

## **HOMELESS OUTREACH TEAM: ANOTHER WAY TO FIGHT CRIME**

Houston Police Department, Houston, Texas

### **Summary:**

The City of Houston like most large cities in the United States is the default home of thousands of homeless people. The Department of Housing and Urban Development in their 2016 homeless count found that there were 3626 people in the Houston area that were experiencing homelessness. This number is composed of 2513 sheltered and 1046 unsheltered homeless, the later number is also probably low due the transient nature of this population. The street population has historically been responsible for a disproportionate amount of civility type complaints and the police have traditionally responded to the civility complaints with law enforcement. Realistically, law enforcement only, has been a less than effective solution to this chronic problem. Police officers need other options or tools to deal with civility complaints, the arrest only option was nothing more than a revolving door, with the same person(s) being arrested time after time for the same type of offenses. One solution to the dilemma of revolving door criminal justice might be to reduce the source of the complaints in order to reduce the complaints.

In 2010, the Houston Police Department officially launched its Homeless Outreach Team. The team sought to be a more compassionate solution to dealing with the homeless and the quality of life complaints that they generated. The team was built on a concept that had its beginnings in 2003 when the Special Operations and South Central divisions began a once a month outreach to the homeless community, this outreach was unique in that it was composed of both law enforcement and help providers. The outreach was focused on bringing the services to those on the streets rather than having those on the streets come to the service providers. The original 2003 outreach was a start but it achieved limited success because the outreach was only once a month and the issues that keep people on the streets needed full time attention. The original concept gave birth to HPD's Homeless Outreach Team in 2010.

HPD's team has grown from two officers in 2010 to its current strength of seven officers, a sergeant, and three mental health case managers. The mission of the team is to eliminate the problems associated with people living on the streets by helping the homeless overcome their barriers and getting them off the streets. The team has also become a major player in the city's response to homelessness and has developed an excellent working relationship with area help providers, city

government and the homeless. The collaborations between the police department, mental health authority, city and county departments and area help providers has resulted in a more focused and effective approach to dealing with the issues that have people living on the streets and have seen an overall reduction in their numbers with a corresponding reduction of civility complaints.

**Scanning:** The perceived increase of unsheltered homeless and the lack of ability of the police department to make a lasting impact on homeless issues resulted in a flood of complaints direct to the police department, city council, and the mayor's office. These complaints were for crimes such as public intoxication, urination in public, public consuming of alcohol in the downtown business district, sitting/lay down on sidewalk during prohibited hours, littering, illegal encampments and impeding of traffic, aggressive panhandling, etc. These quality of life issues accounted for most of the complaints received by the police department in the downtown area.

There was also a citywide increase in the impeding of traffic complaints at intersections throughout the city. This increase was due to a law suit filed by the Houston Chronicle which resulted in the repeal of a provision in the Motor Vehicle code which prohibited solicitation from the roadway. The intersections became a source of revenue for those living on the streets and impromptu homeless camps began to pop up under bridges and vacant lots throughout the city. The homeless were no longer concentrated around the providers and the citizens' complaints mounted with the increased perception of urban disorder. Since many of the city's homeless suffer from addictions issues, the number of people panhandling in the street increased as did the citizen complaints.

**Analysis:** To understand the why of street habitation, the Houston Police Department authorized a survey of the homeless in the downtown area. One hundred and seventy-four homeless individuals were interviewed, in and around the downtown area to better understand the reasons behind their homelessness and better understand the challenges that they face if they chose to exit that live style. The questions on the survey included: How long have you been on the streets, do you use the shelters (why or why not?), do you have **good identification**, how do you provide for yourself, where do you eat or get your medical care, what would it take to get you off the streets. The one issue that was cited more than any of the others on the survey was lack of identification. People on the street do not have storage so when they stash their belongings, their belongings are often rifled through and

stolen. The lack of identification locks you out of most of the services needed to get off of the streets and traps people in a streets.

