

# **Police Response to Homelessness The Fort Lauderdale Model**



**Submitted by The Fort Lauderdale Police Department  
May 1, 2002**

CITY OF

**FORT LAUDERDALE**

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May 1, 2002

Herman Goldstein Award Selection Committee  
Police Executive Research Forum  
1120 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 930  
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Committee Members:

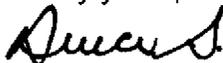
The City of Fort Lauderdale, with its 33 miles of coastal beaches and year round warm temperatures, is an International Tourist Mecca and location for many business, cultural, and recreational amenities. With tourism as a lead factor of the City's economy, the City's image is a significant factor. In addition, residents with their strong pride of the City of Fort Lauderdale are vigilant in maintaining the high quality of life the City has to offer.

Besides the warm climate, many of the County's social services are based in the City causing many of the homeless population to choose Fort Lauderdale as their home. The Fort Lauderdale Police Department recognizes this visible social problem and the difficult challenge it creates for law enforcement.

In meeting the expectations and demands of the political, business and community leaders, as well as the homeless population and the social service providers, the Fort Lauderdale Police Department took some positive steps to address their needs. Through a culmination of efforts, Department Policy was modified, partnerships were formed, officers received training and attitudes changed. Our police officers effected a change in the confidence of the homeless and achieving our goals, and we became a national model for dealing with homelessness involving our citizens and community resources in the resolution process.

At this time, I am requesting your consideration of the Fort Lauderdale Police Department's model in dealing with the homeless for the Herman Goldstein Award. If you require any further information regarding this program, please feel free to contact our Community Support Division Major Robert Pusins at 954-828-6411, who has been instrumental in initiating our program and is actively involved with the National Coalition for the Homeless, as well as our local Broward Coalition.

Sincerely yours,

Bruce G. Roberts  
Chief of Police

BGR:CWD:RRP:mjm

Enclosure: 2002 Herman Goldstein Award Application

**POLICE DEPARTMENT**

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## **Police Response to Homelessness**

### **The Fort Lauderdale Model**

#### **SUMMARY**

**Problem:** The City of Fort Lauderdale is home to many of the County's homeless population. Because the City is a large tourist destination and location for many cultural, business, and educational amenities, the City's image is a significant factor. Criminal activities, including homeless issues, are quick to gain the attention of City political, neighborhood, and business leaders thus generating calls for law enforcement intervention. The Fort Lauderdale Police Department's typical response was to arrest the homeless regardless if the offense was for minor violations. This was a quick fix however leading to the vicious cycle of arrest. The problems in association with homelessness were not being solved and all the communities involved were not satisfied.

**Analysis:** The Fort Lauderdale Police Department looked at several factors regarding homelessness. They included:

- Why are people homeless?
- How can the Fort Lauderdale Police Department lower arrests of homeless individuals?
- What can be done to change how the police deal with the homeless?
- How can we get social services for homeless individuals?
- With what action can the Police Department satisfy the needs and concerns of all the groups involved?

**Response:** The Fort Lauderdale Police Department incorporated several responses to deal with the homeless and reduce arrests. They included:

- Developed partnerships with homeless agencies
- Changed Department policy
- Instituted training for all officers on homelessness
- Changed officers attitude and response towards the homeless
- Created Homeless Outreach Team comprised on an Officer and Homeless volunteer to reach out to homeless individuals
- Developed program for City Jail for inmates that are homeless

**Assessment:** Reduction in arrests of the homeless population. Officers are now educated that it is not a crime to be homeless. There was an increase in homeless placed in shelters and in long term care programs. Change in officer's attitudes and response when dealing with the homeless. Strong partnerships now formed with the Police Department, social service agencies and homeless advocates.



## **Police Response to Homelessness** **The Fort Lauderdale Model**

### SCANNING

The City of Fort Lauderdale, a 33 square mile coastal community with year round warm temperatures, is a home for many of the County's homeless. The Fort Lauderdale Police Department recognizes the plight of the homeless as one of the nation's most visible social problems, generating widespread calls for governmental intervention. It is also recognized that law enforcement faces the difficult challenge of meeting the expectations and often conflicting demands of the political, business, and community leaders, advocates for the homeless, social service providers and the homeless population.

Broward County, in particular Fort Lauderdale, is home to over 6,000 homeless individuals. Fort Lauderdale is the largest City in Broward County with approximately 150,000 year-round residents. There are over six million annual visitors to the area making Fort Lauderdale an international tourist Mecca. The Broward County Convention Center and many national and international companies are located in Fort Lauderdale. Fort Lauderdale offers a multitude of cultural, recreational, business and educational amenities that are affected by the image of the City. With tourism as a lead factor of the City's economy, this City's image is a significant factor. Besides the warm climate, many of the County's social service agencies are based in the City causing many of the homeless population to choose Fort Lauderdale as their home. This has created problems for both the Police Department and the community.

