



# *The Miss Bessie Project*

**Georgetown Police Services Division  
Georgetown, Texas 78626**

## Scanning

Miss Bessie, a seventy-five year old woman, lived alone in a dilapidated, sixty year old house on prime real estate in Georgetown's historical district. Miss Bessie's physical and mental health had progressively deteriorated over the years, leaving her unable to care for herself or the house. Her residence was infested with rats, had no working utilities and was structurally unsafe.

## Analysis

Police witnessed first hand the dilapidated condition of the house, the poor health of Miss Bessie, and the open storage of kerosene used to heat her house. Numerous complaints were received of the potential fire hazard to surrounding houses and of rats in the yard. In February 1997, a tremendous ice storm blanketed Georgetown and officers feared for Miss Bessie's welfare, as she had not been seen in five days. Officers contacted Miss Bessie at her residence where she was cold and hungry. Officers arranged for a motel room and removed Miss Bessie from the elements. Miss Bessie's legs were examined, due to serious infection and possible rat bites; however, she refused any treatment. After witnessing her physical and mental health, the condition of the residence and the potential health hazards to the neighborhood, officers made Miss Bessie's welfare a "Top Priority."

## Response

Officers learned from Miss Bessie that upon her father's death, all assets had been placed into a trust, and an attorney had been appointed by the courts to oversee the account. Research into the family trust and appropriate solutions for this unique problem involved collaborative efforts between more than twenty community agencies and took almost a year. After months of solution finding, a court declared Miss Bessie an incapacitated person, and a guardian was assigned. Arrangements were made for medical and psychiatric treatment. After Miss Bessie was in safe care, intra-agency personnel coordinated the destruction and removal of the condemned residence. Permanent living arrangements were made for her in an assisted living group home. The residence was removed and neighbors were kept informed throughout the process.

## Assessment

Barriers and mountains were encountered along the way; however, each obstacle was overcome due to everyone being focused on achieving common goals and objectives. Through our response, the various problems were solved in a manner that was ethical, moral, legal, and socially acceptable. Due to the thoroughness of the project, there will not be a need for continuous monitoring or assessment.

# **The "Miss Bessie" Project**

**Presented by:**

**Georgetown  
Police Services Division  
Georgetown, Texas**

**Lt. Kevin Stofle  
Sgt. Roland Waits  
Officer Evelyn McLean  
Officer Laurie Chron**

**1998**

On February 10, 1997 a tremendous winter storm blanketed the City of Georgetown with below freezing temperatures and dangerously icy conditions. The city manager proclaimed the city "closed" for safety reasons and recommended all non-essential personnel stay inside their residences and not attempt to travel.

Police Services Division received a call of a welfare concern at 1220 Church Street. A neighbor called and stated the elderly female that resides in the residence had not been seen, nor heard from, in approximately five days. Officers Evelyn McLean and Laurie Chron along with Corporal Rodney Griswold responded and attempted to make contact with the resident, Miss Bessie (last name withheld for confidentiality).

After several minutes of continuous knocking, a soft, muffled voice could be heard calling out, "Here I am." Officers attempted to enter the residence to locate Miss Bessie; however, the front door did not have a doorknob and entry could not be made through the remaining two exterior doors. Miss Bessie eventually came to the front door after spending several minutes searching for a screwdriver to open the door with. As the officers waited for Miss Bessie to open the door, they observed numerous large rats both in the residence and outside.

Upon Miss Bessie opening the door, the officers observed the dilapidated conditions inside the residence and were overtaken by a pungent smell of animal and human feces. Miss Bessie told the officers she was cold and hungry and had not eaten in several days. Officers immediately began making arrangements for Miss Bessie to have a hot meal and a room in a local motel for the night.

While taking Miss Bessie to the motel, officers observed large open wounds on both legs that appeared to be seriously infected and in desperate need of medical attention. Medical personnel were summoned, however she declined any treatment. Miss Bessie stayed in the motel for the night and as the temperature wanned the following day, she requested to return to her house.

When officers returned Miss Bessie to her residence, staff from Adult Protective Services was contacted along with Williamson County Mental Health/Mental Retardation so she could be evaluated. After a short interview, Adult Protective Services explained they would not be able to provide assistance due to the fact that Miss Bessie was not close enough to death, she would not consent to leaving and could not be forced to leave. As for MHMR, the caseworker stated Miss Bessie was not suicidal and showed no signs of psychosis, but that she was merely eccentric. After the officers' observations of Miss Bessie's diminishing physical and mental health, her house deteriorating around her, the public health and safety issues and lack of willingness to become involved by County and State officials, they decided to make this problem a "Top Priority."

