instead promote it. Ideally, residents

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have access to 24/7 service programming and would not be forced to leave at an arbitrary time.

- The program needs to be as barrier free to entry as possible. First-step programs must strive to accept nonviolent individuals as they are, not as you would want them to be. Open acceptance is critical to success. This means taking in individuals who have been drinking, drugging, and committing low-level nonviolent offenses.
- A shelter should be run holistically with the most comprehensive set of services possible (e.g., veteran reintegration programming, domestic violence prevention, job training, job placement, addiction disorders, mental health treatment, primary medical care). It is critical to bring onboard as many nonprofit and faith-based service partners as possible. Master case managers must be the nexus of all services and provide proactive coordination of services for the homeless individuals. They should serve as the proactive leaders in developing and managing individual recovery action plans. The main goal here is to treat negative behaviors and address the root causes of homelessness.
- The culture needs to move from “warehousing” to a “culture of transformation.” Well-run first-step programs embody a culture of engagement, not one of enablement. First-step programs must strive to advance a significant percentage of the homeless they serve from off the street.
- Low-demand shelters are best suited for chronically homeless men and women (not families with children) and should always be customized to fit local needs.

Prospects Courtyard at Haven for Hope: San Antonio, Texas

Prospects Courtyard is part of the overall Haven for Hope homeless transformation campus in San Antonio, Texas. The Courtyard sleeps approximately 700 chronically homeless men and women every night (no families or children) and operates 24/7 with an entry curfew of 10 p.m. The majority of Prospects Courtyard operations are outdoors.

Haven for Hope, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, is the overall coordinator of the campus (havenforhope.org), whereas the Center for Health Care Services, the mental health authority for the greater San Antonio area, serves as the lead service agency. Their mission “is to transform and save lives of the homeless. [Their] purpose is to provide homeless individuals and families with the train-

ing, skills, and assistance needed to help them become self-sufficient.”

A wide variety of nonprofit, faith-based, and government agencies provide comprehensive services, including integrated case management, extensive engagement, mental health screening, medical care, dental care, vision care, life skills, showers, hydration, nutrition, restrooms, security, and better sleeping conditions than the street. Additionally, the overall Haven for Hope campus provides services such as addictive disorder programs and job training. Funding is provided by the City of San Antonio, the State of Texas, United Way, and various foundations, businesses, and individual donors.

The Bexar County Jail has realized an average nightly reduction of 700 homeless individuals since the opening of Prospects Courtyard. The jail re-incarceration rate of Courtyard residents is about 30 percent (a re-offending rate of 16% and a 14% rate for arrests for offenses committed before intake into the Courtyard)—significantly below the national recidivism rate of 60 to 67 percent.



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Approximately 5,000 fewer jail bookings occurred in Haven for Hope's first year of operation compared to the previous year.

The average cost per person to operate the Courtyard is about \$18.75 per day, a major savings compared to the operating cost of about \$60 per day for an average inmate in the Bexar County Jail. Beyond the savings in housing costs, it is important to note that there are other dramatic cost savings for the courts, police, and hospital emergency rooms.

Safe Harbor: Pinellas County, Florida

Pinellas Safe Harbor is part of a countywide coalition of homeless service agencies led by the Homeless Leadership Board. Its primary purpose is jail diversion—to keep the homeless out of the criminal justice system. These men and women are provided a safe environment and the tools and services needed to redirect their lives (safeharborpinellas.org).

The Harbor has a capacity of 470 beds and averages about 400 men and women residents every day (no families or children). It operates 24/7 with an entry curfew of 8 p.m. The majority of Harbor operations are indoors.

The Pinellas County Sheriff's Office is the lead coordinating agency. The Pinellas Sheriff's Office, the

Public Defender's Office, Directions for Mental Health (a local mental health authority), Tampa Bay Metropolitan Ministries, and several other agencies provide services that include master case management, mental health screening, addictive disorder programs, light medical care, job training, job placement, life skills, showers, hydration, nutrition, security, better sleep, etc.

Since opening, the number of homeless in Pinellas County Jail has dropped dramatically—about 300 fewer individuals a day. The average per-person cost to run the Harbor is \$20 daily, which represents a major cost savings compared to the \$106 average daily per-person cost to run Pinellas County Jail. To date, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office has provided the majority of funding with some support from municipalities and the county proper. Efforts are underway to increase funding from local municipalities, businesses, and tourist operators.

Conclusion

The use of a low-demand homeless shelter can be an effective jail diversion program by reducing the number of chronic homeless and serial inebriates in the general jail population, thus creating major cost savings for the criminal justice and social service systems. Beyond the operational cost savings, a low-demand homeless shelter can dramatically reduce the pressure of jail overcrowding.

Finally, a first-step program can provide a more positive enforcement alternative for quality-of-life-ordinance violations. If holistically operated, these programs can reduce the recidivism rate of homeless individuals. Additionally, the vast majority of homeless individuals function significantly better in first-step programs than in jail.

Ultimately, the first-step concept is a proven way to reduce the homeless population in most U.S. cities. By implementing such programs, communities will not only be able to effectively lower jail operating costs, they will also be able to offer new hope for the homeless to become contributing members of society. ■

Robert G. Marbut Jr., Ph.D., is a national expert on homeless issues and manages Marbut Consulting. He was the founding President/CEO of Haven for Hope and a former White House Fellow to President George H.W. Bush. He also served as Mayor-pro-tem of San Antonio and was chief of staff to Mayor Henry Cisneros. Dr. Marbut has a Ph.D. from the University of Texas and master's degree in criminal justice from Claremont Graduate School. He can be contacted at marbutr@aol.com.

Chief Deputy Dan Simovich has been a member of the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office since 1979 and served in a wide variety of operational components. As Chief Deputy, he is responsible for daily operations at the Sheriff's Office (\$200 million budget, 2,700 employees, and 3,000 inmates). Chief Deputy Simovich has a bachelor's degree and is also a graduate of the FBI National Academy and the Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute. He can be contacted at dsimovich@pcsonet.com.

MODULAR PLANNING BOARDS

The image shows a woman standing in front of a large modular planning board. The board consists of a grid of numbered slots (1 through 181) with various colored magnets and cards attached to them. An inset image shows a close-up of a hand placing a magnet onto one of the slots.

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