Residents are very proud of the City of Fort Lauderdale and are quite vigilant in maintaining the high quality of life that is available in their *City*. Criminal activities including homeless issues are quick to gain the attention of City political, neighborhood and business leaders. Residents are not hesitant to voice concerns affecting their quality of life or the image of the City of Fort Lauderdale. With this in mind, the homeless has presented the Fort Lauderdale Police Department a special challenge.

One of the traditional police strategies to respond to the homeless has been the strict enforcement of local laws. The Fort Lauderdale Police Department utilized this approach. One example of this enforcement was known as "Bum Sweeps." Police officers were brought in on an overtime status during early morning hours to "sweep" the homeless away from the beaches, city parks and the downtown. The highly visible tourist and business areas were targeted as well active community areas. Any violation of a Park rule, alcohol, and/or City ordinance, regardless of how minor the violation, was met with strict enforcement and usually arrest. The Fort Lauderdale Police Department operates the only municipal jail in the State of Florida. Because of this, the 115-bed facility staffed by certified detention officers, is able to timely process the arrests and detention for those who violate local ordinances including the homeless. A quick answer became for our officers to arrest the homeless and place them in our City jail.

## ANALYSIS

Strict enforcement and arrests became a short-term resolution to the immediate symptom of the growing social problem of the homelessness. The residential and business community demanded immediate and forceful police action believing that the problem was resolved with the arrest. In reality, the homeless would spend a day or two in jail before being discharged back into the community with a "time served" sentence and the cycle would start again. Police officers attitude was to just "lock the homeless up." Displacement and enforcement became the typical response of the police.

This strict enforcement approach created an adversarial relationship between the police and the advocates for the homeless, the social service providers and the homeless population. It was becoming clear that a strict enforcement strategy was not effective and did not provide long-term resolutionsto homelessness problems.

Complaints of police harassment of the homeless were common. Advocates of the homeless were contemplating civil action in an attempt to fight what was described as the criminalization of the homeless. During this time, the City of Miami had entered into a settlement agreement to resolve a class action lawsuit (Pottinger v. City of Miami) with the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of the homeless.

In 1992, Senior U.S. District Court Judge C. Clyde Atkins issued a landmark ruling in which he found the city had violated the constitutional rights of the homeless. Authorities were told to halt minor arrests for "life-sustaining" activities such as bathing,

sleeping, relieving themselves, and sleeping and create "safe zones". Police management sought to avoid such problems that befell neighboring Miami while City officials created its own safe zone.

The City of Fort Lauderdale created what became know as "Tent City." Four tents were erected in a downtown parking lot. Showers, restrooms, and feedings were provided. Tent City attracted the homeless from all over Broward County. Although a safe zone had been provided for the homeless, it quickly became clear that a new set of problems had developed. Criminal activities involving drugs, alcohol and disturbances became commonplace at Tent City. In addition to these new problems, Tent City was not cost effective for the City. Tent City cost the City of Fort Lauderdale \$25,000 a month for trash collection, bathrooms, cleaning, security and showers.

## **RESPONSE**

What could be done to more effectively deal with the homeless? It was evident Tent City was not the answer. This safe zone created additional problems and calls for police service as well as expense. In addition, Tent City was located in a highly visible location in the downtown business district and within walking distance of City Hall. Police officers still, although not as vigilantly as in the past, were arresting the homeless for minor violations. The advocates for the homeless and social service providers had an adversarial relationship with the police and the community still called for action in dealing with the homeless. It was clear to Police Department officials that the

homelessness issue was not going away and new problem solving approaches must be implemented.

Several things needed to change. Officer's attitude in dealing with the homeless was at the forefront. Officers needed to recognize homelessness is not a crime. Officers needed to understand that the homeless are not "problem people" but rather "people with problems." After years of dealing with a lock them up approach, attitudinal change was imperative. Arrests were merely a short-term resolution to an immediate problem.

Next, the relationship with the Police Department and the homeless advocates and social service providers was strained. How could we change from adversaries to partners? The Broward Coalition for the Homeless reached out to the Police Department. The Broward Coalition for the Homeless offered assistance and training for police officers in regard to interaction with the homeless. The Police Department was very receptive to this idea. In fact, this started the change in how the Police Department would respond to the homelessness issue.

Now that police officers attitude began to change, partnerships with homeless coalitions established and emergency shelters available, the department policy needed to reflect the desired response to homelessness.

For any shift in a law enforcement response or approach to be successful, it must have the full support and encouragement of the agency's leadership. The issue must be clearly

defined by policy, communicated to the Department by training and supported by supervision. The drafting of a policy regarding police homeless contacts was the primary step in defining how the Fort Lauderdale Police Department responds to homelessness.

