

***Homeless Outreach Team (HOT)  
Colorado Springs Police Department***

**Summary**

Since June 2008, the City of Colorado Springs experienced a dramatic increase in the number of homeless camps on public land adjacent to recreational trails and creek beds. The numbers of homeless individuals living in tents swelled to over 500. The increase in camps was the result of two homeless advocacy groups and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) demanding a halt to clean-ups of the camps that were being conducted by a non-profit group in conjunction with the Colorado Springs Police Department. The demand for a halt to the clean-ups was based on potential civil rights violations relating to illegal search and seizure of the homeless persons' property. The Colorado Springs Police Department was also citing homeless individuals for trespassing violations related to park property. The local City Attorney's office ruled that the trespass ordinance was not enforceable due to the homeless camps not specifically being located on park property.

Due to the lack of enforcement and no clean-ups, the camps were generating a tremendous amount of litter (including human waste) that was creating a public health hazard and an outcry by many citizens to address homeless camps. The Colorado Springs Police Department took a community approach to the problem. A Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) was formed consisting of three officers. This team coordinated efforts among a large number of advocacy groups, shelters, and service providers to get services to the homeless community. With extensive public input, an enforceable "no camping" ordinance was passed and procedures were put in place to help the homeless into more permanent housing and programs. The HOT gained the trust of the homeless community and worked with them to better their lives. As a result of this collaboration, most of the homeless camp areas have been cleaned up and no arrests have been made for violation of the ordinance. With the help of the HOT, local nonprofits have sheltered 229 families and allowed 117

individuals to reunite with family out of state. They have also documented 100 people becoming employed and self-sufficient.

**Description**

**A. Scanning:**

At the beginning of the project, there were an estimated 500 homeless individuals living in tents on public land. This number was a dramatic increase in homeless campers and was attributable to two changes in CSPD policy. CSPD had been collaborating with a local nonprofit to conduct homeless camp “clean-ups” including disposal of any abandoned and unusable property such as tents, blankets, boxes of miscellaneous belongings that did not have personal identifying information on it. Items such as backpacks and documents were placed into personal property at the Police Department. This practice came under fire by local advocacy groups and the American Civil Liberties Union as unlawful. As a result of the questions and concerns about civil rights violations, CSPD stopped the camp clean-ups. CSPD also stopped writing tickets to homeless campers for trespassing following a City Attorney review of the ordinance under which these tickets were written. Due to the lack of enforcement and clean up efforts, the camps began generating a tremendous amount of litter (including human waste).

The public health hazard caused a citizen outcry for the police to do something about the camps. A large number of citizens were concerned about the amount of waste being generated by homeless individuals, as well as the “unsightliness” of the camps. Other citizens who frequently used the trails for recreation purposes felt public trails were becoming unsafe for use. Some homeless advocates were concerned about the overall health and welfare of the persons residing in the tents, while others wanted a “hands off” approach and supported the individuals’ right to be there. Law enforcement personnel were caught in the middle and forced to balance individual freedoms with the overall health, safety, and welfare of the community.

The initial level of analysis of this problem was focused in the CSPD Gold Hill Division, specifically in and around the downtown area, as that was where homeless camps were concentrated.

**B. Analysis:**

The Colorado Springs Police Department formed a three officer Homeless Outreach Team (HOT). Each of the three officers selected for the team had extensive backgrounds in problem-oriented policing and all were very familiar with the complexity of homelessness. One of the first assignments of the HOT was to research the local problem and evaluate the efforts of other cities that were dealing with similar issues.

The team spent several weeks researching the problem and various response approaches from other jurisdictions, including sanctioned tent cities, law enforcement outreach teams, and enforcement activities. They began meeting local service providers and local homeless people as they researched the extent of the problem.

An important first step in CSPD's analysis was to document the extent of the homeless problem in Colorado Springs. As described in the Pikes Peak Region's 10-Year Blueprint to Service Every Homeless Citizen, Continuum of Care Housing and Urban Development (HUD) data from 2006 estimated 1,100 homeless people in our region.<sup>1</sup> However, local experts believe this underestimates the number of homeless by about 800 people who remain uncounted in the official HUD process. Of the homeless people counted in the local HUD count in 2006, 21% were severely mentally ill and 23% had chronic substance abuse problems. Over 35% of the people counted in the HUD survey were unsheltered (not in transitional or emergency housing).

