

A Stand Down Success: Helping the Homeless of Austin Get Back on Their Feet

By Julie Solomon

It was hot. In fact, the hottest weekend in September that Texas has seen in a while. However, at Reagan High School on Saturday, September 18, people seemed to find shelter in the heat. Hundreds of homeless individuals gathered at the Stand Down event to receive aid from the many volunteers providing basic health, legal, financial, housing, employment, training, social services and veterans' benefits. Stand Down started in San Diego as a way to help veterans seek shelter, safety, and helpful services in a military fashion of a stand down; now it extends to the entire homeless population.



Stand Down Austin's fourth annual event can be deemed a success. Upon walking into the shaded courtyard of Reagan High School, I was in shock to see all of the booths set up. I expected to see booths of different agencies, shelters, etc. However, there were many things I saw that really went the extra mile in terms of providing needed services that many people take for granted. There was a booth set up providing vaccinations for dogs. Many of the people there had their pets with them and this was something greatly appreciated. As I kept walking I saw a row of chairs set up as a makeshift barbershop. Many hairdressers volunteered to provide haircuts to those who were in need of a little grooming.



This is a valuable service in that a clean-cut look is something that can help in job interviews and other efforts involving making an earnest impression. As I spoke to one of the men waiting in line for his free meal, he told me about how he can make enough money on minimum wage to pay a small rent, but what about putting food on the table? Also, the man was smoking cigarettes and he admitted that much of his money goes toward smoking. Not only is this addictive habit unhealthy, but it also costs money that these people could use for food. However, as I walked inside the Red Cross co-sponsored health area, I saw another service that I would not have previously thought about offering. Besides the expected eye exams, blood pressure check, etc., I was intrigued to see a booth from the American Lung Association set up to warn people of the dangers of smoking and to try to help people quit the habit. These services, among many others, helped to make the participants of Stand Down Austin get what they need in order to survive and get back on their feet.



Although Stand Down does not solve the problem of homelessness, the actions of the many volunteers help to provide hope and opportunity to many individuals who just cannot seem to get their life back together on their own. In fact, this event perfectly fulfilled the mission statement of Stand Down Austin: To provide homeless citizens of Austin, Texas with access to services and resources necessary to reintegrate into the community. However, the second part of their mission, "To promote public awareness about homelessness in Austin, Texas", was only achieved by the relatively small number of volunteers (in comparison with the population of Austin). Stand Down provided an atmosphere in which many people who are often disregarded and made to feel inferior could feel respected and their voices and concerns be heard. Too many people think of the homeless as bums on the street or at highway intersections who ask for money. There is a preconceived notion that those without a home or job are there because of drugs, alcohol, or laziness. This misconception is not only wrong in many cases, but also disheartening to those who are mislabeled. After speaking with several homeless individuals, I have a new picture of what it means to be homeless, how people get to that point, and what they need in order to get back to a normal life.

Many of the people I met were educated and previously employed. They held jobs ranging from agriculture to technology to working for the state. Many had or have families. Many have no one. These are all factors that weigh into their current situation. Most of those who I spoke with described a spiral or series of events that led to their homelessness. One man was laid off from his job in the technology field around the same time that his wife left him. Despite not having the money to provide for himself, the man continued to pay child support for his daughters. However, as a self-described proud Irishman, he did not want to ask for help. For this reason he lived on the streets for two years. The gentleman acknowledged that living on the streets he met many homeless people who did fit the stereotype of drunk and lazy, however he found just as many if not more who through some course of events found themselves, like him, without a job, money, or a home. He hates when people use this stereotype especially because he does not drink, he is educated, and he is a good person.

This mistreatment and misunderstanding of homeless people is just another setback in them getting back on their feet. By educating the population and providing services to those less fortunate, we can overcome this problem. Programs such as Stand Down help the homeless not only get the resources they need, but also the attention and esteem necessary to give them hope and encouragement for rebuilding their lives. This event was organized primarily by the Veteran's Administration and organized by Andrew Miller.