The Department policy emphatically states, "Homelessness is not a crime." Police officers are provided with guidance during contact with the homeless and recommendations are offered for alternatives to arrest for minor violations. In fact, police officers are encouraged by policy to refer the homeless to an appropriate social service provider in lieu of arrest. Police officers are also encouraged to make proactive contact with the homeless to inform them of available social services and offer to assist with admission procedures to various social service agencies.

Policy states when encountering a homeless person who has committed a misdemeanor law violation where the continued freedom of the individual would not result in a breach of the peace or a more serious crime, police officers are encouraged to utilize referral to the Homeless Assistance Center or other appropriate social service provider in lieu of physical arrest. It must be recognized that such referral is contingent on the voluntary agreement of the homeless person to accept such referral.

The Broward Coalition for the Homeless developed a two-hour Homelessness 101 training program for police officers. Homelessness 101 raises the awareness of police officers to the reality of homelessness, its causes, and the most effective and productive

way to address this prevalent social problem. This training is critical to changing the police culture and attitude towards homelessness.

As already noted, the homeless were being arrested for minor offenses such as sleeping in public, violations of alcohol related ordinances, urinating in public and trespassing in parks after closing hours. These arrests made it more difficult for the homeless to become employed, save money, become self-sufficient or have hope for independence. Homelessness 101 is designed to teach officers how to better interact with the homeless, increase awareness of the issues and inform as to what resources are available for the homeless.

In this training, it was also important to teach officers the causes of homelessness. The causes of homelessness remain rooted in poverty and the lack of affordable housing. Complicating the situation for many individuals and families are related problems of mental health, substance abuse, and the breakup of family units. The profile of Florida's homeless continues to be dominated by single adult males who make up 45% of the total homeless population. Families and children continue to be a growing segment of the homeless in Florida with families now making up one-third of all homeless persons.

The Police Department was aware that more facilities were needed for homeless placement. Tent City wasn't the answer. Immediate or emergency shelters as an alternative to living on the streets were necessary. The availability of emergency shelter beds and programs is a key ingredient in any attempt to provide services to the homeless.

With a limited number of intake facilities up to this point, police officers didn't have many options. This shortage of emergency housing eventually led to the construction of the 200-bed Homeless Assistance Center (HAC) paid for with both public and private funding. The HAC opened in February 1999 and Tent City was closed. This much-needed facility provides a maximum stay of 45 days and an immediate medical assessment along with a wide range of social services and education. The HAC only accepts referrals from the referral network within the community including social service agencies and the Fort Lauderdale Police Department. Local ordinance prohibits the facility from accepting walk-up admissions.

Upon admission, the homeless are provided with a health screening, a needs assessment, appropriate placement, case management and life management skills. The homeless, who had survived existence on the streets, often tempted by petty crime for sustenance, are now afforded the opportunity for recovery and independent lifestyle.

In order for the police referral process of the homeless to the HAC to be efficient, it needed to be "user friendly." It would be counterproductive if police officers are required to spend more time referring a person to the HAC than they would processing an arrest at the City jail. In addition, it was necessary to be user friendly to the officer to aid in officer's attitudinal change in dealing with the homeless. The staff at the HAC had taken every necessary step to ensure the success of their program by developing a system that meets the needs of the homeless as well as the referring agencies. This was done.

The referral process established for police requires that the police have verified that the homeless are not wanted for any offenses or violations through a FC1C/NCIC check. The HAC is then contacted to determine if there is an available emergency shelter bed and provided with the name and date of birth of the homeless person. Once the HAC has agreed to accept the individual, the police officer transports him/her and any belongings to the HAC for admission to the facility. This referral is also documented on a police report.

Now that officers were receiving Homelessness 101 training, partnerships were formed with advocates and social service agencies, Department policy had been put into practice, and the Homeless Assistance Center up and running, the Department asked what else if anything can we do to further our problem solving efforts? Were there additional response alternatives to deal with Homelessness? The answer is yes. There is more we can do.

It became readily apparent that many of the hard-core or chronic homeless were not taking advantage of social services for a variety of reasons. Many, suffering from substance abuse and mental health issues, could not make informed decisions about their future. Others based decisions about accepting services on prior negative experiences with social services, inaccurate information or unconfirmed rumors regarding the HAC. The Fort Lauderdale Police Department needed to come up with another problem solving approach to deal with the homeless. Hence, the Fort Lauderdale Police Homeless Outreach Team was created.

