

A “Low-Demand” Homeless Shelter Relieves Jail Crowding: Pinellas County’s Safe Harbor

By Lt. Sean McGillen and Chief Deputy Dan Simovich, Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office, and Dr. Robert G. Marbut, Jr.

Across the United States, jails often function as the largest homeless shelter in their communities, which dramatically exacerbates jail crowding problems.

“Low-demand” homeless shelters (also known as “first-step” programs or “courtyards”) have proved very effective in reducing the number of chronic homeless and serial inebriates in general jail populations. A low-demand homeless shelter can be defined as a program that accepts all non-violent men and women—even if they would not meet the criteria typical of other shelters—and offers them a way off the street.

Low-demand shelters give agencies a much more positive enforcement alternative for “quality of life” ordinance violations. They also create major cost savings by avoiding the use of jail beds. Furthermore, when operated with a holistic programming approach, they significantly reduce the recidivism rate of homeless individuals as well as helping them find steady housing.

A new first-step homeless shelter in Pinellas County takes this concept a step further. In a partnership with the Florida Department of Corrections, the county’s Safe Harbor facility is also used as the first step for prison inmates who are re-entering the community.



Figure 1. External view of the Pinellas Safe Harbor entry.

This article discusses the principles that make low-demand homeless shelters work, tells the story of how the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office established Safe Harbor, and highlights its benefits to the jail and the broader community.

Why Incarcerating Homeless Individuals for Misdemeanors Doesn't Work

Criminal justice and correctional officials have struggled for years with how to handle chronically homeless and inebriated individuals. At first glance, it is understandable why mayors, city councils, and city administrators want to jail homeless individuals who are detained on misdemeanors, yet this approach has proven itself over and over not to work.

- Incarcerating nonviolent, homeless individuals for quality of life ordinance violations provides only very short-term relief, generally no longer than 6 to 12 hours per arrest.
- The high number of cases processed, and particularly the high number of repeat offenders, places the overall criminal justice system and court services under a huge amount of stress.
- Incarcerating these individuals overloads the correctional system, increases the jail's operating costs, and takes up needed bed space in often-crowded facilities.
- Cycling through the jail does nothing to address the root causes of homelessness. Jails are not suited to address the core issues associated with homelessness, such as sleep deprivation, addictive disorders, mental health challenges, job training and placement assistance needs, lack of life skills, and the need for dental health and/or primary medical care.

When the underlying core issues of homelessness are not addressed in an effective manner, the result is a cycling of homeless individuals between jails, emergency rooms, and the streets.

Success Factors in the Low-Demand Shelter Model

The low-demand shelter model provides a solution that both reduces incarceration in the short term and addresses the root causes of homelessness for long-term benefit. Communities that have established low-demand shelters have seen significant drops in the number of homeless individuals in jail. Additionally, well-run low-demand shelters have been able to "graduate" high numbers of individuals off the streets back into society or into better living arrangements.

A low-demand shelter has a low threshold for admitting nonviolent, homeless men and women into the program. These individuals are accepted "as they are," without regard for their sobriety. Many aspects of a low-demand shelter may seem counterintuitive at first, but on closer look they are grounded in common sense.

To be successful, low-demand shelters should embody five core principles.

1. **Shelters should be operated "24/7/365."** Round-the-clock operation is essential. Being open only at night as an "overnight emergency shelter" or only during the day as a "dayroom" will not reduce

homelessness—in fact, either one will promote homelessness. Residents should have access to service programming at all hours and should not be kicked out at an arbitrary time.

2. Entry to the shelter should be as barrier-free as possible. Programs must strive to take in non-violent individuals as they are, not as the provider would like them to be. Open acceptance is critical to success. This means taking in individuals who have been drinking, using drugs, and committing low-level, non-violent offences.

3. Shelters should be holistically run with the most comprehensive set of services possible. Examples include veteran reintegration programming, domestic violence prevention, job training, job placement, addiction disorder treatment, mental health treatment, provision of primary medical care, and more. Bringing in the broadest possible array of non-profit and faith-based service partners is critical to the program's success. Case managers should be the nexus of all services: they should provide proactive coordination of services to each homeless individual and lead the development and management of individual recovery action plans. The main goal for services is to treat negative behaviors and address other root causes of homelessness on an individual level.