For many years, members of the Georgetown Police Services Division and City officials have known about Miss Bessie's mental instability and unhealthy living conditions. Every time an officer would inquire about her deplorable living conditions, they were told she was "off limits." Several of the reasons given for Miss Bessie being "off limits" were; the political ramifications of a once influential family, the only recognized option was one of enforcement, thus leaving Miss Bessie homeless, and the city being liable for her welfare. Officers contacted the Chief of Police and requested he personally observe the condition of Miss Bessie's health and residence. Officers told the Chief the previous "off limits" policy regarding Miss Bessie was not acceptable and they feared for her life. After inspecting the residence, the Chief agreed and immediately contacted the current City Manager. The Chief assured the City Manager that every aspect of this problem would be addressed in the best interests of Miss Bessie, the community, and the City of Georgetown. At that point, the City Manager expressed his support and approval of the Division's decision to address this problem.

Officers began the tedious process of researching information relative to Miss Bessie and her property. The officers initially started gathering the information by interviewing Miss Bessie. She stated during the late 1930's, her father built their majestic house in the heart of Georgetown for him and his family. The 2200 square foot house was a wood framed, two-story structure located within what is now the Historical District of downtown Georgetown. Miss Bessie's family owned several tracts of land within the city and county and was considered by many to be part of the upper echelon of society. Upon her father's death in 1956, he left their estate to his children Bessie, Thomas Jr., and Malcom. The residence was left to Miss Bessie and her father made provisions in his will that ensured that her part of the estate was placed into a trust that would be managed by attorneys in Houston. Miss Bessie continued to reside in the house and became the sole beneficiary of the trust after the death of her brothers. Miss Bessie was reluctant to provide critical information because she thought members of the Police Services Division and the city were only out to take away her land and steal her money.

Officers McLean and Chron went to both the Williamson County Clerk's and the District Clerk's Offices to research Miss Bessie's legal affairs. The documents were very extensive and included her father's will, inventory of the estate, the family trust, and numerous correspondence between Miss Bessie, her attorneys, the courts, stock brokers, the City of Georgetown and many others.

While reviewing several articles, it was learned that the original attorney assigned as the custodian had since passed away and that another attorney had taken over the account. After searching records, officers discovered Miss Bessie had a living relative that resided in Austin, Texas.

Lieutenant Kevin Stofle contacted the relative and through several conversations, the attorney in charge of the trust was identified and located in Houston, Texas. Although the family

member stated she was concerned for Miss Bessie's welfare, she made it clear she would not become Miss Bessie's permanent guardian.

Lt. Stofle contacted the attorney and learned he had requested several years earlier to be removed as the guardian, due to Miss Bessie's lack of mental stability and unwillingness to cooperate. In an attempt to aid him in this endeavor, he relinquished all the Trust's documents to the Williamson County District Clerk's Office, thus leaving no one to manage Miss Bessie's affairs.

The Social Security Office was contacted to ascertain Miss Bessie's eligibility to receive benefits. City National Bank in Taylor, Texas was contacted to determine if Miss Bessie had an account and if funds were available. The Texas State Teacher's Retirement System was contacted to inquire whether Miss Bessie was receiving pension benefits. Research was conducted at the Williamson County Appraisal District relative to any properties owned by Miss Bessie or the families trust.

A check of the automated reporting system revealed since 1989, when the system was implemented, the Police Services Division responded to Miss Bessie's residence more than seventy times. Prior to this problem solving initiative, calls for service involving Miss Bessie were found to have no basis and were therefore handled individually, resulting in a short-term solution (if any). This was precipitated by the fact the officers considered her as mentally unstable. The calls for service ranged from animal calls, assist citizen, civil disturbance, prowlers and welfare concerns. On several of the animal calls, large rats and several sick dogs and cats were removed from the residence. During several of the civil disturbance calls, officers arrived to find Miss Bessie in a confrontation with neighbors because she believed she still owned the majority of the property in the neighborhood. The confrontations involved verbal disputes, criminal mischief, and threats of violence. Each time Miss Bessie would become frustrated and return to her residence, threatening to contact her attorney.