**Response:** The city of Houston needed to find other ways of addressing the issues associated with street habitation. This quest for out of the box solutions resulted in HPD's Homeless Outreach Team. HPD officially began its Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) as a program in January 2010. The mission of the HOT is to improve the lives of all Houstonians by helping the homeless overcome the barriers that have them on the streets and therefore reducing their numbers. When HOT can get someone off the streets, all the low-level quality of life complaints associated with that person are eliminated.

In 2012, the HOT, which then consisted of a sergeant and two officers and later a clinician from The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD (The Harris Center), to assist in its work with homeless individuals living with mental illness. In the beginning the officers attended every community provider event and began to network with the organizations to more efficiently get people off the streets. HOT entered a collaboration with our local mental health authority, the Harris Center and got our first case manager assigned full time to the team. The partnership between the police department and The Harris Center opened a world of untapped resources to the team and allowed both organizations to be more efficient together than they could be individually. The more effective the team became at getting the chronic homeless off the street, the more popular the team became and it began to get financial and other community support through the development of a public-private partnership with local private philanthropic organizations. This community support has allowed the team to gain personal and equipment. Houston's Homeless Outreach Team now consists of one sergeant, six officers, one Metro Officer and three mental health case managers from The Harris Center. These types of collaborations are what is necessary to tackle the complex societal issue of homelessness and the corresponding complaints associated with this population.

Additionally, the HOT developed a process that utilizes HPD and other law enforcement records to conduct an investigation to confirm a person's identity and then produce an identification letter for homeless individuals in order to help them then access services that require some form of official identification. The HOT worked with local advocates, the Office of State Representative Jessica Farrar, and the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) to develop a formal policy with the DPS so that this state agency accepts the HOT's identification letter as a valid supporting document in its process of providing an official state identification card.

**Assessment:** Since its inception in 2011, the HOT has created and promoted its homeless letter which have enabled hundreds to get off of the street, the concepts of homeless outreach teams has spread to other cities in the state and the relationship paradigm between the police, government agencies, and the homeless has been changed. The police are no longer seen as working against the interests of the homeless and the homeless providers. In addition, the HOT is part of a larger public-private partnership formed between the HPD, The Harris Center, and several local private philanthropic organizations that has resulted in a total of approximately \$1.15 million in private financial support for the joint programs of the HPD and The Harris Center.

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## **Analysis of Problem**

Over the years, the Houston Police Department (HPD) has received an increased number of calls for service involving homeless individuals, many of whom are living with a mental illness. Thousands of these complaints are generated throughout the city by a relatively small number of people. Traditionally, the role of police officers has been to cite, arrest, or otherwise remove these individuals for petty crimes such as trespassing, public urination, and public intoxication. While this kind of action might have an immediate effect, it is a very short-lived and ineffective intervention for a very complex problem.

While misdemeanor crimes related to homelessness are a nuisance and deserve some kind of intervention, calls-for-service involving these issues take valuable and already limited resources away from other more immediate situations that require a police response. This coupled with the fact that HPD, like so many other law enforcement agencies across the country, has been unable to maintain the needed number of police officers on its force for a city its size has made it imperative that the fourth largest city in the nation find a more effective and efficient way to deal with the issue of homelessness and its intersection with local law enforcement.

As part of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) requirements for federal funding, the Coalition for the Homeless Houston/Harris County conducts an annual point-in-time (PIT) count for the area it serves, which includes the City of Houston, Harris County, and Ft. Bend County. Statistical data

collected by the PIT count found an increase in the number of homeless individuals in the greater Houston area from 2009-2011, with specific numbers being:

- 2009: 6,550 homeless individuals
- 2010: 6,819 homeless individuals
- 2011: 8,538 homeless individuals

HUD estimates that one-fifth of homeless individuals are living with a severe mental illness, something that serves as both a factor in an individual's entry into homelessness as well as his/her continued homelessness. Many of these individuals also develop co-occurring substance use disorders, at least in part as they self-medicate their mental illnesses. In addition, being homeless and having a mental illness make individuals more likely to come into contact with law enforcement, which traditionally has resulted in a vicious cycle of arrest and prosecution for petty crimes that are more likely to land individuals in jails rather than mental health facilities.

