

Clearwater Homeless Interventionrw.ct.t **Project Summary**

The Clearwater Homeless Intervention Project was established to address public drinking, panhandling/vagrancy, disorderly conduct, loitering and other issues directly related to homelessness in Clearwater's downtown area. The SARA model was applied to the problem as follows:

Scanning:

The problem was identified in Clearwater's downtown business district and residential area. The problem had been occurring since 1993 and was identified by repeat calls for police service, citizen and business owner complaints, *crime* analysis, media coverage, and observations by social service providers. The target area and its problems related to homelessness were chosen for application of the SARA model primarily due to the concern expressed by the community and police officers and the political pressure that resulted.

Analysis:

Through a detailed analysis conducted by Clearwater police officers, various social services agencies, and community and business leaders, it was determined that there were a number of social/environmental factors allowing the problems relating to homelessness to occur. The resulting harm was clearly identified: property owners and businesses feared lost business and declining property values due the presence of the homeless and their activities. Community residents and police were frustrated with the cycle of arrests that centered around the St. Vincent de Paul Soup Kitchen located in the target area.

Response:

The focus of the response phase of the project was the creation of a new emergency homeless program, the Clearwater Homeless Intervention Project (CHIP). CHIP is an emergency homeless shelter program that serves truly homeless persons in need of services. Clients can obtain food and other essential support services - but ~~must~~ be involved in the intervention program coordinated by The Salvation Army. The Downtown Bicycle Team officers stationed at the police substation housed at the CHIP shelter have increased enforcement of public drinking violations in the area.

Assessment:

For the evaluation phase of the project, Clearwater entered into an agreement with the University of South Florida. The evaluation revealed improved satisfaction on the part of the community in three important areas: (1) physical appearance of the target area; (2) area job opportunities; and, (3) quality of police services. Much of this improvement can no doubt be attributed to CHIP, the new police substation and implementation of the Downtown Bicycle Team.

Clearwater Homeless Intervention Project **Project Description**

Clearwater's approach to homelessness issues in the downtown area involved the utilization of problem oriented policing methodology, specifically the SARA model. The following *is a description of each phase of the implementation of the Clearwater Homeless intervention Project:*

Scanning

Since 1993, complaints about chronic inebriates and homeless persons suffering from alcohol abuse had become a daily occurrence in Clearwater. Homeless "camps" had sprung up in many undeveloped areas - especially in pockets close to the downtown section of Clearwater. Public drinking, panhandling, loitering, and general deterioration of property were the result at an ever-increasing rate in the downtown area - all associated with the problems of the homeless, about one-half of whom suffer from alcohol/drug abuse. Property owners and businesses feared lost business and declining property values due to the presence of the homeless and their activities, while community residents and police officers were frustrated with the cycle of arrests that centered around the St. Vincent De Paul Soup Kitchen.

Analysis

Citizens and business owners first brought the problem to the attention of city management. At the direction of the City Commission, Clearwater Police Chief Sid Klein spearheaded efforts to coordinate efforts on a community-wide basis to determine

solutions to the homelessness-related issues - especially those associated with public drunkenness and chronic inebriates. The result was the founding of the Clearwater Homeless Intervention Project, Inc. (CHIP) and its subsequent project to build an emergency overnight shelter incorporating a community policing substation. The major organizations leading CHIP are the Clearwater Police Department, Clearwater Housing Authority, St. Vincent De Paul Soup Kitchen, and The Salvation Army. A designee from each of these organizations makes up CHIP's Board of Directors.

Through monthly CHIP meetings held at the Clearwater Police Department (which continue to this day), a number of recurring social and environmental factors within the target location were determined to be allowing the problem to occur. Some of these factors included: abandoned houses; life sustaining provision of meals; cheap alcohol; lack of any accountability on the part of homeless clients for their behavior to service providers; and, no consequences for negative behaviors exhibited by the homeless.

A variety of data sources were analyzed in an attempt to further define the problem and to come up with a viable solution. Some of the data reviewed included: police records (arrest reports, field incident reports, calls for service); residential and business surveys; cold night shelter surveys; Salvation Army homeless services data analysis; and police grid reports.

Clearwater's analysis also included a hard look at the homeless individuals themselves in order to better assess an appropriate and effective solution to the criminal behavior

exhibited by some of them. Actual crime data, as well as anecdotal data, were collected throughout the analysis phase of the project. It was also noted that there was virtually no accountability for the actions of the homeless in Clearwater's downtown area, and that meals and social services were free and unconditional.

It was determined that the addictive lifestyles many of the homeless embraced were "enabled" by *these conditions*, leading to an increase in the numbers of homeless individuals in Clearwater's downtown. Incidents related to open container violations, as well as public intoxication and other chemical dependency arrests, were also another negative impact that was observed and attributed to the "enabling" of the homeless population.

Response

The creation of CHIP - an emergency homeless shelter program that serves truly homeless persons in need of services - and the creation of an adjoining community policing substation at the shelter, were the centerpiece of Clearwater's response phase. At the CHIP shelter, clients can obtain food and other essential support services - but must be involved in the intervention program coordinated by The Salvation Army. This program consists of counseling, caseworker review, and housing and job placement. Not only does CHIP provide a place for homeless persons to sleep, but also it addresses the individual's problems, such as alcohol and substance abuse, that may have caused the homeless condition in the first place.

