

The Business of Homeless Services Has Changed

By Joel John Roberts

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Images of homeless people sleeping in a large warehouse and loitering throughout a neighborhood are not today's view of how homeless agencies operate. That is a 30-year-old picture of 1980s programs.

Today, successful homeless programs in other cities show dramatic decreases of homelessness on the streets surrounding their facilities. These programs use a business approach where the customers are both people who are homeless and people living and working in the surrounding neighborhood.

The neighborhood profits when there is a reduction of homelessness on its streets and people who are homeless benefit when they are actually housed.

This new business model for addressing homelessness is being proposed at the World Trade Center building on Sixth Avenue and A Street in downtown San Diego. The new facility, Connections Housing, is designed to significantly reduce the number of people living on the streets of the financial district.

Connections Housing is based on a cutting-edge approach called Housing First, which places people in studio apartments or interim housing situations and then engages them in treatment designed to address the root causes of their homelessness.

A recent survey around the proposed site revealed that there are currently 300 homeless people living within blocks of the building. Connections Housing would bring these people off the street and inside the building.

Housing First has been successful in other cities in reducing the number of people living on the streets. In New York City, this model moved all but one homeless person out of Times Square. Contrary to popular belief, most people living on the street would prefer a roof over their heads but they often find it difficult to adhere to the rules of traditional programs. A Housing First approach gives cities a way to actually end homelessness, rather than just manage it through temporary housing and food programs.

Connections Housing will offer 73 studio apartments and 150 long-term interim beds for people in transition to permanent housing. It will also include a minimal of services and a medical clinic. Outreach staff will work directly with homeless people in the immediate vicinity, along with people in other parts of downtown San Diego.

The three program partners of Connections Housing are PATH, People Assisting the Homeless, Family Health Centers of San Diego and Affirmed Housing Group. These agencies have decades of experience serving low-income and homeless people.

One key element of this new approach to homeless services is a Good Neighbor Covenant, a legally enforceable promise to its neighbors about the quality of life in the surrounding area. That includes issues like loitering, littering, and security. The covenant is incorporated into a conditional use permit and is overseen by a Neighborhood Advisory Council made up of nearby residents and businesses.

Like any good neighbor, these new homeless programs work with the neighborhood to prevent people with violent criminal records, serious drug offenses, or registered sex offenses, from living in the area.

The rich history of the World Trade Center building, as the San Diego Athletic Club that included 96 sleeping rooms, will now reflect a new approach to housing formerly homeless people.

The historic building is physically sound and experts agree it will require only minimal seismic retrofitting and fire safety upgrades. The budget is conservative and the financing has been vetted by respected real estate analysts.

Like any procurement of services for the city, the selection process for this new initiative was open and public. A request-for-proposal was issued and a selection committee was created that included representatives from downtown stakeholders. Public outreach and input began as soon as the confidential interviews and recommendation were finished.

Connections Housing is part of a paradigm shift in our city's approach to addressing homelessness. This Housing First business model will significantly reduce homelessness on the streets surrounding the facility.

It will become a homeless program that other parts of the city and the county will want to replicate, because everyone, from the businessman to the resident, to even people living on the streets, wants homelessness to end.

Helping people access permanent housing and reducing the number of people living on our streets just makes business sense.

Like the old Apple Computer slogan stated, we just need to "Think Different."

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