

Solving homelessness in San Diego by thinking local

By Todd Gloria, Richard C. Gentry & Joel John Roberts | 5 p.m. Jan. 9, 2014

Jesse was a fixture on a downtown San Diego street corner, with his cardboard sign and bag in tow. Life on the streets was worse than life on the battlefield for the Army veteran. No longer homeless, Jesse has turned his life around at Connections Housing, the city-sponsored one-stop homeless housing and service center in downtown San Diego. He is one of more than 109 homeless veterans who have found full-time employment through the services available on-site.

Initially met with skepticism from downtown businesses and residents, the year-round Connections Housing facility for 223 men and women has been in operation for nearly a year.

Did it work? Yes. Homelessness in the neighborhood has been reduced by 81 percent.

Through the extraordinary collaboration of public and private partners, Connections Housing is helping homeless San Diegans rebuild their lives.

Since it opened, 89 people who were living on the streets are now living in the residential apartments at Connections Housing, developed by Affirmed Housing Group and People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) Ventures and supported by federal housing vouchers administered by the San Diego Housing Commission (SDHC). Seventy-three of those individuals reside in permanent studios, and another 16 individuals reside in interim special-needs units.

Through the joint partnership of PATH and Alpha Project, 463 homeless individuals were served through interim housing, and more than 60 percent of those who exited went on to permanent or longer-term housing. SDHC administers the city of San Diego's contract for the 134 interim beds at Connections housing.

Thirty agencies provide services at the PATH Depot at Connections Housing, where at least five to eight programs and groups are offered each day.

And Family Health Centers of San Diego has provided more than 4,000 medical and mental health visits at their center, located on the first floor of Connections Housing.

A local group of volunteers called Urban Angels is providing meals for residents living in the building, and the Downtown Fellowship of Churches and Ministries set up an on-site volunteer program.

With all of these groups working together, Connections Housing is making a difference in the lives of homeless San Diegans and in the downtown community.

Two years ago, 246 people lived on the streets in the neighborhood around Connections Housing. This is according to a survey of homeless individuals within the geographic boundaries around the building, which was conducted by PATH, the lead agency for services and operations at Connections Housing, in partnership with Alpha Project and the San Diego Police Department's Homeless Outreach Team (HOT).

There are now 50 people living on the streets in this neighborhood. That is an 81 percent decrease.

Collaboration among public and private groups has been the foundation of Connections Housing's success since its inception. During the planning stages of Connections Housing, PATH and Family Health Centers of San Diego met with hundreds of community members and groups, explaining that the proposed center would be a local initiative that would reduce the number of people living on the streets in the surrounding neighborhood.

PATH established a street outreach team dedicated solely to the local neighborhood. The center's interim housing prioritized people experiencing homelessness in the surrounding area. Dozens of local agencies were recruited to provide services.

If the model proved to be successful, other communities throughout San Diego would and should be encouraged to create their own local homelessness initiatives.

Connections Housing and the PATH outreach team have since become integral pieces of the Campaign to End Homelessness in Downtown San Diego, led by the Downtown San Diego Partnership, LeSar Development Consultants and the United Way of San Diego County, and supported by SDHC's federal housing vouchers, which provide the housing.

Although homelessness has been a national struggle for decades, here in San Diego, we realize that the only way to find solutions to homelessness is by going one neighborhood at a time and working together.

Gloria is interim Mayor of San Diego. Gentry is the president and CEO of the San Diego Housing Commission. Roberts is the CEO of PATH, the Connections Housing lead agency.

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