The problem of homeless camps was concentrated primarily in the Gold Hill Division of Colorado Springs, home to approximately 103,000 people over 44 square miles. Camps were found along a public trail close to the downtown area of the city and in other areas of the Gold Hill

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<sup>1</sup> Holmes, B. (2009). A 10-Year Blueprint to Serve Every Homeless Citizen in the Pikes Peak Region. Retrieved from: <http://homewardpikespeak.org>.

Division. At the beginning of the project, there were an estimated 500 people living in tents on public land.

The CSPD Crime Analysis Unit mapped calls for service typically associated with the transient population (e.g. intoxicated person, panhandling, trespass) and the highest density of these calls was found in locations also associated with homeless camps (see Appendix for map).

The Homeless Outreach Team surveyed 100 homeless people over a one-month period in the summer. The average time respondents had lived in Colorado Springs was 7.5 years, with an average of 3.3 years living on the street. As expected, there were many reasons people gave to explain why they were homeless, including lost jobs, family, alcohol/drug addiction, injuries, physical and mental health issues, and legal issues. There were also many reasons the people surveyed did not stay in one of the shelter beds available in Colorado Springs, including that the length of stay in the shelter was too short, respondents had warrants, were registered sex offenders, the shelter felt like a prison, lack of freedom and shelter does not accept pets. When asked about resources available to help them, most respondents did not know the extent of resources available in Colorado Springs.

During their research, the Homeless Outreach Team found there was good agency-level collaboration among service providers in the city; however, that collaboration did not translate to “*street-level*” collaboration.

The HOT collaborated with Dr. Bob Holmes, Executive Director of Homeward Pikes Peak, the agency charged with coordinating a strategic plan for homeless services in the Pikes Peak region, to better understand the local homeless problem and the causes of homeless camps.

The Homeless Outreach Team’s research eventually took them to Pinellas County, Florida, where law enforcement agencies had dealt with similar issues and found successful resolution. Accompanied by Dr. Holmes of Homeward Pikes Peak, the HOT traveled to Pinellas County to learn more about their approach and any best practices that could be used in Colorado Springs.

Together with Homeward Pikes Peak, the City of Colorado Springs held a number of community forums to allow citizen input for possible solutions to homeless issues. Those in attendance included homeless people, Colorado Springs City Council members, advocates, and other citizens. These forums were open to everyone and, at times, became somewhat heated due to opposing viewpoints. The ideas expressed at the forums ranged from leaving the situation as it was to the immediate and forcible removal of all homeless individuals.

In addition to the forums, the growth of the homeless camps and the City's options for response was heavily covered by the local media, allowing further public discussion through editorials and online blogs.

**C. Response:**

One of the major lessons learned from Pinellas County was that any solution would have to be a community-wide effort with law enforcement only being one partner. The Colorado Springs Police Department wanted to generate a solution to the homeless issues in Colorado Springs that went well beyond a temporary fix. The factors taken into consideration in finding a solution were the welfare of the homeless individuals, the environment and overall aesthetics of the city, the safety of all citizens, and the civil rights of everyone involved. A number of response alternatives were considered, including adding a social worker to go to homeless camps with the HOT, developing an ordinance prohibiting camping on public land, a sanctioned homeless camp, and resuming homeless camp clean-ups.

The analysis pointed toward continuation of the dedicated Homeless Outreach Team, collaboration with service providers and trust-building with the homeless population before any ordinances changes would be successful.

In addition to forming the Homeless Outreach Team, the Colorado Springs Police Department's response included the following key strategies:

- Development of a multi-agency partnership to increase "street-level" collaboration of service providers.
- Ongoing personal contact between the HOT officers and homeless people to increase trust and make referrals to service providers.
- Prohibit camping on public property and work collaboratively with involved advocacy groups, service providers, and homeless people to transition campers to housing.

The HOT has worked with nine shelter agencies, 11 food providers, six mental health care providers and a number of other agencies providing medical treatment, drug and alcohol treatment, clothing and other services. HOT attends weekly meetings with local service providers, civil rights leaders, local homeless advocates, concerned community members and the homeless themselves. These weekly meetings are attended by over 60 separate entities. When the HOT was initially formed, less than 10 people attended the meetings.

The HOT began the project by patrolling the areas where homeless camps were located and introducing themselves to homeless individuals, building a foundation of trust. This trust was formed after repeated contacts with the same individuals who were able to see that the HOT was not there to harass them, but to help them. The HOT would interact with people to find out what the circumstances were that caused them to be in such a dire situation. The HOT encountered a wide range of problems that are common to homelessness. The team used their contacts with area service providers to make referrals. People could get the services that they desperately needed to help them get off the street. Success stories were frequent. For example, one man contacted in a homeless camp was out of work, but had a construction job lined up. However, he lacked the necessary tools to accept the job. The HOT called on a local service provider to provide a voucher for the necessary

tools and the homeless man became employed the following day. He is now self-sufficient and residing in an apartment.

