

A Journey of Change: Implementing Homeless Outreach Teams in the Sarasota Police Department

By: Kevin Stiff, City of Sarasota

Old School

As a 30+ year career law enforcement officer (LEO), I came from a time when LEOs did not want to get involved in resolving issues that did not deal with a violation of the law. Officers were paid to enforce the law and catch bad guys, not solve social problems. I was not alone; most law enforcement officers learned their trade under the “old school.” It was not that we did not care but rather that we believed social issues were best addressed by social workers and nonprofits. We never received training for issues such as homelessness or mental health, beyond telling someone to move along or how and when to use the Baker Act.

A Need to Respond Differently

All that changed for the Sarasota Police Department (SPD) in 2014, when a local political battle raged over how to address homelessness in our community. It became apparent that a solution would be neither quick nor easy. This was not good news to a police department whose officers were responding daily to numerous complaints relating to individuals who were homeless on our city streets. Many community advocates also accused the city of trying to arrest their way out of homelessness, rather than finding a real solution to the problem. This exacerbated the issue since in 2006 the National Coalition for the Homeless had named the City of Sarasota as “America’s meanest city” in terms of criminalizing homelessness.

We knew we had to design an approach that protected our officers and the City from litigation but also offered the opportunity to resolve complaints from businesses and citizens about issues related to homelessness. We adopted a model used successfully in San Diego – law enforcement Homeless Outreach Teams (HOT teams).



A Sarasota HOT Team Case Manager engages with a person who is homeless downtown.

Introducing Homeless Outreach Teams as a Bridge to Services

A Homeless Outreach Team consists of a police officer and a non-LEO case manager working together to accomplish a simple mission: contact every homeless person in the City and offer them a “bridge to services.” The goal was to bring social services directly to the homeless population where they were, both physically and mentally. This would be a significant task, given that according to the annual Point in Time count, the city streets were “home” to more than 1,000 homeless individuals.

I must admit my initial focus was not to develop a solution to homelessness but rather to protect the City and officers from litigation, and to be able to say we are doing all that we could. Our HOT program mission is still not to solve homelessness, but rather to collaborate with local social service providers and the Continuum of Care to achieve our respective missions, while bridging those missions to persons who are homeless on our streets.

Our HOT team case managers did an excellent job of making contacts with homeless individuals and connecting them to a local service provider and/or emergency shelter. This approach allowed the police department to document the agency’s efforts beyond simply enforcing local ordinances, but initially the case managers were not able to effect an immediate change for the homeless individual with whom they were working. This led to our next innovation – creating set aside low barrier shelter beds.

Recognizing the Need for Low Barrier Shelter

In October 2015 we began contracting with the local Salvation Army for six dormitory style emergency shelter beds, called

“HOT beds” for homeless individuals contacted by the HOT team or an SPD officer. Individuals who requested a HOT bed would receive shelter, security, food, other necessities and most importantly case management as they worked on a plan to end their episode of homelessness.

At first, only the HOT teams were offering this bridge to services, but with growing success, more patrol officers began to engage homeless individuals. Now approximately half of the entries into the City’s current inventory of 20 HOT beds are entered by patrol officers. Patrol division officers are also educated about services available to those who are homeless in our community and how to connect a person to the opportunity to receive housing. The SPD has also provided approximately 90% of its patrol officers valuable Crisis Intervention Training.

Results and Success

The HOT teams continue to become more effective over time as they develop invaluable connections with a variety of service providers in our community. In 2017 the HOT team made approximately 10,000 contacts with those who were homeless. Most importantly, of the entries into our low-barrier shelter HOT beds, more than 30% were able to move quickly to a permanent housing destination and 39% left the streets for either permanent housing or another more stable destination.

The 2017 Point in Time Count indicates that the homeless population in the City of Sarasota has dropped by over 60%

since 2014. I am hopeful for even greater and more rapid changes over the next few years. In April 2017, Sarasota’s City and County Commissions approved the “Homeless Crisis Response System” strategic plan, developed and implemented with the assistance of Susan Pourciau and the Florida Housing Coalition. Over the past year we are all working together collaboratively to create systems that ensure that homelessness in Sarasota will become rare, brief, and nonrecurring.

Continuous Improvement

As you can see, our HOT program has evolved. Similarly, our police department evolved, from enforcement-focused to services-focused. If your community is considering developing law enforcement HOT teams, it will be important to continually monitor the progress, recognizing that improvements will be required to accommodate the social, political and legal realities in which the teams develop.

One thing that has not changed for us, however, is the core mission to “offer services to every homeless individual in our city and a bridge to services” before moving to enforcement. I credit the Homeless Outreach Team for reducing homelessness in our city; the HOT has also been an incredible catalyst for a department-wide philosophy shift.

To learn more about the Sarasota HOT Team program, join us at the Conference in August. [HNN](#)



The Sarasota homeless collaborative received a Sarasota Magazine Unity Award for its work in reducing homelessness in Sarasota by 26% in one year.

From left to right: **Don Hadsell**, Sarasota Office of Housing and Community Development; **Wayne Applebee**, Sarasota County; **Jon Thaxton**, Gulf Coast Community Foundation; **Susan Pourciau**, Florida Housing Coalition; **Kevin Stiff**, City of Sarasota; **Ed DeMarco**, Suncoast Partnership to End Homelessness



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Kevin Stiff, is a retired 37-year law enforcement officer, having served with 3 different law enforcement agencies, including the United States Army Military Police. Stiff retired in 2017 as the Captain of the Sarasota Police Department Patrol Division, after assisting in the development and implementation of the Homeless Outreach Teams for the City of Sarasota. He currently serves as the Coordinator of Homelessness Response for the City of Sarasota.