Given the steadily rising number of homeless individuals in the greater Houston area, then-Houston Mayor Annise Parker's office called together a meeting with area stakeholders, including the HPD, to discuss the issue of homelessness. The discussion involved the idea of forming a specialized Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) within the HPD given the connection between the issue of homelessness and local law enforcement as well as the previous work of Officers Hill and Wick with this population.

### **Response:**

This is the prequel to the formation of HPD's full time team, the foundation for the team was laid seven years earlier. In 2003, HPD Officers Mike Hill and Steve Wick began working together on civility complaints involving homeless individuals. Recognizing that a ticket or arrest was not the answer to the problem at hand, these two officers began to work with community service providers to organize a monthly outreach effort during which the HPD would accompany providers into areas where homeless individuals congregated. The idea was simple-developing a partnership to take the help into the homeless community instead of expecting those living on the streets, particularly those with mental health issues, to somehow find their way to the providers operating in a fragmented and confusing

system. Given the safety concerns that service provider organizations face when deciding how to proceed with street outreach efforts, the presence of the officers allowed outreach workers a unique opportunity to reach people who may otherwise never access services.

While the concept was simple in some ways, one of the biggest obstacles Officers Hill and Wick encountered during this time was an institutionalized distrust of the police department by the service provider community. Because of past experiences, it was hard for service providers to accept that this effort was not meant to be a “round-up” of homeless individuals for arrest or removal but rather a genuine attempt to get them the help they needed to meet their needs and hopefully exit homelessness. Adhering to the basic tenets of the community policing philosophy, these officers addressed this issue by continuing to engage with providers to develop a level of trust and respect that allowed these monthly outreaches to continue and grow over time. This is truly when a shift began in terms of the relationship between service providers and the HPD that eventually evolved into the synergetic relationship that exists today. The concept of the outreach was good but it was not very effective because it only happened once a month and the people on the streets need a full-time attention to the issues that had them living on the streets.

Taking the initiative to research this further, in 2010, now-Sergeant Wick asked the HPD to send him to the Center for Problem Oriented Policing Conference in Arlington, TX. to hear a presentation by the Colorado Springs Police Department’s HOT. The request was granted, and Sergeant Wick was later sent to Colorado Springs to be trained and certified by their program. Upon his return, HPD command staff approved his request for a pilot project to create and implement a HOT under the HPD Special Operations Division.

The formation of a full time homeless outreach team began in 2011, HOT started as a pilot project under the HPD’s Special Operations Division and later made the natural transition to the Mental Health Division. Houston is the only department in the nation that has a Mental Health Division and many of the chronic homeless suffer from addictions and/or mental health issues. The department was supportive of the initiative as an alternative to the traditional way that law enforcement dealt with the homeless population, Sergeant Wick struggled to get interest from other officers to join his team as well as to get buy-in from officers in general to the concept behind the Homeless Outreach Team.

The first to join the HOT, was Senior Officer Jaime Giraldo, and he was soon followed by Officer Janice Terry. Both of these officers had spent years working

with the homeless in the areas they patrolled. In addition, both are veterans of the armed forces and were able to bring a unique insight into working with veterans who found themselves homeless.

The pilot, officially launched in January of 2011 with the following as its goals:

- Seek out the chronically homeless wherever they might be, to build relationships with them to find out why they are on the streets and not currently accessing available help;
- Becoming advocates for the homeless in order to help shepherd them towards available help; and
- Helping the homeless navigate provider and governmental bureaucracies that are often intimidating to them.

As a pilot project, the HOT was required to submit regular monthly reports to HPD command staff detailing its work and accomplishments as well as the continued need for the program. During the initial phase of the pilot, the officers spent a significant amount of time networking and developing relationships with the many service providers found in the greater Houston area in order to be able to help homeless individuals navigate the very complex service delivery system that had failed them in the past. They also continued to develop their personal relationships with the homeless community so that these individuals would feel comfortable talking to them and, when ready, accepting their assistance.