Clearwater has also collaborated with the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which owns the property on which the CHIP shelter is built and operates the adjacent Soup Kitchen. The Soup Kitchen feeds approximately 120 persons each day, the majority of whom are homeless. St. Vincent de Paul also assists in the implementation of CHIP's client registration program. In order to receive services at the CHIP shelter or the Soup Kitchen an individual must present proof of residence. If a person cannot provide this information, he/she must go to the CHIP shelter and obtain a CHIP photo identification card. A digital photo is taken of the individual and affixed to a laminated CHIP ID card. The card serves as the key to services at CHIP and the Soup Kitchen and can be revoked at any time for failure to abide by any of the rules established by CHIP.

The Neighborhood Advisory Committee was also created by residents from the neighborhood surrounding the shelter to monitor, advise and volunteer services at the shelter. CHIP met with a certain amount of resistance from neighborhood residents and businesses when the project first began. That resistance has been overcome and has been replaced by active community participation in the project. The Neighborhood Advisory Committee is the end result of that change in attitude; their continuing support is without question one of the most critical elements in the project.

One of the greatest strengths of the CHIP program is the community policing substation which is housed in the shelter and which also serves as home to the Clearwater Police Department's Downtown Bicycle Team. Bike Team officers patrol the downtown area on bicycles and get to know the residents, business owners, and also the homeless

population. The Bike Team is taking a very active role in referring clients to CHIP, as well as enforcing the rules at the shelter and St. Vincent De Paul Soup Kitchen. One of the complaints often raised by the homeless themselves about shelters is that they do not feel safe there. The presence of the Downtown Bicycle Team at the CHIP shelter provides a sense of security not only for staff and homeless residents at the shelter, but also for residents of the surrounding neighborhood who feared the worst when news of the shelter was first announced.

Clearwater also provided for the installation of a computer network at the CHIP shelter for the social service workers, the police officers at the community policing substation and Soup Kitchen administrators. Additionally, data collected by the Police Department's geographic information system (GIS) from public intoxication incidents and complaints is now available on a real-time basis for officers at the substation, thereby assisting with "hot spot" identification. The computers and software aid in conducting time and space analyses of various aspects of the public intoxication problems encountered in Clearwater.

Clearwater and its various partners realized early on that community support would be essential to the success of the homeless intervention initiative. In order to keep the lines of communication open, CHIP distributes a newsletter and crime prevention literature to the community. CHIP has also designed the "Street Survival Guide," a brochure to serve as a pocket guide to services for homeless persons in Clearwater. The brochure is available to all homeless persons in Clearwater, community policing

officers, local area businesses, and residents. Featured prominently on the back of the brochure are the "CHIP Rules of Conduct" which clearly state that public drinking/drunkenness, panhandling, loitering, and disorderly or violent behavior will not be tolerated.

Assessment

For the evaluation phase of the project, Clearwater entered into an agreement with staff from the Department of Psychology, University of South Florida. USF staff worked closely with the Clearwater Police Department and CHIP throughout the various phases of the project. Monthly meetings of all project partners and the evaluator were conducted at the Clearwater Police Department. An initial meeting was held with community residents and business owners to describe the project to them and to elicit their input. Another meeting was held at the end of the project to assess the overall impact of the project upon the community.

Base-line data pertaining to police statistics on these activities were gathered to compare to statistics at the project's conclusion. Data on these and other crime statistics in the vicinity were garnered from police calls and arrests and gathered throughout the project period. Surveys of local businesses and residents in the community were also taken at the beginning and end of the project period.

A comparison at the conclusion of the project indicated a modest increase in the targeted criminal activities in the area since January 1997. Interestingly, the perception

of workers and residents in the area concerning local crime levels generally *improved* during the course of the project. Baseline data showed 63% of those surveyed felt that crime was a problem in the target area, compared with 46% at the end of the project year. The data also reflected a decrease in the proportion of individuals witnessing crime in the target area, with 76% reported at the beginning of the project, and 54% at the end of the project period.

The evaluation also revealed improved satisfaction on the part of the community in three other important areas: (1) physical appearance of the target area; (2) area job opportunities; and, (3) quality of police services. Most notably, the increase in satisfaction with police responsiveness rose from 47% at the onset of the project to 69% at the close of the project year. Much of this improvement can no doubt be attributed to the new police substation and the implementation of the Downtown Bicycle Team.

The project evaluation also revealed some areas where improvement is still needed. The biggest complaint from many area workers dealt with the problem of cleaning up their business premises after transients who have engaged in "binge drinking" there the night before. The second most common complaint stemmed from problems caused by a few overly aggressive homeless individuals who frighten potential business customers away. Both local area workers and police officers agree that it is primarily this small group of aggressive transients who are responsible for many of the area's crime problems.

The project evaluation has helped to bring into focus what has been accomplished and what remains to be done. Homelessness is a very complex problem that is often the end result of a variety of circumstances for different people, i.e., alcohol/drug dependency, illness/disability, or mental illness. Due to the nature of the problem of homelessness, which is a major factor in Clearwater's problem of public drinking and the associated activities, it would be impossible to ever completely eradicate the problem in our community.

Yet the trend appears to be that the community is improving and that given time the variety of responses that have already been put into place will create even more positive results in the future. New and different approaches to problems in the area will be implemented as the situation warrants.