4. The mindset of area agencies needs to move from warehousing the homeless to transformation. Well-run first-step programs embody a culture of engagement, not a culture of enablement. First-step programs must strive to “graduate” off the street a significant percentage of the homeless individuals they serve.

5. Low-demand shelters should serve only an adult population. They are best suited for assisting chronically homeless men and women, not families with children. Each shelter's specific goals and target audience should always be customized to fit local needs.

Prospects Courtyard: The Antecedent to Pinellas Safe Harbor

The largest low-demand shelter in the U.S. is Prospects Courtyard, which is part of the Haven for Hope homeless transformation campus in San Antonio, Texas. The Courtyard sleeps approximately 700 chronically homeless men and women every night. It operates 24/7 and has an entry curfew of 10:00 p.m. Most of the operations of Prospects Courtyard take place outdoors. There are no families with children under the age of 18.

Comprehensive services are provided by a wide variety of non-profit, faith-based, and government agencies. Residents benefit from integrated case management, extensive engagement opportunities, mental health screening, medical and dental care, vision care, life skills education, showers and restrooms, hydration, nutrition, security, and better sleeping conditions than the street. The overall Haven for Hope campus also provides services such as addictive disorder treatment programs and job training.

Haven for Hope, Inc., a 501(c)3 nonprofit, coordinates the campus. The Center for Health Care Services, a nonprofit that is the mental health authority for the greater San Antonio area, serves as the lead

service agency. Funding is provided by the City of San Antonio, the State of Texas, the United Way, foundations, businesses, and individual donors.

The average per-person cost to operate the Courtyard is about \$19 per day. This represents a major savings compared to the operating cost of about \$60 per inmate-day in the Bexar County Jail. Beyond the savings in housing costs, it is important to note that the program also creates dramatic system cost savings for the courts, the police, and area hospital emergency rooms.

Pinellas County's Need for Jail Diversion

Pinellas County, Florida, is located due west of Tampa Bay and has a population of more than 900,000 residents. The county encompasses 24 incorporated cities, including St. Petersburg, Clearwater, and Largo. The county's attractive, mild climate, its numerous parks, and its plethora of services for homeless persons have led to a long history of challenges related to the condition of homelessness. The Tampa Bay metropolitan area has the highest percentage of homeless people in the U.S., at about 57.3 homeless individuals per 10,000 in the general population.

The nation's prolonged economic downturn has resulted in a double-digit unemployment rate in Pinellas County. Budget pressures have led to a reduction in government-funded social programs. Both of these factors have contributed to an increase in homelessness and homeless-related issues in our area.

As recently as 3 years ago, St. Petersburg's central business district—the heart of the city's business and entertainment center—had hundreds of homeless individuals living and panhandling on the streets. Homeless individuals were sleeping in city parks, on private property, under bridges, and on boats in area marinas. The problem was so severe that around 200 individuals were sleeping on the grounds of City Hall every night. Complaints from citizens and local businesses escalated, and the St. Petersburg Police Department struggled to address the issue.

The Pinellas County Sheriff's Office was also affected by the economic turndown. Over the past 5 years, the agency's budget was reduced by \$108 million, or about 35%. The reductions resulted in the elimination of 616 positions, sworn and unsworn.

A perfect storm was developing—the resources of the jail system were shrinking at the exact time there was a dramatic increase in the number of homeless individuals being incarcerated. And, lacking any better ideas, metro area cities wanted to incarcerate even more homeless individuals.

Out of necessity, the Pinellas County Sheriff Office initiated meetings with stakeholders from the judiciary, the Office of the State Attorney, the Office of the Public Defender, and local incorporated cities to look at the inmate jail population more strategically. This dialogue started a conversation about how to reduce the number of nonviolent, homeless individuals in the Pinellas County Jail.

A review of the data showed that the number of homeless individuals being charged with "quality of life" ordinance violations was high and dramatically increasing. Misdemeanor arrests for open containers of alcohol and urinating in public were frequent examples. The volume of arrests was further

exacerbated by the ever-increasing number of individuals who failed to appear for their court dates. A significant number of homeless individuals were being arrested 20 or more times in a single year for minor offenses.

Creating a Safe Harbor

Using Prospects Courtyard in San Antonio as a prototype, Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri authorized the conversion of a closed jail facility into a low-demand homeless shelter. The shelter was established as a jail diversion program called Pinellas Safe Harbor. In forming the program, Sheriff Gualtieri took the lead in forging relationships with local social service providers, local law enforcement agencies, the state attorney's office, and the public defender's office.

