

## Atlanta Downtown Improvement District

### INNOVATION

The Atlanta Downtown Social Impact Safety Team (A.S.I.S.T.) is a mobile homeless outreach initiative that was launched by the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID) in 2020 as a community-based pandemic related response. It was intended to build capacity and fill gaps in the homeless service ecosystem on a short-term basis while community providers and their outreach teams worked to resume uninterrupted service delivery to those experiencing homelessness on the streets of downtown. A.S.I.S.T. homeless outreach is dispatched by direct calls from the stakeholder community or through observational engagement in problem solving conversations with those experiencing street homelessness throughout the downtown improvement district. A.S.I.S.T. responds to non-criminal, non-emergency quality of life, business nuisance, public disturbance, substance use, or mental health concerns related to homelessness within the four square miles of the Atlanta downtown corridor. A.S.I.S.T. is staffed with trauma informed community outreach workers to include social workers and safety advocates trained in de-escalation and crisis management with a network of connections to shelter, treatment, and care providers for those experiencing homelessness in downtown.

### OUTCOME

A.S.I.S.T. – Atlanta Downtown Social Impact Safety Team 2020 Highlights as of December 31, 2020:

- Engaged over 900 men, women, and women with children, or what represents nearly 30% of Atlanta's entire homeless census and directly connected many of them with services required to meet basic needs, including the opportunity for more than 350 individuals to end their current episode of unsheltered homelessness, accounting for almost 80 homeless veterans in that total.
- Acted as a conduit in getting over 400 individuals tested for COVID-19, providing masks, handwashing stations, and other essentials to promote public health in a pandemic.
- Served as a value add to the stakeholders from both the business and residential communities of downtown Atlanta responding to calls from area hotels, restaurants, retailers, property managers, and security personnel who partnered with the A.S.I.S.T. initiative to address street homelessness within the ADID.
- Having demonstrated proof of concept, the A.S.I.S.T. initiative was approved by the ADID Board of Directors to continue operations, furthering the business community's commitment to the vibrancy of downtown as a safe and inclusive live, work, and entertainment destination.

### EXECUTION

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, downtown stakeholders began to express their concerns that those experiencing street homelessness seemed to be left to themselves without having their needs met and were displaying nuisance and other behaviors negatively affecting downtown patrons and residents. In response, the A.S.I.S.T. initiative was launched as the only outreach team targeted to address street homelessness in downtown Atlanta fully funded by the community improvement district. Operating during business hours Monday through Friday, A.S.I.S.T. interactions with those experiencing homelessness begin in the heart of downtown Atlanta at Woodruff Park, the public space managed by the ADID on behalf of the City of Atlanta. Throughout the day, A.S.I.S.T. conducts homeless outreach by canvassing the community improvement district on foot, and mobile response when called upon by downtown stakeholders to address non-criminal concerns related to homelessness affecting a business, person, or property. Having responded to over 200 calls from the stakeholder community, the A.S.I.S.T. initiative has received numerous accolades about its impact from business and property owners seeking to maintain and attract patronage in public and private spaces at a time when public services, public health, and public confidence in the economy were affected by the pandemic.

### REPRESENTATION

Led by the Social Impact Director at ADID, A.S.I.S.T. was initiated from conversations with stakeholders and those from the general public throughout the downtown to understand their concerns about what they were seeing and not seeing in the community related to those experiencing homelessness and how they were affected by it. Those conversations led to a request being presented to the leadership and board of directors of ADID, which resulted in the initiative being approved and funded. The Social Impact Director executed a strategic approach to coalescing community partners throughout the homeless services ecosystem in order to secure a collaborative and inclusive network of supportive services. Community partners include those involved in safety, emergency, and crisis response, shelter and homeless services such as food and meal services, and those involved in therapeutic, mental health and addiction services. A.S.I.S.T. is made up of social workers, community service workers, and safety advocates, including those with lived experience in homelessness. The A.S.I.S.T. initiative is fully funded by the Atlanta Downtown Improvement District.

## **REPLICATION**

The A.S.I.S.T. initiative is fully replicable in any other area desiring to use a targeted approach to addressing homelessness through outreach services. The benefit of homeless outreach is its focus on inverting the burden of service provision off of the person in need and meeting the person at their point of need (place and space) with tangible resources. The A.S.I.S.T. initiative is one that can be funded as part of a public-private partnership such as the ADID, or funded by a local, state, or federal program, or any non-governmental organization seeking to have a positive impact on homelessness in urban places.

## **COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY**

There were challenges in launching a project intended to be short-term. One was hiring experienced and skilled staff willing to lend effort to a temporary project in lieu of a permanent opportunity. This challenge was overcome through engaging previously established community relationships. Another major challenge was launching during a pandemic and having to survey severely limited or non-existent resources. This challenge was overcome through consistently connecting with service providers and building a revised network of viable resources. Additionally, many providers of mental and physical health services were only doing so through telemedicine or virtual visits. This presented a challenge to the majority of those who are street homeless as many do not have access to cell phones or technology or the skillset to use telemedicine. Our solution was having a cell phone and a tablet with Wi-Fi access available during our daily homeless outreach engagements. An additional challenge and perhaps the greatest was the need to engage one-on-one with a population at high risk of COVID-19 infection while also adhering to public health guidelines. We overcame through the diligent use of PPE which was provided to both staff and those they engaged with, including masks, hand-sanitizer, and gloves.