

Austin Advocate

The "Street Paper" By, For, and About Austin's Homeless Community

Story and photo by Kristin Elmore

Scarcity is no stranger to the homeless. While life sustaining resources such as food, shelter, and clothing continually elude those experiencing homelessness; we sometimes overlook the intangible resources homeless individuals find themselves without. Opportunity, respect, acceptance, and a collective voice seem to be forgotten assets when a warm meal and a snug bed are at the top of a daily to-do list. The Austin Advocate strives to provide these seemingly secondary resources to those currently experiencing homelessness, those who have experienced it in the past, and those who have come too close through the publication of a street paper.



Austin Advocate Program Director Monte Carter

Established in 1999, The Austin Advocate is a monthly newspaper written by, for, and about the homeless community. The paper is made possible by Program

Director Monte Carter, Office Manager Brenda Curran, and Publications Facilitator Cliff Taylor. The Advocate is supported through various vendors offering the paper on the street for personal profit. Vendors purchase the paper for twenty-five cents, and sell it to the general population for a \$1.00 suggested donation. Currently, the paper boasts a number of regular vendors who distribute the paper each month, as well as volunteers who contribute content for each of the publication's twelve pages.

The newspaper's ultimate mission is to provide a voice to the homeless community. In an effort to help the homeless help themselves, the publication strives to achieve a committed readership through numerous organizational goals. Primarily, the paper aspires to provide a legitimate source of income to homeless persons. Although the paper's creators do not reasonably expect profits from the sale of the paper to alleviate the struggle with homelessness, they do hope profits will afford homeless persons an opportunity to save for a cell phone, or possibly clothing for job interviews. Another goal of the paper is to provide an outlet for homeless persons to express themselves. For instance, this month's paper includes poetry, a host of jokes, and a story from a homeless man who describes his personal encounter with hate crimes. In addition, the paper hopes to educate the housed community about the struggles of the unsympathetic street. Sensitivity to the experiences of the homeless will ideally encourage increased donations and support for those who struggle for survival. Furthermore, The Austin Advocate exists to improve the community's outlook on the homeless population. By working to sell the newspaper, Advocate vendors are offered an alternative to panhandling, which is frowned upon by many. Additionally, the ability to make a profit by working for oneself often boosts self-esteem and confidence in many homeless individuals.

Vendors for The Austin Advocate are guided by a code of conduct while selling their product on the street. This code includes seven very manageable and effective stipulations which include: vendors are responsible for their papers once they are purchased, vendors must wear their identification badges in a clear and visible manner when selling the paper, vendors must be alcohol and drug free while selling the paper, vendors are not permitted to fight over territory, use abusive language, or exert aggressive behavior, vendors cannot pitch in doorways, directly in front of businesses, or near ATM machines, vendors may not panhandle while selling the paper, and vendors must not try to forcefully sell the paper to potential customers.

As with any other social service, The Austin Advocate inevitably faces challenges. Foremost on their list of struggles is a view held by many homeless individuals. Many believe there is more money to be made panhandling rather than selling a publication for personal profit. While this may be true in a few cases, the benefits of the paper as discussed above will surely prove more advantageous in the long run. Not only does the paper thrive on contribution and

distribution by the homeless community, it also serves to enhance the publication's image of homeless individuals, as well as increase confidence and functionality in those near homelessness, currently experiencing homelessness, or prior homeless persons.

The Austin Advocate collaborates with the Homeless Task Force, local churches, CTOSH, and The VA Clinic's Stand Down event in an effort to achieve their valuable goals. Currently, the paper hopes to increase their vendor team to include more regular contributors and distributors. Vendor meetings are held every Tuesday at 2:00 p.m. in the Advocate office at 200 E. 8th St., these meetings are open to new and regular vendors.