The stated purpose of Pinellas Safe Harbor is to divert criminally involved homeless individuals away from being booked into the county jail and into Pinellas Safe Harbor, where they can be connected with specialized services.

The Pinellas Safe Harbor building was formerly a minimum-security, direct supervision jail. It required minimal renovation and was a natural fit for the shelter. Safe Harbor is located just outside the secure perimeter of the county's main jail, and it came equipped with restrooms, showers, and some office space. Significant effort was made to soften the environment from the traditional correctional atmosphere.

Social service agencies were actively encouraged to partner with Pinellas Safe Harbor. Pinellas Safe Harbor became part of a county-wide coalition of homeless service agencies led by the Pinellas County Homeless Leadership Board.

Pinellas Safe Harbor officially opened on January 6, 2011. The Harbor has a capacity of 470 and averages about 400 men and women residents every day. (It does not accept families with children under the age of 18.) The Harbor operates 24 hours per day with an entry curfew of 8:00 p.m. The majority of the Harbor's operations take place indoors.



Figure 2. View of the Pinellas Safe Harbor dayroom.

As a jail diversion program, Pinellas Safe Harbor has admission criteria that are significantly different from those of other homeless shelters in the community, all of which are operated by private nonprofits. Pinellas Safe Harbor does not turn away potential residents if they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol or have a criminal record. This is in vast contrast to other shelters that screen out individuals who are under the influence or who have a history of past criminal behavior. The chronic segment of the homeless population is the most challenging and represents the largest drain on the

resources of the criminal justice system and correctional communities. It is important that the county get these people off the street and into services so they can be kept out of jail.

Pinellas Safe Harbor is the largest shelter in the county and is the only government-operated shelter in the area. Compared to Prospects Courtyard in San Antonio, Pinellas Safe Harbor has significantly more formal operational ties to the law enforcement and correctional communities. The Pinellas County Sheriff Office continues to be the coordinating lead agency and to date has provided the majority of the funding. Some support has come from municipalities and the county proper. Efforts are underway to increase funding from local municipalities and businesses.

Services are provided by the Pinellas Sheriff's Office, the Public Defender's Office, Directions for Living (a local mental health authority), Tampa Bay Metropolitan Ministries, and several other agencies. A number of social service partners have embedded their case workers at Pinellas Safe Harbor.

"Master" case managers, who are Sheriff's Office employees, coordinate services for individuals and facilitate educational and therapeutic classes and services each day. Safe Harbor provides case management, mental health screening, addictive disorder programs, basic medical care, job training and placement, life skills education, showers, hydration, nutrition, security, and other services, as well as giving people a better place to sleep.

Many formal classes and programs also are offered, such as NA/AA, mental health awareness, independent living, resume writing, and job interviewing skills.



Figure 2. View of a sleeping area with pallets, Pinellas Safe Harbor.

Notice to Appear Diversion Process

A critical success factor for Pinellas Safe Harbor has been the creation of a Notice to Appear diversion process. In partnership with the Sheriff's Office and local police agencies, Pinellas County Public Defender Bob Dillinger and the State Attorney's Office created a detailed process for the disposition of charges related to misdemeanors and quality of life ordinance violations. Local law enforcement agencies were then educated on the goal of diverting homeless individuals into Pinellas Safe Harbor in lieu of the county jail.

Under the new process, when a law enforcement officer comes in contact with an individual who may be violating a quality of life ordinance or perpetrating a general misdemeanor, the officer's goal is to secure the individual's voluntary admission into Pinellas Safe Harbor. The individual may be arrested through normal protocols if he or she does not agree to a voluntary admission. Instead of moving

quickly to arrest, however, the officer will continue to engage the person and explain the benefits of going to Pinellas Safe Harbor as opposed to the county jail. If the person ultimately agrees to seek services at Pinellas Safe Harbor, the officer will transport the individual there and give him or her a Notice to Appear rather than delivering the individual to the jail for booking.

A staff member from the Public Defender's Office meets with the individual the following day. As a result of the meeting, a mental health evaluation, a substance abuse evaluation, or a community service assignment is recommended. If the individual is successful in completing his or her assigned requirements, the "Notice to Appear" charge is satisfied without further court hearings, and there will be no future sanctions.