Soon after the pilot began, Sergeant Wick made a presentation to a group of community stakeholders at the Harris County Jail. In the audience was Dr. Steve Schnee, the executive director of The Harris Center (then known as the Mental Health Mental Retardation Authority of Harris County). The Harris Center is the local public mental health authority charged by the state with providing services to indigent residents of Harris County who have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness. One of the agency's federally funded programs is the Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH). Because of the connection made first with Dr. Schnee and then others within the agency, one PATH case manager, Deidre Charles, was assigned to work with the officers as a permanent member of the team in 2011.

The significance of this addition cannot be overstated. The case manager's experience in working with this population coupled with her vast knowledge of services and providers in the community greatly expanded and streamlined the assistance that the HOT was able to provide the individuals the Team

encountered. In addition, the PATH case manager brought along her access to mental health/medical records from The Harris Center that allowed her and the Team to more fully understand the mental health background of their clients to better meet their needs. This is something that is not readily available to law enforcement under normal circumstances.

In addition to the daily and more formal partnership with The Harris Center, the HOT also began working on a consistent basis with outreach workers from other local service agencies. In contrast to years past, service providers began to actively seek out the opportunity to ride with the HOT because of the level of trust the officers have developed within the homeless community. Also, teaming up with the officers allows these outreach workers to access homeless camps and communities that would otherwise be off-limits for them due to safety concerns.

As it developed its role, the HOT began to work with what might be considered non-traditional partners (in terms of the issue of homelessness), such as local management districts that focus on economic development of specific areas of the city. An example of this kind of cooperation is the HOT's relationship with the Downtown Management District in its efforts to help ease the effects of homeless individuals congregating on the streets of the downtown Houston area. The Downtown Management District agreed to pay the housing costs for ten homeless individuals who were identified by the HOT. The District continues to provide this financial support to this day.

Having a specialized team dedicated to this work has also helped ensure that clients see more and better follow-up in their cases, since the HOT serves as a point of contact for them with service providers. The HOT routinely assists with transportation to and from service providers and helps meet other immediate needs. In addition, the HOT serves as a point of contact between other parts of the HPD and the homeless community. The HOT has helped others within the Department locate missing persons as well as suspects in crimes thanks to the Team's ability to navigate and communicate with the homeless population.

During the pilot phase of the HOT, then-Lieutenant Mike Lee, the manager of the HPD Mental Health Unit (MHU) at that time, began working to have the HOT moved under his command for two main reasons. The first was the fact that the HOT was dealing with a significant number of individuals who in addition to being homeless were living with mental illness, and the MHU already had a strong working relationship with The Harris Center through its Crisis Intervention Response Teams and Crisis Consumer Stabilization Initiative as well as relationships other providers

and advocates. The second was that he wanted to expand the public-private partnership that the MHU had already begun with local advocates and private philanthropic organizations in order to fill the gaps the HOT was experiencing in terms of its equipment and resources.

Due to its success and growing community support, the HOT was made a permanent program of the HPD MHU in 2012. At that time, One Voice Texas (OVT), a Houston-based collaborative of health and human services organizations focused on advocacy at the local and state levels, began working with the HOT, as it already had in other instances with the MHU, to identify their needs and possibilities for external financial support to meet those given the budget limitations of the HPD. From its inception through most of 2013, the HOT's did not have any department funding, its primary vehicle was a 1999 Ford van that had previously been retired. The vehicle had constant mechanical issues, it did not have a wheelchair lift and the team did not have a way to accommodate the numerous homeless individuals in wheelchairs. The old van injured two of the HOT officers when it slipped out of gear. With no Departmental funds, available for another vehicle and no budget the officers gathered left over electronic equipment from the HPD as they could to outfit the van as a mobile office. The team members felt so strongly about the value of their mission that they often used money out of their own pockets to outfit the van.