A police officer and a volunteer from the Broward Coalition for the Homeless joined efforts to proactively seek contact with the chronic homeless. This effort was not designed to take enforcement action against the homeless but rather to inform them of the available social services and to encourage them to take advantage of such services. Often, the outreach team had to make repeated contacts with the homeless to establish a rapport as well as earn the trust and confidence of the homeless before they would accept social services. The fact that the volunteer was able to not only identify with many of the homeless he/she contacted, but was able to speak from a personal point of view regarding the advantages of social services further developed our rapport in relating and interacting with the homeless.

At first, in an effort to provide a non-threatening approach to the homeless, both the ( police officer and the volunteer wore plain clothes and operated an unmarked vehicle. It quickly became apparent that this approach was counter-productive. The homeless became apprehensive and concerned for their safety when approached by two strangers and were not receptive to the message regarding social services. On the second night of the outreach effort, the police officer wore a police uniform and operated a marked police vehicle. Immediately, the homeless were more receptive to the initial contact and willing to listen to the message regarding social services.

The Fort Lauderdale Police Department decided there was one more element that needed to be included in dealing with the issue of homelessness. Although the Police

Department prefers to refer the homeless to an appropriate social services provider in lieu of arrest, there are still some homeless that are arrested for minor violations such as disorderly conduct or intoxication. When arrested, most of the homeless serve a minimal term in the City Jail and then are released into the community with no hope of change. The homeless are no better off than prior to the arrest and will likely generate new complaints requiring a police response as the cycle is perpetuated.

In an effort to break the cycle of homelessness, personnel at the City Jail are now attempting to identify those who are homeless during the intake processing stage. It begins with the question "Where did you sleep last night?" Any response that indicates that the person may be homeless triggers a homeless referral form. This information is provided to the Broward County Social Service Outreach Team that makes twice-weekly intervention visits to the City Jail. The homeless are interviewed by social workers with the goal of placement in an appropriate social service upon release, as opposed to release to the continuing cycle of homelessness.

## **ASSESSMENT**

A culmination of all the combined efforts mentioned above has developed into the Fort Lauderdale Police Department's model for police response to the homeless. Several things have been accomplished with this problem solving approach.

The first is Department wide training. All police officers, sergeants, captains and majors attend the Homelessness 101 training. This training has been instrumental in the

changing the police culture and attitude towards homelessness. The homeless are not considered bums or vagrants. Also, police officers have become more sensitive to the needs and rights of homeless people. Educating officers about the causes of homelessness has affected a cultural change in the department.

Our partnership efforts have expanded. The Fort Lauderdale Police Department continues to grow our partnerships with agencies through new initiatives. Monthly meetings are held with the HAC and police management now serves as a board member for the Broward Coalition for the Homeless, the Broward Partnership for the Homeless, and the Salvation Army's Advisory Council.

The Homeless Outreach Team has been expanded to a full time officer assigned to the project. This non-traditional approach has created a greater trust in the police by the homeless. The Team recognizes it's better to assist the homeless and give someone an opportunity to change their lives and break out of the cycle of homelessness. This approach can provide a long-term change in the behavior or lifestyle of a homeless person.

In 2001, the Outreach Team contacted 3,935 individuals, almost double the amount of contact made in 2,000. The team placed 1,988 individuals and family members into a shelter for at least one night. In addition to the Outreach Team, patrol officers have taken 770 individuals to shelters. Also, in the City Jail, these outreach efforts have proven very

successful. Over 45% of the homeless from the City Jail are being placed in a social service agency.

All of these efforts have resulted in partnership building and local, state and national awareness of the program. Other law enforcement agencies, social service providers and advocates for the homeless have accompanied the Team to assess the efforts and possibly replicate the model in their communities.

A Continuum of Care approach in dealing with the homeless has been implemented and adopted by the Fort Lauderdale Police Department. Officers are able to assess and identify the homeless; immediate or emergency shelter is offered as an alternative to living on the streets; and transitional housing with appropriate supportive services to help people reach independent housing may be provided.

This non-enforcement approach has not only assisted in the placement of the homeless in appropriate social services agencies, but has closed the traditional adversarial gap between the police and the homeless, the advocates for the homeless, and the social service providers.

The Fort Lauderdale Police Department recognizes that law enforcement alone is not effective if you're going to have long-term change. Through partnership, attitude change, and training, the Fort Lauderdale Police Department Homeless Model has become standard practice. This model is based on the understanding that the homeless are not

problem people but rather people with problems. The Fort Lauderdale Police Department is striving to end those problems and through our efforts help individuals find a home.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

For more information, contact Major Robert Pusins, Commander of the Community Support Division of the Fort Lauderdale Police Department, 1300 West Broward Boulevard, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 33312; phone: 954-828-6411; fax: 954-828-6427; email: [BobP@ci.fort-lauderdale.fl.us](mailto:BobP@ci.fort-lauderdale.fl.us)