

Mary Rychlik: Homeless Services Coordinator

# Rychlik Performs Behind-the-Scenes Work Benefiting Homeless Service Providers in Austin

By Ashley Gatewood

Mary Rychlik is the Homeless Services Coordinator for the Austin/Travis County Health & Human Services Human Services Department. While she does not directly interact with the homeless population, Rychlik has the paramount task of aiding with the development and oversight of services for more than two dozen homeless service providers. I spoke with her about the responsibilities of her job and how her behind-the-scenes work impacts various homeless organizations and the people they serve.

She explained how these initiatives receive funding. The City of Austin receives Emergency Shelter Grant funding from HUD because it is an entitlement city. Based on our population and statistics, HUD provides us with ESG money that we don't have to apply for. Our Neighborhood Housing department accepts it on behalf of the city and turns it over to us. Next, we decide how best to use those dollars in the community and for which services. The second portion of money we administer is City and County Social Service Funds. Those are general funds that the city and county bring in.

Another aspect of Rychlik's job involves working with the individual organizations to figure out how and where the funds will be spent. Every year she collaborates with each of these groups to devise a statement of work which describes how each group proposes to use its allotted money. Next, Rychlik and the groups must come to an agreement on how to measure the outputs and the outcomes in addition to the parameters for setting up each individual contract. She elaborated, We spend a lot of time on city/county social service contracts. Those are the grant funds we actually administer. There is another pool of grant funding that we help community providers apply for but we do not actually receive any of that money. It is a service that we offer to the community and the grant is called Continuum of Care. Every community is required to submit a consolidated application. These are then assembled into a document that tells HUD what exists in that community currently, what the organizations have done in the past year and what they propose to do in the upcoming year. It is all sorts of statistics about homelessness, how we set the priorities that are going to be funded over the next year, as well as how we chose which projects are applying for this particular pool of funding, Rychlik said. She also added that it takes nearly three months to prepare this document.

Before coming to the Human Services Division five years ago, Rychlik worked for the Bryan school district in a program for homeless students and their families. The program is part of the Texas Homeless Education Office, which liaisons with every school district in Texas to ensure that the school district has a staff member to specifically work with homeless students and their families. Rychlik described the model as being a client centered, student helpful approach.



**Building of Austin/Travis County Health & Human Services Human Services Department where Rychlik works**

Her current position as Homeless Services Coordinator requires her to work on multiple projects in a single day. This can entail everything from getting performance reports from the service providers to handling calls from citizens asking what they can personally do to help Austin's homeless population. Additionally, Rychlik is often involved with various aspects of the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless (ARCH). We oversee that program. Front Steps carries out the day to day operations, and we work with them to address issues, which includes everything from dealing with an elevator breaking down to which agencies are going to be able to have a collocated space in there to giving a tour of the facility.

When asked about the greatest causes of homelessness in Austin, Rychlik cites the lack of affordable housing in Austin and lack of income from employment and/or benefits as major reasons why many people are homeless in the city. Rychlik cites that many single adults have untreated mental illnesses and substance abuse issues. Unfortunately Austin lacks a sufficient number of resources to provide comprehensive care to persons dealing with these issues, and many of the resources that do exist are seeing their funding cut.

It is obvious that many of the homeless service providers in Austin depend upon Rychlik and her department for their expertise in funding assistance and operational logistics. Without her help and expertise, Austin's homeless persons might not have the homeless service providers to aid them in overcoming homelessness and improving their quality of life .