Service Coordination Through Master Case Managers

Extensive master case management services are made available to every Pinellas Safe Harbor resident, with the goal of engaging individuals into customized program services. Pinellas Safe Harbor has 10 full-time case managers who work under one supervisor. Seven of the case managers are considered to be "master" case managers.

Master case management has proven to be the most valuable component of the program and has greatly reduced the cyclical pattern of chronic homelessness and involvement in the criminal justice system. Master case managers have successfully placed hundreds of individuals into better living arrangements, and many more clients have "graduated" from the streets.

Safe Harbor as a Reentry Portal

Pinellas Safe Harbor has also partnered with the Florida Department of Corrections to serve as a formal reentry portal for inmates being released from state prison. Pinellas County currently receives approximately 2,500 inmates each year who are returning from prison to the community. All inmates who are participants in the state's reentry program and will be released in Pinellas County are brought to Pinellas Safe Harbor at the conclusion of their sentence. Those who have lost touch with family or friends and have no residence are provided a bed at Pinellas Safe Harbor until such time as they are independent.

Each returning inmate is connected with a master case manager, evaluated for needed services, and given assistance in reintegrating back into society. In the past, state inmates were returned to their home counties with only a bus pass and a small amount of money.

Results to Date

In 2011, Pinellas Safe Harbor served 3,950 unique individuals. This population included 591 U.S. military veterans, 648 residents processed under the Notice to Appear diversion system, and 104 inmates processed through the reentry portal during the last 6 months of the year. The average per-person cost to run the Pinellas Safe Harbor is \$13 per day, which is a major cost savings compared to the \$106 average daily cost per inmate to run the Pinellas County Jail.

Diverting chronically homeless individuals from the county jail to the low-demand shelter has become a win-win-win scenario for Pinellas County, its residents, and its homeless population. Pinellas Safe Harbor has provided significant relief to the overall criminal justice and correctional systems, it has helped to reduce the street-homeless population in the county, and it has provided a more constructive environment to assist homeless individuals in regaining their independence.

Conclusion

The use of a low-demand homeless shelter can provide an effective jail diversion program by reducing the number of chronically homeless persons and serial inebriates in the general jail population. This creates major cost savings in the overall criminal justice and social service systems.

Beyond these immediate operating cost savings, a low-demand homeless shelter also can dramatically reduce the pressures of jail crowding.

A “first-step” program also can provide a more positive enforcement alternative for quality of life ordinance violations. Holistically operated programs can reduce the recidivism rate of homeless individuals. The vast majority of homeless individuals function significantly better in first-step programs than in jail.

By implementing first-step programs, communities will be able to effectively lower jail operating costs and reduce the homeless population within the correctional system while offering new hope for homeless persons to become contributing members of our society.

About the Authors

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Lt. McGillen has been Pinellas Safe Harbor’s commander since its inception. McGillen has served as a member of the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office for 20 years and held various positions in such areas as Accreditation, Internal Affairs, Juvenile Boot Camp, Correctional Response Team, and Honor Guard. He received the ASIS International Meritorious Award and the Clearwater Bar Gold Badge Award for his work at the Pinellas Safe Harbor homeless shelter. McGillen is a Graduate of the Florida Criminal Justice Executive Institute and has a Bachelor’s Degree in Organizational Leadership.

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Dr. Marbut is national expert on homeless issues and manages Marbut Consulting. Dr. Marbut was the founding President/CEO of Haven for Hope and has been an advisor to Pinellas Safe Harbor since its inception. He also served as a White House Fellow to President George H.W. Bush, as the Mayor Pro-Tem of San Antonio, Texas, and as chief of staff to San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros. He has a Ph.D.

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Dan Simovich, Chief Deputy

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

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For More Information

Pinellas Safe Harbor

- <http://www.safeharborpinellas.org>

Haven for Hope and Prospects Courtyard

- <http://www.havenforhope.org/new/gethelp.aspx>
- <http://www.sanantonio.gov/comminit/HomelessHavenForHope.aspx>

Document available at:

http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2012/10/25/a-low-demand-homeless-shelter-relieves-jail-crowding-pinellas-county-s-safe-harbor.aspx

The National Jail Exchange is an ongoing electronic journal focusing on providing information to jails practitioners and is sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). The contents of the articles, the points of view expressed by the authors, and comments posted in reaction to the articles do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the National Institute of Corrections.

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