

Downtown Reno Partnership

INNOVATION

Our ambassadors are the only full-time on-the-ground team in Downtown Reno. We have a unique opportunity to work with homeless people at their level, in a way that no other service provider can because it's not their job to walk the streets all day. Our ambassadors are taking people by the hand and walking them through the various steps they need to get out of the cycle of poverty. Our 20-person ambassador team is trained to understand these systems and know how and when to hand people off to our two Outreach ambassadors who can take a more focused approach.

More importantly, our ambassadors are the only ones employed by StreetPlus (a Safe and Clean service in more than 80 districts) who previously experienced homelessness and drug addiction. They are more able to connect with, relate to and inspire the people they encounter because of that life experience.

The ambassadors' goal is to create a flowchart that could easily be used to assist someone out of homelessness when they are ready. We do this by identifying gaps in service, and then looking for providers to bridge those gaps. The process allows us to plug people into various assistance programs at the right time to create a custom approach to fit their specific needs.

OUTCOME

Using this approach, we've seen less recidivism on the streets and in the penal system. Since October 2019, seven individuals have been housed. We consider it a success when people have left the streets and are sustaining themselves in permanent housing. This has a broad effect on the downtown area. It takes pressure off retailers and property owners, service providers, the shelter and police. It contributes to the overall image of downtown and opens our sidewalks to visitors while providing a more balanced environment that everyone can enjoy.

We want Reno's residents, visitors and homeless to live in harmony together. Changing our approach and hiring ambassadors with street-life experience has shifted the culture in downtown. We used to have visitors and business owners complain about the state of our homeless population. In the last few months, several developers receiving tours of downtown have commented on how clean it looks. Two have asked us if Reno even has a homeless problem anymore. To be clear, it does, but our population knows they can turn to us now if they need help.

There are currently no plans to discontinue this approach and instead, to expand it through hiring additional Outreach Ambassadors. It is self-sustaining because our budget for this project is part of our ambassador operations budget and does not require additional funding outside of salaries and equipment. It can grow with the increase in assessment dollars collected for the district.

EXECUTION

All our ambassadors previously spent hours managing many homeless people every day. Some of those people are well known by emergency personnel, but those first responders are not charged with full-time social care. That job fell on us.

We found that lack of communication between services was a bigger problem than lack of resources. So, Outreach Ambassadors established a direct line of communication with organizations, giving our ambassadors a larger view of available options in the community. This took nine months leading up to the new approach.

Once those partnerships were established, Outreach Ambassadors became experts and more easily navigated the system with individuals – especially those who don't trust these systems or have trouble navigating the processes required to establish and coordinate them alone. All of this together offered credibility to our approach. Gaining trust of providers and individuals takes time, but helping people achieve a series of small wins builds trust and helps them see a way out.

Over time, the process of housing an individual can be shortened to a few weeks and allows for repetition. This gives us a huge advantage and established standards for maintaining a high level of care.

REPRESENTATION

Our approach is inclusive to the service community and to people living in poverty.

The Downtown Reno Partnership's ambassadors started by establishing a direct line of communication with organizations such as Living Stones Church, Reno Behavioral Health hospital, Washoe County Crossroads (a supervised program meant to overcome drug addiction) and Volunteers of America (which manages the shelter). We also work closely with the Washoe County Community Court judges who are creating a non-punitive approach to homelessness, Washoe County Jail, Regional Emergency Medical Services ambulance team, Renown Regional Hospital's emergency room and Reno Police social outreach team.

We work with Well Care to help with detox services and Health Plan of Nevada to help people sign up for Medicaid. We've supplied data to the City of Reno's Homeless Management Information System to make sure people are being counted for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development funding and the county's Good Grid data systems to help track homeless individuals on their journey.

Our approach is impossible without the full commitment of all these partners who work with our homeless every day. It has been our goal from day one to be the facilitators on the street level.

REPLICATION

We believe this project could be replicated in other cities with varying success. Though each city is unique and homelessness can vary from massive to minor, we believe the most valuable element of our success is the people who make up our ambassador team. About 12 out of 20 were formerly homeless and have the emotional fortitude and experience to relate to other people's experiences.

The most important element of this project is the connection all our ambassadors make with people on their beats. They know all of their names, they know their stories and they know when a person is ready to improve their situation. A comprehensive understanding of the service provider landscape and building relationships with those groups is also necessary. We certainly met with resistance and confusion at first, but polite persistence always made allies.

We recommend that other partnerships create an Outreach Team who can dig into the full-time navigation of those organizations. Try to hire people who have been out of that life for some time, who have gone through at least one proven program and learned important coping skills. We recommend against hiring people who are currently homeless.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

This was not our first attempt at addressing homelessness. It seems counter-intuitive at first to work with one person at a time for so long but we realized we were already doing that every day. Our new approach is longer lasting. That is why we didn't approach this using special funds or a finite timeline. In order to see outcomes, it must become a permanent fixture of the organization.

Our biggest challenges were creating strong relationships with so many organizations and building trust with people we want to help. It took strong leadership from our Operations Manager and dogged persistence from our ambassadors to convince people to try our approach. But once people saw success with even just one person, that task suddenly became easier.

The next challenge is finding people who are ready to make a change. In Charles' example, the hard part was spending time with him daily for months until he finally was willing to try our approach. But the simple part was taking him through the system because we had contacts in place waiting for him.

The solution then appears simpler to Charles because he didn't need to do all the groundwork.