Officers involved determined additional research would be needed in reference to the following: structural integrity of the residence, ability to bring house within code compliance, the existence of fire hazards to Miss Bessie and the adjacent properties, lack of sanitary living conditions, and the extent to which her physical condition had deteriorated. Therefore, over the next few months other agencies such as Code Enforcement, Fire Services, Williamson County Health Department, and a home health care provider conducted inspections and visitations with Miss Bessie.

Findings from the inspection of Code Enforcement revealed the house was deemed uninhabitable and an unsafe structure due to deteriorating roof rafters and foundation piers and deficient electrical wiring both inside and outside. The Fire Services Division provided a report indicating the open storage of approximately 100 gallons of kerosene on the front porch and carport area was a serious fire hazard. Additionally, the kerosene space heater used to warm the entire house was positioned within a narrow, poorly ventilated hallway. A Williamson County Health Department report indicated the animal feces and dead rodents needed to be removed from the residence. In the opinion of the home health care provider, Miss Bessie was suffering from serious infection that extended from her feet to just below her knees. Additionally, both legs had open oozing wounds. Every report completed in regard to the residence made reference to the absence of running water, electricity, and the overwhelming stench of human and animal feces. As was the case previously, officers departed and continued to research information that would help to clarify Miss Bessie's trust fund issues and other available resources.

In developing a response for solving this problem, members of the Police Services Division referred to our Corporate Strategy's mission statement, specific purposes, and values. We found the following to be relevant to our project:

### **Mission Statement**

The mission of the Georgetown Police Services Division is to protect and serve the community of Georgetown's quest for a peaceful and safe existence, free from fear and with democratic values applied equally to all citizens.

### **Specific Purposes**

- To assist those who cannot care for themselves: the intoxicated, the addicted, the mentally ill, the physically disabled, the old, and the young;
- To resolve conflict, whether it be between individuals, groups of individuals, or individuals and their government;
- To identify and work collaboratively to resolve problems that have the potential for becoming more serious problems for the individual citizen, for the police, or the government;
- To interact with the community to generate mutual understanding, thereby facilitating public support and involvement.

### **Values**

- Human life, believing that every life is precious;
- The principles embodied in our Constitution and the authority of federal, state, and local laws, believing that democratic values apply to all;
- The person, believing that being valued is a basic individual need;
- The community we serve, believing that a competent community can develop and maintain a peaceful and tranquil environment in which to live and prosper.

Numerous meetings involving our project team members, private, City, County, and State agencies along with Miss Bessie's relative were conducted to review the results of the vast amount of research collected and formulated possible alternatives for solving this problem. The root cause of this project was identified and agreed upon by all persons involved to be

that Miss Bessie was unfit to adequately manage her basic health and welfare. As a direct result of this, quality of life in the neighborhood had seriously diminished.

The team determined the end result of this project would be the unsafe structure removed from the neighborhood and Miss Bessie's physical and mental health needs would be met in a manner that would exemplify compassion and dignity. The following objectives had to be accomplished in order to achieve the desired results:

- Guardianship for Miss Bessie,
- Executor for the family trust,
- Condemnation and demolition of unsafe structure,
- Physical and mental evaluation,
- Placement, and
- Neighborhood explanation of sequence of events.

Lt. Stofle wrote a letter to Judge Henderson's court, outlining the need for and requesting the appointment of a guardian for Miss Bessie. Judge Henderson appointed a local attorney to investigate the need for guardianship. An investigation was conducted that resulted in a subsequent guardianship hearing involving the city attorney, the court appointed attorney, code enforcement, and project team members. The court appointed attorney advised Judge Henderson that he found Miss Bessie's residence unfit for living and that she was in danger if she remained in the residence. City of Georgetown officials spoke before Judge Henderson and provided photographs and documentation supporting Miss Bessie's attorney.

Judge Henderson ordered a hearing to be held on November 26, 1997, at 9:00 a.m., at which time, Miss Bessie was declared an incapacitated person and a member of Family ElderCare, Inc. was named her guardian. Immediately following the Judge's decision, arrangements were made involving project team members, EMS, her guardian, code enforcement, animal

control, and the city attorney to remove Miss Bessie from her residence and transport her to a medical facility for the treatment of her infected legs.

