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Agencies share the struggles and
successes of working with local
homeless populations Page 40



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Homeless people present a sensitive situation for park managers, but agencies across the country have found ways to work with, instead of against, their part-time residents

By Danielle Taylor

The San Francisco Recreation and Park Department recently made national headlines as the city's board of supervisors voted to close its parks nightly between midnight and 5 a.m., a policy shift many say was specifically orchestrated to oust the local homeless population, many of whom make their homes each night in the city parks. Although Supervisor Scott Wiener denied these accusations, stating that the move is an attempt to curb vandalism and illegal dumping in parks, his statements were met with significant backlash from the community. In response to the pending vote, homeless advocates held a "sleep-in" at San Francisco's Dolores Park and rallied outside City Hall. The final vote passed 6-5, clearly illustrating the complexity of the issue and the polarized opinions going into the board's ultimate decision.

Many park directors face a broader version of this dilemma on a daily basis, as homeless people often take advantage of the public nature of parks and establish makeshift homes in what are intended to be shared spaces. Sometimes their belongings or behaviors cause a nuisance, and often their presence dissuades other people from using or even entering a park. Both situations cause frustration for park employees who work hard to maintain inviting spaces, and it's easy to lose patience and just want these people to go elsewhere. But where? In many cases, homeless shelters are overcrowded and can't supply enough beds to meet the needs of a community, and without other available op-



Arizona State Parks hopes that its pilot program to employ homeless veterans as temporary park rangers will take off nationwide.

tions, people without anywhere else to go invariably resort to parks.

In response, some park agencies have developed successful programs that allow them to work with the people who make their homes in parks instead of constantly struggling against them.

The Facts of Homelessness

Although many perceive homelessness as a primarily a chronic condition for the people affected by it, it's much more often a temporary circumstance that individuals deal with for a short period of time before getting back on their feet. The fluid nature of this issue makes it difficult to establish accurate statistics covering the problem, but the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) conducts regular surveys to assess the current status of homelessness in America. According to the *2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR)* released last fall, which was based on HUD's annual "point-in-time"

estimate that measured the scope of homelessness in more than 3,000 cities and counties on one night in January 2013, the overall numbers of homeless people in the United States have decreased significantly in the past few years. Last January's count recorded 610,042 homeless individuals across the country, representing a 6.1 percent reduction from January 2010. Of these, 394,698 were living in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs, while 215,344 were living in unsheltered locations, such as under bridges, in cars or in abandoned buildings. Chronic homelessness among individuals declined by a noteworthy 15.7 percent since 2010, now accounting for just 15.1 percent of the total homeless population.

However, despite the promising downward trend, the raw numbers still illustrate the enormity of this problem, and additional statistics showcase the causes behind the issue. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, although only 6

percent of the general U.S. population is considered severely mentally ill, 20 to 25 percent of homeless people suffer from some form of severe mental illness. Additionally, the *2010 AHAR* indicated that approximately 35 percent of all sheltered adults who were homeless had chronic substance-abuse issues. Males and minorities are also disproportionately represented among the homeless.

Knowing these general facts, agencies often conduct or gather extensive research on their local homeless populations through HUD and homeless support organizations such as the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Alliance to End Homelessness before they develop programs so they can better support local residents in need.

Giving Veterans a Second Chance

When Arizona State Parks Director Bryan Martyn read about the high suicide and low employment rates among veterans, he immediately recognized the potential for high-quality employees and decided to act. Martyn, who spent 20 years in the U.S. Air Force and Army as a special-operations helicopter pilot, knew that veterans have been trained for performance, so he quickly began working with the local U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs office to recruit job candidates.

"The jobs we (state parks) have lend themselves to what these military guys possess," Martyn says. "They show up on time, are willing to work and are trainable." Deciding to focus on veterans in the most need, he concentrated his efforts on homeless vets and soon hired five candidates to work as temporary park rangers. The program provides each employee with full-time work for nine months at \$12 per hour, plus a trailer where he or she can live for a \$25/month fee in their assigned park. So far, rangers' responsibilities

have included providing maintenance tasks, offering customer service to visitors and supervising inmate work crews. Although the program is still in its infancy, the employed veterans have expressed plenty of gratitude for the opportunities offered.

“It’s a great opportunity to work with great people,” says Dean Duewiger, one of the program’s participants. “I hope to get a permanent position.” Duewiger, who served his country with nine years of active duty, had been living in a carport and doing odd jobs one or two days a week prior to applying for the park program. Now he is gainfully employed and lives with his dog in a 32-foot trailer at Fool Hollow Lake Recreation Area, and his supervisor is extremely pleased with his job performance. “He’s a good worker,” says Fool Hollow Park Ranger Jim Wilson. “His work skills and our work set have meshed together.”

“The idea here is not to just give them a nine-month job, but to basically get them on their feet,” Martyn explains. “If they are only with me three or four months and they get a full-time job, then that is fantastic.”

