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# Can San Antonio Overcome Homelessness?

Local advocates have partnered with a national agency to identify gaps in services for homeless

BY KATHLEEN PETTY



ILLUSTRATION BY NATHAN YODER

Homelessness became the focus of statewide news last fall when Gov. Greg Abbott and the city of Austin sparred over the best approach to managing the capital city's homeless population. Austin's mayor relaxed camping ordinances leading to tents all over town while Abbott decried the measure as unsafe and ineffective, pointing to San Antonio's Haven for Hope as the system that works for urban areas. But before San Antonio was even brought into the discussion, service providers and city leaders already were looking at the best way to evaluate its own approach to homelessness—knowing Haven for Hope is a major resource but that gaps in assistance do still exist. In October, San Antonio City Council allocated nearly \$130,000 to hire

Homebase, a California-based consulting firm to create a comprehensive plan for addressing homelessness in the years to come. “We don’t want a cookie cutter plan,” says Melody Woosley, director of human services for the city. “We want a plan that is usable, measurable and really reflects the unique system that we have.”

## **What does homelessness look like in SA?**

Homelessness was down 6 percent in 2019, according to a one-night point-in-time survey that’s conducted annually. However, says Brenda Mascorro, executive director of the South Alamo Regional Alliance for Homeless (SARAH), which is the continuum of care agency that collects and analyzes data, homelessness among families increased 18 percent. Mascorro adds that some in the homeless population are difficult to count, including youth. She and other advocates stress there is no descriptor that encapsulates all homeless individuals. The population includes families who’ve been priced out of their housing, those who struggle with mental health issues or addiction, former foster care youth, people who’ve experienced a costly health condition and others. “There is not a one-size-fits-all solution for any of our cities,” Mayor Ron Nirenberg said during a November News 4 town hall.

## **What services already exist?**

Haven for Hope is the city’s largest resource and one advocates say will continue to be a major asset in addressing homelessness. The nonprofit serves around 1,700 people per day, including over 700 who stay in its emergency shelter program, known as The Courtyard. It also has a Transformational Campus that includes short-term housing and coordinated services provided in partnership with 140 other agencies that connect people to mental health and substance abuse treatment, employment assistance and other resources meant to provide stability. The Salvation Army has a shelter for men plus myriad services for families while SAMMinistries works to prevent homelessness, providing help to those who are at risk. There are also multiple agencies who’ve partnered to nearly eliminate veteran homelessness plus the dozens of nonprofits and churches that work to provide assistance to the homeless and to those whose paychecks leave them choosing between rent, food and prescriptions. In 2019, SARAH was awarded a \$6.8 million two-year HUD grant (the largest in the U.S.) that it will allocate to agencies and efforts meant to eliminate youth homelessness. “We don’t have that many resources that are specific to 18-24 and that’s what we’re working on,” Mascorro says.

## **Why Homebase?**

Some locals pushed back against the city for hiring Homebase since they are not local. Nirenberg explained that no local agencies applied and that area homelessness advocates touted the experience and expertise of Homebase. The agency will study what exists in SA now,

meeting with various sectors (including homeless individuals) and relying on data gathered by SARA. After Homebase has studied what exists, it will identify gaps and then look at best practices from around the country before providing a recommendation this spring on where San Antonio should go from here, Woosley says. That could mean more housing, or a housing first approach for some, efforts to fund more beds for mental health and substance abuse programs, changes to housing policy or other efforts. “Right now is the time to be proactive,” Mascorro says.

## By the Numbers

**Homeless veterans:** 215

**Chronic homeless:** 343

**Homeless families:** 274

**Unaccompanied homeless youth:** 98

**Total homeless count on Jan. 24, 2019:** 2,872

*\*All stats from South Alamo Regional Alliance for Homeless’ annual point-in-time survey conducted Jan. 24, 2019.*

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