In a spirit of compassion and in order to ensure Miss Bessie's dignity, an all female team was formed to initially contact her. They assisted Miss Bessie in getting dressed prior to any male team members entering the room. Miss Bessie's guardian advised her of the court's decision to appoint a guardian to oversee her affairs and that the residence had been condemned. Miss Bessie was reluctant to cooperate, became combative and had to be assisted from her residence in a manner that prevented injury to her, or any team members, and into the waiting ambulance.

At approximately 11:00 a.m., Miss Bessie and her guardian were transported to the Georgetown Hospital and received medical attention on her legs. While at the hospital, Sergeant Roland Waits and the guardian requested a physician's examination that would allow for Miss Bessie to be transported to the Austin State Hospital for psychiatric evaluation. The on-duty physician declined to conduct the examination, stating he was not "qualified" to conduct mental health exams. Sgt. Waits, who is trained as a mental health/mental retardation officer, explained the examination was not strictly a mental health evaluation, moreover, it had several questions that related to the patient's general mental health. The physician still declined to perform the examination.

During the time the discussion between Sgt. Waits and the doctor was taking place, Miss Bessie continued to be combative and non-cooperative toward the hospital staff. Miss Bessie stated the attending nurses were rude and were hurting her legs. Miss Bessie's legs were inspected by the on-duty physician and her treatment consisted of several small, dead skin areas being removed, a saline rinse and Tylenol being administered. Miss Bessie expressed a desire to leave the hospital as soon as possible.

Sgt. Waits explained to Miss Bessie's guardian the situation and that without supporting documentation Miss Bessie could not be evaluated by the state hospital. After the discussion, Sgt. Waits performed an assessment of Miss Bessie and the determination was made to take Miss Bessie into custody on a Police Officer's Emergency Commitment.

Members of the Williamson County Mental Health/Mental Retardation office were contacted and requested to have Miss Bessie screened by the on-duty caseworker. MHMR personnel stated their psychiatrist was currently in the facility and if Miss Bessie could be in her office within ten minutes, she would conduct an evaluation.

Miss Bessie, her guardian, and Sgt. Waits departed the Georgetown Hospital and proceeded to the MHMR office in Round Rock. During the ride to the MHMR intake office, a visible change in Miss Bessie's attitude was apparent and she began to ask questions as to what would be next for her. Upon her arrival, MHMR staff greeted Miss Bessie and an interview was conducted.

While she was being evaluated, her attorney had responded to the MHMR office to ensure Miss Bessie's legal affairs were taken care of and expenses were covered. Miss Bessie's guardian, her attorney, and Sgt. Waits were discussing the previous situation at the Georgetown Hospital and everyone agreed the treatment Miss Bessie had received for her legs was not acceptable and that she should be seen by a doctor at the Round Rock Hospital.

After Miss Bessie's evaluation by the psychiatrist, the doctor stated Miss Bessie should be transported to the state hospital for further evaluation to determine the extent of her mental illness. Upon completion of required documentation by the psychiatrist, Miss Bessie, her guardian, and Sgt. Waits proceeded to the hospital in Round Rock.

Miss Bessie was provided prompt, thorough treatment that entailed complete cleaning and disinfecting of the wounds on her legs. Miss Bessie was given a prescription and instructions on how to maintain care of her legs. Prior to leaving the hospital, Miss Bessie thanked the

staff in the Emergency Room for taking care of her legs and that she appreciated all they did. Miss Bessie, her guardian, and Sgt. Waits departed for the state hospital.

At approximately 9:00 p.m., when Miss Bessie arrived at the state hospital intake area, all the documentation was given to the staff for the on-duty psychiatric doctor's review and at approximately 11:45 p.m. Miss Bessie was taken into an intake room for yet another screening.

It was nearly an hour before Miss Bessie would exit the intake room and as she did, she appeared very relaxed and comfortable. She sat in a chair and began to have a conversation with several other persons in the room.

The on-duty psychiatrist exited the office and stated Miss Bessie would be admitted to the hospital for further evaluation and treatment. After completing the last of the admissions paperwork, Miss Bessie and her guardian exchanged pleasantries and Miss Bessie then shifted her focus to Sgt. Waits. She asked him for a business card and stated she was thankful for everything he had done for her. Sgt. Waits and Miss Bessie's guardian departed the hospital at approximately 1:30 a.m., November 27, 1997.

