

ACCESS/PATH and Safe Haven Keeping the Spark Alive

By Annie Kovski

There are so many organizations out there trying to do their part to help the homeless situation in Austin, and getting homeless individuals a "home" is not always the only issue. Among these organizations is the Austin Travis County Mental Health and Metal Retardation Center, which serves individuals in the 10th Congressional District represented by Lloyd Doggett. This publicly funded, non-profit organization has been around since 1967 and was one of the first of its kind to be created. The Homeless Services of this organization promotes and provides two main programs: ACCESS/PATH and Safe Haven. I had the pleasure to speak with David Gomez, the Homeless Services Coordinator at the center, and he gladly spoke about the details of these programs

ACCESS/PATH is a service that provides assertive outreach into the community with intent to engage disenfranchised homeless individuals. The outreach process can be as little as providing a blanket to providing a hygiene kit. It can take anywhere from thirty seconds to ten years before formal service is delivered. Because many homeless people have been burned by the system, there is a tendency to be distrusting and weary of pursuing further assistance from programs similar to this. So, ACCESS/PATH focuses first on regaining trust from these individuals before trying to achieve the ultimate goal of providing formal services. The formal services include getting them on medication if necessary, receiving psychiatric help, and finally, helping them to apply for all the programs for which they are eligible. There are two psychiatrists and an RN available for their access as soon as they are ready. Building an honest and trusting relationship is extremely important in changing these individuals' life situations; thus, in this program the client is in control. They have the option to leave anytime they please or refuse any help at any point.

Safe Haven is exactly what the title implies. It is a "safe and accepting environment" for the most vulnerable and ill. Because many homeless individuals do not have a safe place to sleep at night and are not legally allowed to sleep on the streets during the day, they are often sleep deprived. This obviously disrupts the normal functioning of a person and thus creates or triggers other illnesses. Merely providing a safe environment to reside in and a nutritional meal can usually resolve these issues. This is what Safe Haven tries to offer. The homeless people are first screened and then referred through the Access/Path program. Provided are 16 semi-private rooms, 3 meals a day, laundry facilities, and an actual address and phone number. Depending on the duration of each resident, Safe Haven is able to accommodate between 50 and 75 individuals each year.

David Gomez, a graduate from St. Edwards University, here in Austin, manages both of these programs. He has been involved with mental health clients for over 30 years, and has been working with this organization since 1993. He sees the homeless as not permanently ill, but as often functioning on little sleep and extreme hunger. He estimates

that about 2,500 are touched each year by these programs. Even though about half of those people are seen multiple times, about 650 people actually go on to receive intensive, formal services. These programs are designed to change the lives of individuals on a long-term basis, and Gomez emphasizes the importance of teaching them the necessities and providing the tools needed for them to stand on their own two feet once they have left the program.

Gomez stands by the motto of "No Wrong Door." He acknowledges that the most disenfranchised and hopeless individuals are the people who do not fit perfectly in one center. Take for example, this situation: a person goes for help to resolve issue number one and is turned away from the center because that center determined their other issue, issue number two, needs to be resolved before being admitted. So, the person then goes to resolve issue number two at a different center, and are then turned away because that center thinks their issue number one needs to be resolved first. Thus, they are bounced back and forth only to land out on the streets. For this reason, these programs are designed to take anyone, regardless of the concerning issues. Homeless people do not have a support system, a person to trust and reflect reality to, and with this idea comes the basis of these programs, Gomez reiterates.

A successful case that Gomez specifically singled out was a client who, ten years ago, would not talk to anyone even though he had the ability to do so. As time passed they eventually got him to interact with others, and take part in their program. Nine years later, he was ready to live at Safe Haven where he began to start talking, and his name was discovered. And after a year at Safe Haven, he was able to reunite with his family.

Because stability is something that is universally lacking in homeless individuals, Gomez also points out that the continuity of the programs and the longevity of the staff members also plays a major role in their success. "Our job is bringing out the spark in these individuals and then growing and nurturing that spark so that it inevitably promotes the spark of mankind. And if a person is not dead, then there is hope for that spark", says Gomez.

For more information about ACCESS/PATH and Safe Haven, see <http://www.atcmhmr.com/service/BH/index.html#housing>.