Personal Connections

In Oregon, Portland Park and Recreation (PP&R) rangers patrol 16 of the city’s downtown parks, and a key component of the rangers’ duties is outreach and assistance to Portland’s homeless population. This ongoing work has received an impressive boost through the efforts of former Portland Park Ranger Katie Gribbon in partnership with local nonprofit Bridgetown Inc.

Every Thursday night underneath Burnside Bridge in PP&R’s Waterfront Park, Bridgetown Inc. hosts Night Strike, an opportunity for members of Portland’s homeless community to hang out, enjoy a

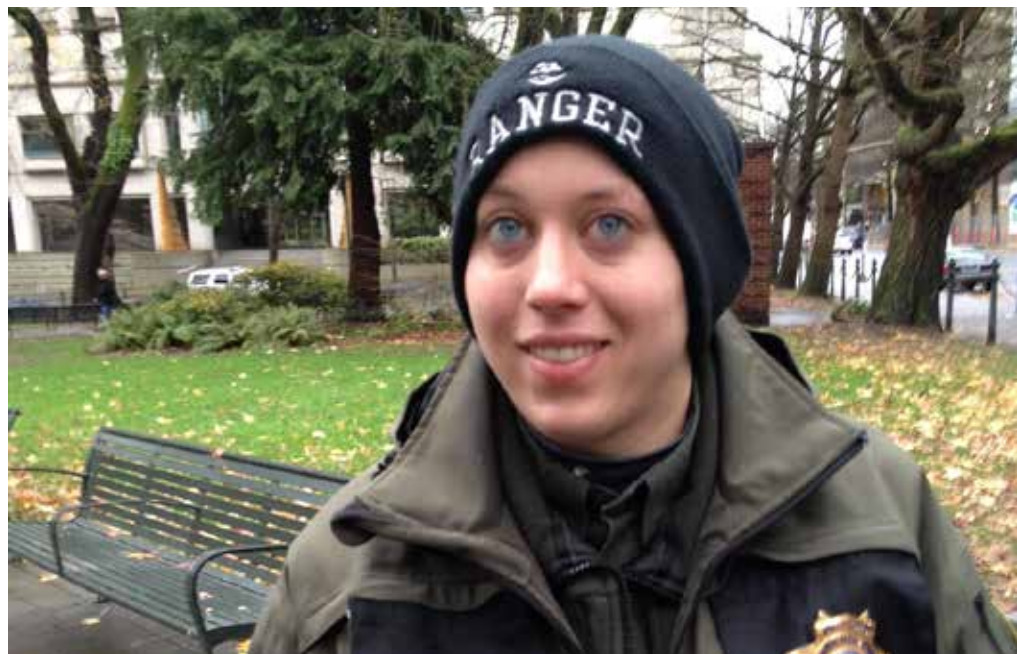
hot meal, receive a free haircut and shave, have their feet washed, pick up toiletries, and replace their old shoes, clothes and sleeping bags. Additionally, resources for services ranging from bike repair to mental health needs to pregnancy and runaway issues are offered at the weekly event,

Homelessness isn’t limited to just adults, and 199,690 minors were included in the 2013 AHAR’s point-in-time count.

and Gribbon had been a regular volunteer prior to joining the ranger corps. Her well-known presence allowed her to strengthen new and existing relationships with Night Strike attendees, many of whom she sees elsewhere around town.

“At first it was a trying experience,” she admits. “People immediately see the badge and are apprehensive, but you start building the trust with consistency. I’m not down there to enforce rules, but to provide help and a longer-term relationship. It only takes one support person to help someone find the right road. I want them to talk to me and tell me what’s going on with their life.”

By getting to know the people who live in the parks she patrols, Gribbon has been able to assess each person’s individual needs and provides personalized support when she has the resources to do so. She often buys supplies with her own money and has given away dozens of pairs of gloves, often cementing an early connection with that gesture alone. Out of all of her efforts, Gribbon says she is most proud of helping a homeless woman find an apartment, securing pregnancy resources for another and of seeing scores of people move on to better things. Other rangers have followed in her footsteps, continuing



Katie Gribbon, a former Portland (Oregon) park ranger, cultivated dozens of relationships with homeless people in city parks and paved the way for her colleagues to do the same.

Gribbon's work even after her recent departure from PP&R.

"Portland Park Rangers have been and continue to be a welcome asset to our efforts," says Lesley Snider, Bridgetown Inc. administrator. "We are delighted at the friendly, helpful and valuable efforts they bring to our goal of advocacy for the homeless."

Reaching Out to Kids

Homelessness isn't limited to just adults, and 199,690 minors were included in the 2013 AHAR's point-in-time count. The West Allis-West Milwaukee Recreation and Community Services Department in Wisconsin works with the local school district to provide opportunities for these students in transition. Recognizing that paying for recreation programs is outside the range of most homeless families but still wanting to include homeless kids in their activities, the recreation agency and school district have worked together to find alternate sources of funding so these students can participate in after-school and youth sports programs. Additionally, the partners have gathered and distributed winter coats, boots, hats, mittens and gloves to eligible students and their parents. Now in its second year, the partnership has helped approximately 50 students and their families.