One Voice Texas had previously helped the MHU's Crisis Consumer Stabilization Initiative, also done in partnership with The Harris Center, access funding from the Frees Foundation as well as the Simmons Foundation, both Houston-based private philanthropic organizations, to pay the salary of the psychiatric technician assigned to that program. Building on this already established relationship, OVT worked with the HOT as well as the Houston Police Foundation to approach and then apply to these two foundations for funding for a new, wheelchair-accessible van.

Both foundations approved the requests, and in October 2013 the new vehicle was formally presented to Mayor Parker and HPD Chief Charles McClelland in a ceremony attended by officers, service providers, advocates, consumers/homeless individuals, other local funders, members of the media, and local elected officials. The event served as an opportunity to highlight the work of the HOT as well as the importance of continuing the development of public-private partnerships between local law enforcement's community policing programs and this part of the private sector that is actively working to address needs, including homelessness, in the community.

Further building on this collaboration, OVT and the HOT continued to work closely with members of the philanthropic community to expand the reach of the Team, with the following additional collaborations to date:

- Funding from the Albert and Ethel Herzstein Charitable Foundation and the Houston Police Foundation for the purchase of a pickup truck (allows access to homeless camps along bayous and other hard to reach areas) and a van;
- Funding from the Houston Police Foundation for an all-terrain vehicle (allows access to camps in wooded areas previously not accessible by vehicles, only on foot or bicycle) and trailer (for towing the ATV);
- Funding from the Frees Foundation, the Simmons Foundation, and Funders Together to End Homelessness-Houston for a documentary on the work of the HOT to encourage other communities to replicate the Team's work entitled *The Shepherds In Blue: How Community Policing Is Guiding People Home*, as well as a premiere event for the documentary; in addition to two wheel chair accessible vans
- Funding from the Albert and Ethel Herzstein Charitable Foundation for a discretionary fund to be used by the HOT as needed to meet the needs of the homeless individuals they serve.

Area churches have also done coat drives and contributed money to a traveler's aid fund which is used to buy bus ticket for people who find themselves in Houston but have a support base somewhere else. The team will always verify the support system before buying the bus ticket.

As a result of this expanded community support, The Harris Center was able to access additional federal funding for the addition of two case managers to the HOT in 2014. Following through on a previous commitment made to the private funders supporting the HOT, the HPD added two officers at the same time to match the contribution made by The Harris Center. It should also be noted that the HPD MHU became the Mental Health Division this same year, further showing the HPD's commitment to specialized police responses that more effectively address the needs of the community. In 2016, the department authorized an additional two officers for the team.

The HOT's proactive nature and willingness to collaborate with others in the community also led to a major breakthrough in addressing one of the main obstacles faced by homeless individuals, namely a lack of official identification. Shelters, public assistance programs, and other programs that help people get off the streets all require something that many who find themselves homeless have either lost or had stolen-a valid government issued form of identification (ID). The HOT quickly

realized that to help people get off the streets, they had to find a way to get them government issued IDs.

The HOT used the latest technology available to them, including AFIS, to access HPD police and jail records to identify individuals who had no valid forms of ID. Using these records and after conducting a thorough investigation to confirm the person in question's identity, the HOT would issue a notarized letter attesting to the identity of the individual in question.

Having built a strong working relationship with OVT and one of its employees who had a background in working with members of the Texas Legislature, the body that oversees the DPS, Sergeant Wick was put into contact with the Office of State Representative Jessica Farrar, from Houston, to ask for her help in reaching the correct individuals at DPS in order to discuss formalizing the state agency's acceptance of the HOT's ID letter. Thanks to the request made by Representative Farrar's office, the HPD HOT and the Department's legal team were able to quickly meet with the DPS executive in charge of IDs as well as that agency's legal team to develop a formal agreement that says that DPS accepts the HOT's ID letter as a supporting document that may be used in verifying a person's identity as part of an application for a state issued ID. The letter is currently accepted by the Texas Department of Public Safety as a supporting document and can be used to obtain a replacement license, birth certificate, and will allow access to most of HUDs services.

