

## **Use of “Low-Demand” and “First-Step” Homeless Shelters to Relieve Jail Overcrowding**

*By Dr. Robert G. Marbut Jr. and Chief Deputy Dan Simovich, Pinellas County Sheriff's Office*

Across the lower third of the USA and the larger metro areas in the Northeast, jails more often than not function as the largest homeless shelter in their respective communities in terms of census, which dramatically exacerbates jail overcrowding problems.

In many jails homeless individuals make up a significant portion of the overall jail population, especially within the “palm-tree and golf-course circuit” states like California, Texas and Florida.

The advent of the “low-demand” homeless shelter concept (sometimes called “first-step programming” or “courtyard”) has proved very effective in reducing the number of chronic homeless and serial inebriates in the general jail populations.

Additionally, the use of low-demand shelters create major cost savings in regards to homeless individuals, while providing a significantly more positive enforcement alternative for “quality of life ordinances” violations. Furthermore, when first-step programs are holistically operated, they significantly reduce the recidivism rate of homeless individuals.

### **The Challenges of Incarcerating Homeless Individuals**

Criminal justice and correctional officials have long struggled with how to handle chronically homeless and inebriated individuals. The placing of non-violent chronic homeless individuals in jails for quality of life ordinance violations negatively overloads the entire system (eg policing, jails, courts, probation, parole, etc.). This ends up increasing operating costs for jails by crowding out needed bed space, while doing 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 the underlying core issues of homelessness are not addressed in an effective manner, there is a cycling of homeless individuals between jails, ERs and the streets.

At first look, it is understandable why mayors, city councils and city administrators want to jail homeless individuals, yet this technique has proven over and over not to work.

Incarceration for quality of life ordinances only provides very short-term relief, generally no longer than 6-12 hours per arrest. Furthermore, these incarcerations create huge stresses to the overall criminal justice system and do not address the critical needs of the homeless cohort.

### ***First-Step Programming and Low-Demand Shelters***

Communities that have stood-up low-demand shelters have seen great success in dropping 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 a better living arrangement.

A low-demand shelter is best defined as a “first-step” off the street program for non-violent homeless men and women who come into a program “as they are.” Many aspects of a low-demand shelter, at first, may seem counterintuitive, but on closer look are grounded in common sense.

### ***There are five core principles that well-run low-demand shelters should embody in order to be successful:***

1- Low-demand shelters should be operated 24/7/168/365. Being open only at night as an “overnight emergency shelter” or open only during the day as a “day-room” will not reduce homelessness, in fact, it will promote homelessness. Ideally, residents would have access to 24/7 service programming and not be kicked out at an arbitrary time.

2- The goal is to have a program as “barrier-free-to-entry” as possible. First-Step programs must strive to take in non-violent individuals “as they are,” not as you “would want them to be.” Open acceptance is critical to success. This means taking individuals who have been drinking, drugging and committing low-level non-violent offenses.

3- A shelter should be holistically run with the most comprehensive set of services as possible (eg veteran reintegration programming, domestic violence prevention, job training, job placement, addiction disorders, mental health treatment, primary medical care, etc.). It is critical to bring in as many non-profit and faith-based service partners as possible. Master Case Managers need to be the nexus of all services and provide proactive coordination of services to the homeless individual. Master Case Managers should be the proactive leaders in developing and managing individual recovery action plans. The main goal being to treat negative behaviors and the root causes of homelessness.

4- The “culture” needs to move from “warehousing” to “a culture of transformation.” Well run “First-Step” programs embody a “culture of engagement,” not a “culture of enablement.” First-Step programs must strive to “graduate” a significant percent of the homeless being served off the street.

5- Low-demand shelters are best suited for chronic homeless men and women (not families with children) and should always be customized to fit local needs.

### **Case Study One - Prospects Courtyard at Haven for Hope in San Antonio Texas**

Prospects Courtyard is part of the overall Haven for Hope homeless transformation campus in San Antonio. The Courtyard sleeps approximately 700 chronic homeless men and women every night (there are neither families nor children) and operates 24/7 with an entry curfew of 10:00pm. The majority of the Prospects Courtyard operations are outdoors.

Haven for Home Inc., a 501(c)3 non-profit, is the overall coordinator of the campus while the Center for Health Care Services (CHCS) serves as the lead service agency (CHCS is the mental health authority for the greater San Antonio area).

Comprehensive services are provided by a wide variety of non-profit, faith-based and government agencies. Services include integrated case management, extensive engagement, mental health screening, medical, dental, vision, 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, foundations, businesses and individual donors.

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

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

The average per person cost to operate the Courtyard is about \$18.75 per day, which represents 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 there are other dramatic system cost savings for the courts, police and hospital emergency rooms.

### **Case Study Two - Safe Harbor in Pinellas County Florida**

Pinellas Safe Harbor is part of a county-wide coalition of homeless service agencies lead by the Homeless Leadership Board. The Harbor has a capacity of 470 and averages about 400 men and women residents every day (there are no families and children). The Harbor operates 24/7 with an entry curfew of 8pm. The majority of the Harbor operations are indoors.

The Pinellas County Sheriff Office is the coordinating lead agency.

Services are provided by 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. Services include master case management, mental health screening, addictive disorder programs, light medical, job training, job placement, life skills, showers, hydration, nutrition, security, better sleep, etc.

To date, the Pinellas County Sheriff has provided majority of the funding with some support coming from municipalities and the County proper. Efforts are underway to increase funding from local municipalities, businesses and tourist operators.

Since opening, there has been a dramatic drop in the number of homeless individuals in Pinellas County Jail, about 300 less individuals a day.

The average per person cost to run the Harbor is \$20 daily which is a major cost savings compared to the \$106 average daily per person cost to run Pinellas County Jail.

### **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 to the overall criminal justice and social service systems.

Beyond the operating 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, which when holistically operated, 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 curtail the homeless population in most USA cities. By implementing such programs, communities will then be able to effectively lower jail operating costs. This concept also offers new hope for the homeless to become contributing members of our society.

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Dr. Marbut is national expert on homeless issues and manages Marbut Consulting. Marbut was the founding President/CEO of Haven for Hope and was 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. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Texas and Master's degree in Criminal Justice from Claremont Graduate School.

**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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