A few states away, the Columbus (Ohio) Recreation and Parks Department (CRPD) also takes a special interest in homeless children, and staff members work with the local Dowd Education Center to provide these kids with outdoor education programs and opportunities to play in nature. The Dowd Center offers homeless families an academically focused after-school and summer program that follows the curriculum of Columbus City Schools and helps



Homeless kids in Ohio explore new territory in a nature art class organized by the Dowd Education Center and the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department.

children overcome their obstacles to academic success. CRPD's collaborative programs with the Dowd Center have included activities such as rock climbing, archery, fort building, a night hike, campfires, and classes learning about fossils and trees.

"In talking with some of the Dowd Center staff, we have learned that for some of the children coming to our site, [these programs are] the only exposure they have to playing outdoors due to the lack of safe green space in their own neighborhoods," reveals Christina Snyder, CRPD's nature programs administrative manager. "We challenge ourselves to create new activities for the children so they are always learning and experiencing new things. Although we offer planned activities, there are almost always two days each year where we skip our planned lesson and spend time rolling down hills or jumping in the leaves."

During the summer, CRPD also operates a free meal program that feeds children all over the city. In 2013, more than 482,000 meals were served to people under the age of 18 at more than 200 locations in the Columbus area.

Comprehensive Approach

Las Vegas, Nevada, ranks third in the nation in terms of homeless individuals per capita, trailing only Los Angeles and New York, and the last count found that approximately 33,000 people experience homelessness to some degree each year in southern Nevada. Given this huge population to support, the city's many departments have developed several programs and strategies to support homeless individuals and help them get back on their feet. Stephen Harsin, director of Las Vegas Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services, notes a marked increase in the number of the city's homeless following the recent recession, and he states that crime, facility damage and violence by homeless individuals have created significant problems for the city's parks.

To help assist homeless people with getting out of their current situation, the city offers an array of services providing full support. The Corridor of Hope Center in downtown Las Vegas is staffed by both city employees and staff from a local nonprofit focused on the homeless and provides information, programs and services to all walk-in homeless community members. Also, Las Vegas has refurbished and relabeled a number of parking meters throughout the city to serve as donation centers for homeless program support. In addition to the change collected at these meters, businesses or other groups can sponsor a meter for \$1,000 and wrap the machine with

their design. So far, these meters have collected more than \$8,000 in funding for homeless services.

To engage other influential groups, the city coordinated an outreach effort to develop a Faith-Based Initiative in which all local faith-based organizations were invited to collaborate on community issues. More than 300 groups from a wide range of religions have pitched in, bringing a wealth of resources and services to provide holistic support to homeless individuals instead of just providing them with material needs.

To connect with other groups working to combat homelessness throughout southern Nevada, the city participates in the regional “Help, Hope, Home” effort, and representatives from the City’s Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services Department sit on the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition Committee of Homelessness. This group is working to develop a community awareness program to educate people about the realities of homelessness and encourage volunteerism and donations.

Finally, if a homeless person in Las Vegas simply needs help returning home where he or she will have more resources available to them, the city offers a “Reconnecting Families to Home” program, in which the city will identify a friend or family of the homeless individual in their hometown, assist the individual with clean clothes and food for their trip, and then purchase their bus ticket home. So far, Las Vegas has been able to reunite more than 500 struggling individuals with their loved ones.

Even with all of these programs in place, Las Vegas still had to take a




Through a regional effort, Las Vegas hosts an annual Project Homeless Connect event that brings together service providers and homeless residents in need of help. The city also recently installed a number of donation meters where people can easily give their spare change to support homeless programs.



hard line to curb violence and property damage, so it updated its park rules to clearly establish nightly closing times for each park and regulations against camping and unpermitted feeding programs. By enforcing these measures, the city hopes to encourage homeless people to take advantage of the many assistive programs available.

“Homelessness is a sensitive issue to deal with for any city or jurisdiction,” Harsin says. “The community, especially the elected officials, wants to help homeless individuals but is frustrated when there are homeless that are service-resistant. Law enforcement can only go so far (i.e., when the individual commits a crime), but it is not the answer or desire to arrest homeless individuals for trespassing in a park. At the same time, the

community is frustrated when their parks, plazas and streets are becoming encampments for homeless individuals.”

There’s a fine line to walk between ignoring the needs of vulnerable individuals, enabling them to continue making unhealthy and destructive choices, and providing real opportunities for success, and what may be the best solution for one community might be the worst one for another. If your agency has struggled with how to respond to your community’s homeless population, partner with a strong local nonprofit focused on the needs of the homeless to determine your best course of action. As you do, however, keep in mind that parks are for *all* people, including your homeless neighbors, who may need your services more than anyone else in your community. 

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