Since the formal agreement with the DPS was signed in 2013, the team has created over 1200 identification letters. The importance of the identification letters cannot be over emphasized, it has allowed the team to get hundreds of people off the street and therefore eliminated the complaints civility complaints associated with their street habitation. In addition to the homeless individuals directly served by the HOT, other local service providers routinely refer clients to the HOT for the specific purpose of obtaining the ID letter so that the individual may then obtain a state issued ID and access services, obtain employment, obtain benefits, and anything else that requires an ID. The synergy of the providers and the police working together has made an inefficient system work more efficiently and therefore has benefited everyone, especially the homeless.

**Assessment:**

While Sergeant Wick initially struggled to get interest from his fellow officers in the early stages of the HOT, the Team is now regularly called for assistance by other

officers throughout the department. They are consulted on missing persons' cases, homicides, assaults, and crimes involving the homeless community because members of the homeless population trust them and are willing to provide information they may not share with others within the HPD. Other local law enforcement agencies have sent their officers to do rotations and train with the HOT. The METRO Police Department, a local law enforcement agency in Houston that focuses on the public transit system, has permanently assigned an officer to work with the Team. The addition of the METRO officer to the team has increased the teams reach and effectiveness, the two departments are now working together to face the challenges of homelessness. The concept and value of the team continued to spread and in 2015, The Harris County Sheriff's Office created its own Homeless Outreach Team based on HPD's model. The Harris County Homeless Outreach Team is composed of two deputies trained by HPD HOT and has now extended the concept of HOT county wide. The Harris County team also issues identification letters based on the HOT's ID letter. Other police departments such as San Antonio and Austin have also formed Homeless Outreach Teams. San Antonio also issues a homeless identification letter based on Houston's model.

A combination of increased community focus and collaboration as well as increased support from the federal government on the issues surrounding homelessness have helped the greater Houston area reduce the overall number of homeless individuals in the community in the last few years. While only a part of these overall efforts, the HOT has had a significant impact on this work because of its unique role as a hybrid law enforcement-service provider initiative. By working collaboratively with others while also leveraging its unique role as a law enforcement-service provider hybrid, the HOT has managed to meet its initial mission of improving the lives of homeless Houstonians and reducing their numbers by helping them overcome the barriers that keep them homeless in both a broader sense and individually with the clients the Team serves.

In addition, the HOT has managed to meet the initial goals it set for itself:

- Going to where the homeless live to build relationships with them to find out why they are on the streets and not currently accessing available help;
- Becoming advocates for the homeless in order to help shepherd them towards available help; and
- Helping the homeless navigate provider and governmental bureaucracies that are often intimidating to them.
- Reducing the civility complaints in and around the downtown area by reducing the number of people on the streets.

The HOT has been able to successfully meet these because it has been able to “think outside the box” and create mechanisms that allow it to meet the unique needs of homeless individuals. Some of the prime examples of the HOT’s innovative aspects include:

- Adding PATH case managers from The Harris Center to provide better targeted and holistic services to homeless individuals living with a mental illness;
- Developing a public-private partnership with local philanthropic organizations that has helped the HOT fill gaps in its resources to better reach its targeted population; and
- Developing a unique and official ID letter that meets the fundamental need of so many homeless individuals to obtain state issued IDs and, once that need is met, other services that are off-limits without this documentation.
- The Homeless Outreach Team instructs cadets at the academy on a different approach to homeless issues and has added new tools to deal with homeless issues
- HOT has done presentation at Community meetings, taught student nurses and paramedics, lectured at the University of Houston on Homeless Issues, presented at last year’s POP conference, received a Community Policing Award from IACP, and presented at the state and international CIT conferences.

In addition to these bigger picture achievements, the HOT has been able to work directly with a significant number of clients since its start in 2011, meeting everything from the basic need for transportation to a shelter/service provider to helping individuals gain and maintain permanent housing and employment. Since its inception, the HOT has made over 1200 homeless ID letters, HOT has been able to transition approximately 1500 people into temporary and permanent housing. The numerical reduction of civility issues addressed and complaints eliminated is hard to quantify because the size of the homeless population is not static but when you help a person get off of the streets you eliminate the complaints that that person might generate.

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