On December 12, 1997, as neighbors gathered to show their support, members of the City of Georgetown's Community Owned Utilities, Police Services, Fire Services, Animal Control and Inspection Services worked collaboratively in the removal of Miss Bessie's residence and the clearing of the lot. As the dilapidated structure was being removed a feeling of sadness was evident throughout the neighbors as many shared memories of the once majestic house, but toward the completion of the removal, feelings of sadness gave way to conversations that Miss Bessie's life had probably been saved through the efforts of the team.

Following eight months of intense research, courtroom proceedings and countless meetings, our problem solving efforts began to wind down. Every action taken by the project's team members supported our established goals and corresponded with our objectives.

The first area that could be assessed was the improvement of Miss Bessie's overall quality of life. By resolving the numerous issues concerning the family trust, Miss Bessie now has access to the complete trust and all the entitlements she has right to. Without taking that first step, the rest of our response would not have been possible.

The financial considerations of Miss Bessie were not the only factor that led to her quality life issues; there was also the physical and mental health treatment she received. Miss Bessie's physical condition began improving immediately upon the initial treatment she was given for her legs. As for her mental welfare, an improvement could actually be seen long before contact with a mental health worker was initiated.

Miss Bessie appeared to relax and accept the fact that all the team's actions were designed to make her life better. By the time her guardian and Sgt. Waits departed the state hospital, Miss Bessie appeared more content than either of them had seen before.

A letter was received from Miss Bessie that explained she is doing quite well in a group home, she was responding very well to her treatment and she had made numerous good friends. The wounds on her legs have completely healed and she stated her health has never been better. Miss Bessie's letter was perhaps the best feedback the team could have ever received.

Miss Bessie's relative contacted the Division and expressed her appreciation for the efforts and that without our intervention and sense of care and compassion, she feared Miss Bessie would have died in that rat-infested environment.

The Division has received numerous telephone calls from citizens that wanted to express their support, and appreciation, for all that we did for the neighborhood and Miss Bessie. The dangerous structure, the threat of disease from rodents and the serious fire hazards were completely eliminated, thus allowing for the citizens to continue their "...quest for a peaceful

and safe existence". Not only were both Miss Bessie and her former neighbors impacted by the problem solving efforts, the entire City of Georgetown has benefited as well.

Since the removal of the structure, there have been no calls for service for any division or department to that address; however, officers still keep a watchful eye on the vacant lot to ensure no one begins to dump illegally. City officials have related that their offices are no longer being inundated with citizen complaints and requests for action.

Officers have contacted Miss Bessie's guardian several times over the last eight months and she has stated that without the intervention and decision making of everyone involved, Miss Bessie would not have survived the winter. The director of the MHMR center in Round Rock contacted team members and expressed her gratitude for the assistance and compassion demonstrated by each member of the team throughout the entire project. Additionally, she indicated Miss Bessie has adapted to her new home and finds her becoming a more productive, and appreciated, person daily.

This project had several mountains that had to be negotiated, but with a coactive problem solving approach and the focus of achieving common goals and objectives, every difficulty was eventually countered or eliminated. This project is somewhat unique to other problem solving efforts undertaken by the Division previously because there is no continuous monitoring or assessment that will need to be conducted. Every issue, concern, and solution was addressed in a manner that proved to be ethical, moral, legal, and socially acceptable. We feel we have shown how one individual's problems have a direct and indirect influence on an entire community and that if those problems go unresolved, the entire community will suffer.

The goal of the Patrol Department is:

To provide the community with a total spectrum of policing spanning a full range of services to include the responses to emergencies, responding to calls for service, directed patrol activities and **problem solving with a human touch that only police and community interaction can offer.**

Trying to assess the amount of time and money committed to this project is difficult to record, due to the fact there were so many people and organizations involved. Team members were recognized for their achievements at the Annual City Awards Luncheon. As a result of the cooperative work environment of the team, stronger partnerships have been formed and more areas of concern are being addressed using problem solving strategies and techniques throughout the community.

**Project Contacts:**

Roland Waits

Administrative Patrol Sergeant

809 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

Georgetown, Texas 78626

(512)930-3503

(512) 930-2516-fax

E-mail address: rwaits@gtwn.net

Kevin Stofle

Patrol Department Commander/Lieutenant

809 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

Georgetown, Texas 78626

(512)930-3503

(512) 930-2516 - fax

E-mail address: kstofle@gtwn.net