While the HOT was helping those in need connect with available resources, the El Pomar Foundation, made a \$5,000 grant to a local non-profit for the purpose of buying bus tickets to reunite homeless people with out-of-town family members. During their patrols, the HOT would identify homeless individuals that had family members located in other cities that could help them. The HOT would then verify that the family was willing to take in the involved person and help. A bus ticket would then be purchased. The HOT would arrange to transport people to the bus station and ensure that they got on the bus to be reunited with family.

Although the HOT was making great strides, the issues associated with increasing camps and accumulation of trash and waste continued. The Colorado Springs Police Department worked with the City Attorney's Office, homeless advocacy groups and the American Civil Liberties Union to draft an ordinance related to public camping that would be enforceable and fair. This was a long process, but an ordinance was drafted that prohibited camping on public property. The ordinance was presented to City Council and passed, becoming law on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

A condition of the ordinance passing was that procedures for enforcement would be adopted and followed. The procedures included a written warning being provided to the offender notifying them of the ordinance and that they had 48 hours to vacate the public property. Also, a specific referral linking the individual with a local shelter or other housing would be made at this time. No arrests were to be made if no shelter space was available. If shelter space was available and the violator failed to vacate the property in the time allowed, a summons would be issued and the violator would be given an additional 24 hours to vacate the property. After the additional 24 hours had passed and the violator had not vacated the property, the violator would be issued a second summons. If a second summons was issued, only the tent and sleeping bag being used would be

taken as evidence. Other personal property would be stored in a local storage facility provided and overseen by a local homeless advocate.

After the ordinance was adopted, all homeless campers were given a two-week notice prior to any enforcement action. When individuals were contacted, the HOT explained the ordinance, continued to provide resources, and encouraged people to look for alternatives to remaining in the camps. One of the alternatives came in the form of a motel that was close to the majority of the homeless camps and managed in conjunction with a local affordable housing group. Another grant from the El Pomar Foundation was secured to provide funding for the rental of rooms at the motel for homeless individuals while they looked for other more permanent housing. The HOT team used this resource and placed numerous individuals there in the days and weeks leading up to and following the passage of the ordinance.

Following the passage of the “No camping” ordinance and a two-week voluntary compliance period, enforcement began. To accomplish effective enforcement, three additional officers and one sergeant were temporarily assigned to the team. The HOT began a very methodical approach to enforcement by concentrating on one geographical area at a time. When the warnings had been provided and 48 hours had elapsed, the HOT partnered with Keep Colorado Springs Beautiful to move into the area, take any enforcement action necessary and thoroughly clean the area. The level of trust that the HOT had previously established with the homeless population was evident and truly paid off. Many of the homeless campers had already found alternative housing and were gone. The remaining property was clearly abandoned or unusable and was cleaned-up along with the other waste. The trails and adjacent areas were returned to their natural state (see photos in the Appendix). Since the passing of the ordinance, the HOT has not had to make a single arrest for a camping violation.

**D. Assessment:**

Initiative and innovation is really what made the Homeless Outreach Team an incredibly successful project. The three members were available when needed and were persistent. It is difficult to fully describe the success of this effort without including individual success stories.

For example, the HOT encountered one homeless couple who were chronic alcoholics and living in poor conditions in a tent. The HOT was conducting a welfare check along the trail where the tent was located. It was Christmas Eve and temperatures had dropped well below zero. The couple approached the HOT and expressed how cold, scared, tired, and hungry they were. The HOT offered for the couple to get into the patrol car to be transported to a local substance abuse and housing facility. The couple refused help and stated that they had just purchased alcohol and wanted to go drink. Over the next few months the HOT made daily contact with the couple and eventually convinced the couple to enter a local alcohol treatment program. The couple has been successful in their treatment and now has permanent housing. In addition, both people are now employed by a local homeless service provider to assist other chronically homeless people to get off the streets.

The overall successes of the HOT are remarkable. At the beginning of the project there were an estimated 500 individuals living in tents on public land. With the help of the HOT, Homeward Pikes Peak has sheltered 229 families, and returned 117 individuals to family out of state using the bus tickets funded by the El Pomar Foundation. They have also documented 100 people becoming employed and self-sufficient. Many homeless camps have been cleaned following this effort and the trails that citizens had been avoiding are again in use.

