

New Homeless Task Force Leadership In Place

Story by Stacey Frank

Imagine your life with no home, food, money, medical care, or support. Visualize what it might feel like to finally have the strength to leave a violent situation while knowing that there is no place to go. These situations are very common to the homeless and without the help of the Homeless Task Force; many people would still be facing these problems. Mitch Weynand, the new chair of the Homeless Task Force, sat down with me to describe what the Homeless Task Force is all about.

The Homeless Task Force, a branch of the Community Action Network, assists community policy makers, providers of homeless services, those with community resources, and the homeless in determining and addressing the needs of the homeless in Austin and Travis County. According to the Community Action Network's website, in 1996, the Homeless Task Force was created by the Community Action Network as the primary organization to "serve as the community's official planning body for homeless issues." Community Action Network focuses on providing accurate and current information on the community, and develops strategies for each issue they discover. The Community Action Network's Homeless Task Force is a group of 24 people who have volunteered to help with creating and implementing plans, maximizing services and resources that all work to meet the needs of the homeless.



Just recently, the Homeless Task Force elected new leaders, and they are beginning to set and implement their goals. Along with Weynand as one of the new chairs, the members consist of Ricky Rivera, Roger Arriaga, Angela Atwood, Margarine Beaman, Brenda Curran, Jennifer Daughtrey, Jerrol Davis, John Gilvar, Kathryn Hall, Reverend C. Kern Huff, Rose Lancaster, Andrew Miller, Robert Peterson, Joseph Rhode, Kathy Ridings, Alison Schmidt, Surrena Schreiber, Richard Troxell, Andrea Valenti, Stacey Yates, Bill Brice, Jennifer Redish, Amy Smith-Edwards, and Susan Villarreal. One of their main objectives is to apply the developed plan called “Ending Chronic Homeless Plan.” Mitch Weynand stated that “ten to fifteen percent of the homeless are chronically homeless.” Although this percentage is a small amount of people, the Homeless Task Force has found that these people usually have some kind of mental disability and are the ones that use the most of the resources that are offered. One of the major goals in this plan is to provide permanent and supportive housing. These types of housing are places that the chronically homeless can live as long as they can pay for part of their rent and abide by the rules. While living in these residences, many different types of support are provided, such as case management, mental health, financial, drug and alcohol, and transportation. Another objective that has been set for this new plan is to continue to support campaigns that are working toward businesses paying enough to their employees so that they can afford some type of residence. Many people in Austin are homeless because of the high cost of living and some businesses pay the very minimum wage, which does not cover living expenses.

Although the “Ending Chronic Homeless Plan” is a big project in itself, the new leaders of the Homeless Task Force are also aiming to expand the existing health care clinics and other programs that have been provided. Currently, there are 6 committees that deal with the health, housing, resources and programs, discharge planning, and advocacy for the homeless. With the newly elected people on the force, fresh and existing plans have been made for each committee. On Friday, February 20th, the Homeless Task Force announced the different committees for this year and the tasks each committee should pursue. One of those is the Health Committee. There are four main objectives for this committee, which consist of helping with discharge planning, clinic planning, writing grants to support homeless health services, and coordinating all homeless service providers. Another committee is the Housing Committee which works on issues such as the development of new housing, dealing with policy barriers to housing, and evictions. The Advocacy Committee deals with issues such as the implementation of the new “Ending Chronic Homeless” plan, input into the consolidated plan (which is a plan that the Austin government has to come up with every five years to decide how they should distribute their money), develop media contacts, coordinate monthly spotlights of nonprofit organizations, and keep the community aware of all new developments. The Resources and Programs Committee is primarily used to discover new trends and demands in the community by making counseling surveys. They also

provide a frequently asked questions list about homelessness, operate their homeless management system, and work on the continuum of care program, which the Community Action Network website states is to “both prevent and resolve homelessness through comprehensive and individualized services provided through several levels of intervention.” Finally, the last two committees formed for this year are Discharge Planning--which works with hospitals, jails, foster cares, and state institutions to build on ways to prevent homelessness of people that have been discharged--and the Stand Down Day Annual Planning Group--which works on this event that the Homeless Task Force carries out every year.

Many achievements have been made by the Homeless Task Force over the past years and in order to build and maintain these resources, finding the funds is critical. Without grants, they are not able to create new, innovative, and challenging resources nor are they able to successfully continue the existing programs. Annually, they produce an application to the federal government for Housing and Urban Development funds. In the past, the federal government has granted the organization four million dollars to finance their goals in helping the homeless. After receiving money each year, the Homeless Task Force has achieved many programs and resources that include outreach programs, emergency shelter, medical services, permanent housing, case management, and transitional living residences. One of the most recent accomplishments is the new Austin Resource Center for the Homeless, otherwise known as the ARCH building. According to the City of Austin’s website, this downtown Austin facility “is made up of three components: a 100-bed shelter for men, a day resource center, and a health clinic for all homeless persons.”



Many people have come in to their services as a homeless person, worked with the resources offered, and have left on their own two feet. Many start in their transitional housing, move to a subsidized home that is supported by the Homeless Task Force while they work, attend school, and do whatever is necessary to collect money. After they complete their tasks, many of them are able to purchase their own homes. In order to maintain their success, more funding and volunteers are vital to the Homeless Task Force. If anyone is interested in contributing in any way, please contact Mitch Weynand at (512) 735-2207. Additionally, the task force meets every third Friday of the month, currently at the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (4th and Nueces) from 11am to 1 pm. Interested parties are invited to attend, and a portion of the agenda is devoted to comments from the floor.

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