

# Caritas of Austin Reentry Program Brings Hope to People Who are Homeless

By Ashley Gatewood

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For over 41 years, Caritas of Austin has provided basic needs for people in times of crisis. I spoke with Julia Spann, the agency's executive director, on how the Reentry Program and other initiatives at Caritas enable people who are homeless to find housing and become self-sufficient.

Caritas extends its services to people who are on the brink of being homeless and people who are currently homeless. Spann emphasized that a crucial way of helping people is to reach them before they actually lose their housing. That is what we want to do first and foremost: to help people avoid becoming part of the system. Not only is it more respectful to the individual, but also it is more cost-effective to help someone stay in his or her home than to help someone start from scratch, explained Spann. The cost of helping someone stay in his or her home is \$1,200 per month compared to \$4,800 per month to start from scratch.

When a homeless person needs a helping hand, Caritas Reentry Program works with the individual to set and meet goals. The program began in 1999 and receives funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, commonly known as HUD, which Caritas provides with a 25 percent match. Caritas works with clients on three major areas: self-care, income and housing. Spann said Reentry Program Manager Jerrol Davis attributes the program's success to the professionalism and in-depth knowledge of the case managers and their focus on clients' relationships to change.

In addition to the Reentry Program's long-term case management, Caritas provides people who are homeless with a safe, clean area and a hot lunch. In the agency, you tend to see people who are homeless using our services in areas like the waiting area, where they can come and have a moment of respite, and using the restroom, phone or soup kitchen, Spann said.

**Caritas' executive director, Julia Spann, in her office.**

We will feed around 400 to 450 people today, she continued. We provide the lunch service Monday through Friday, and there is a volunteer group that does it on Saturday. These services help address immediate concerns and needs of people who are homeless. However, Caritas' concern about clients' long-term welfare led the agency to create the Reentry Program. During the early years of the agency, we focused exclusively on short-term and emergency assistance services. As we moved into the '90s, you began to see movement toward long-term services that provided people with more permanent options for their well being. Spann elaborated on the various ways Caritas supports and looks after its clients. We have a flourishing life skills program and hold a lot of classes about money management, financial literacy, banking and avoiding predatory lending, she said. Client education in these areas is essential for proper financial management and to avoid sliding back into homelessness. Caritas focuses on teaching people how to live within their means and decrease expenses through energy conservation and other cost-cutting measures.

I asked about the criteria for staying in the Reentry Program. You have to have a plan, and you have to make progress on working toward goals, said Spann. The case manager assists the client with setting goals, but ultimately, the client must create a plan and put forth an effort to make that plan successful.

Finding employment for people who are homeless can be a daunting task, and many find their job opportunities limited by lack of education, disabilities, criminal histories or extended employment gaps. Spann stressed that the Reentry Program helps clients break down the barriers to employment and navigate the process of finding a job. Searching for employment is difficult in a tough economy but even more so when facing multiple barriers. It is really hard not to get terribly discouraged in the job hunt when [you face] a lot of barriers, Spann pointed out. Furthermore, whether or not a person finds and keeps a job can be dependent on that person's motivation. For many people who are chronically homeless, full-time work very well might not be the best source of income, Spann said, but we also have folks who have just been incredibly able, willing and desperate to work. Another goal to making the employment program a success, Spann said, is to broaden the pool of employers who know about Caritas. Recent successes include a temp agency that often works with Caritas to provide jobs in manufacturing to clients, and many other clients who have found positions within the local hospitality industry.

Despite being one of the larger agencies in Austin that serve people who are homeless, Caritas must turn people away everyday. One of our greatest challenges is that the demand for our services dramatically outweighs our capacity, Spann said. Caritas is a member of the Homeless Task Force and works closely with other local agencies to better serve the homeless population. While Caritas may not be able to reach everyone in need, its programs are clearly benefiting numerous individuals. In fiscal year 2004, the Reentry Program enabled 75 percent of clients to obtain and remain in permanent housing. Three months later, 84 percent of clients were still living independently and housed.

As Spann spoke of Caritas' programs, her passion for helping people was obvious. In Austin, Spann began as Director of Social Service at the Salvation Army, and then moved to SafePlace where she was Deputy Director of Overall Programs for eight years. Spann said she was drawn to Caritas because of the agency's reputation of respect for the people it serves. This respect is evident in everything Caritas does and its remarkable success in helping people over the last four decades.