Since August of 2009, the Homeless Outreach Team has made 2,301 outreach contacts and 872 referrals. They have participated in 40 clean-ups of vacant camps following the ordinance with Keep Colorado Springs Beautiful, a local non-profit organization. They have made 29 felony and 80 misdemeanor arrests.

The line graph in the Appendix shows the number of police calls for service (CFS) associated with the transient population in the downtown area. The HOT moved from the analysis to the response stage in August 2009, the month in which these CFS peaked and then declined in the months following.

In addition to the above statistics, the HOT has received accolades from many segments of the community. Citizens have expressed their satisfaction with the appearance of the city following the clean-ups. Homeless advocates have been extremely pleased with the treatment of the homeless and civil rights groups have been satisfied with the resolutions to the problems. Homeless individuals are extremely appreciative of the efforts of the HOT.

Some cities have attempted to enforce ordinances limiting the activities of the homeless and have been successfully sued by the ACLU. Colorado Springs ordinance has been successful because it has avoided the Constitutional issues raised by the ACLU in other cases and importantly, it was drafted with diverse community input that included homeless people and homeless advocacy groups.

The formation of the HOT has essentially established a blueprint for the community of Colorado Springs and the police department on how to deal with large scale problems that affect a wide segment of the population in one way or another, and should therefore be equipped to handle future maintenance. The key element in this case and others that may be presented in the future is to identify the stakeholders in the problem and involve them. Law enforcement can certainly be one piece of a solution, but those involved also have to take ownership of the problem. The Colorado Springs Police Department plans to return the HOT to their regular patrol duties but have them continue to handle and monitor calls for service involving homeless issues and homeless camps throughout the city. CSPD's goal is to have every officer equipped with the tools to interact with the homeless population and serve them in the best way possible. All of our officers and communications personnel will have lists of services available so they can refer those in need to

people who can assist them, whether the person involved is seeking a job, housing, counseling or other service.

Numerous other law enforcement agencies, such as the Houston PD, the Manitou Springs (CO) PD and the El Paso County (CO) SO, have either contacted the HOT team or sent officers to train with the HOT to learn how to implement the program at their agency. The HOT has also attended training offered by the Florida Regional Community Policing Institute which qualifies them to instruct or train other departments in Homelessness Issues in the Community.

The challenge for CSPD is future maintenance of the success of the HOT, involving several efforts, including:

- Ability to maintain the relationships with the numerous homeless service providers as well as the homeless population in order to keep the number of homeless camps to a minimum.
- Bi-monthly clean ups of abandoned homeless camps to maintain the beauty of the trails and parks.
- Ability to work throughout the city (beyond the Gold Hill Division) to locate homeless camps that have been set up in secluded areas.

**Agency and Officer Information**

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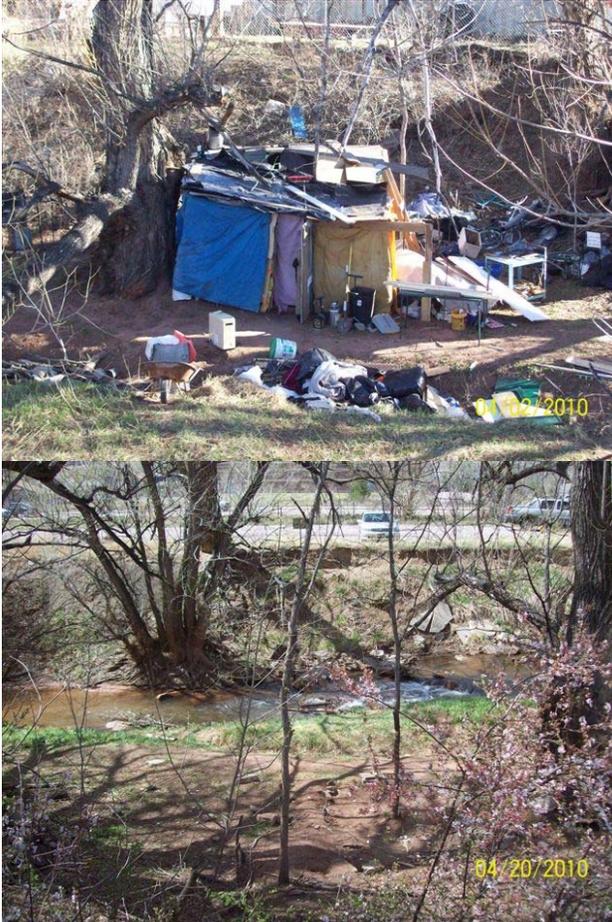
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Appendix

Before and after images of one homeless camp site.





# Transient Related CFS 2009-DTA

