



Photo by Chuck Cherney, Chicago Tribune

Creating a Positive Police and Community Response to Homelessness

by Julie Dworkin, Erin Ryan, and Alexandra Kubinski

In March of 2000 a tragic event occurred between a Chicago police officer and a homeless mentally ill man. The police were called by the CTA to remove Arthur Earl Hutchinson from the Addison El stop because he was trying to sell transfers. Hutchinson left the platform and a police officer encountered him in the alley. The officer saw Hutchinson lunge toward him with a shiny object. According to police protocol, he shot to kill. Arthur Hutchinson was only holding a fork. This shooting occurred not long after a series of articles appeared in local newspapers about police intervention to prevent homeless people from riding CTA trains all night. The articles also linked a series of violent events that took place on CTA property with the presence of homeless people.

Many believe that this tragic death could have been avoided with proper training for police and a will to respond to homelessness by attempting to help people rather than just arresting them or removing them from view. The media portrayal of homeless people as violent only added to the fear and mistrust that led to the violent act.

The Criminalization of Homelessness

Although the Hutchinson case is an extreme example, it raises important questions about how police and our communities respond to homelessness, particularly homeless people on



the street. Around the country, many laws and police practices criminalize homelessness. Police routinely target homeless people for violating “nuisance” or “quality of life” laws such as those regulating panhandling, sleeping in public places and loitering. Often homeless people are arrested for things that are unavoidable when one has no place to live.

According to a recent report by the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, police removal of homeless people is rising as community revitalization efforts increase. Existing laws are selectively

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enforced in these gentrifying communities to restrict the visibly homeless from accessing certain parts of the community.

Chicago's Response

As in other cities around the country, police in Chicago are feeling the pressure in gentrifying neighborhoods to “take care of the homeless problem.” To date, the response has largely been simply to move people around from one district to another or to arrest people repeatedly without ever addressing the reasons why they are committing the crimes. This approach presents several problems. First, it takes into

account only the needs of the person making the complaint and not the needs of the homeless individual. Second, it is not a long-term solution. Finally, it is costly. Repeatedly arresting someone for the same crime without attempting to address underlying problems, ends up costing money in expensive jail time, court costs, and police resources.

The experiences and needs of homeless people on the street in Chicago vary. For some, homelessness is an economic problem and they simply need housing they can afford. Others may have an untreated mental illness or addiction. A citywide policy to respond to the problem must take into account these varied needs. It also must include police training, since police are often the first people to come in contact with homeless people on the streets. Currently in Chicago, officers receive only three to five hours of mental health training in cadet school. A handful of training sessions on homelessness have been conducted, but only sporadically and usually in response to a tragedy as opposed to taking a proactive approach. Chicago does not have a comprehensive policy to address homelessness on the street. We can, however, learn from other cities. Here are two models that have been successful:

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NEW YORK

New York City now has a Homeless Outreach Unit under its Special Operations Division in the Patrol Services Bureau. The unit balances community concerns with the needs of homeless individuals. This unit is also trained to screen and refer individuals who may need shelter, food, medical attention or psychiatric evaluations.

MEMPHIS

Memphis has a model program called the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT). CIT is a program that partners communities and police who have extensive mental health training. The Memphis Police Department sought out expertise from the Memphis Chapter of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, mental health providers and local universities to organize, train and run the CIT. Officers are able to address crisis situations where community tensions rise and to defuse circumstances that otherwise may have negative outcomes. The goals of the CIT focus on safety, understanding and service to the mentally ill and their families, with a recognition that mentally ill people can also experience homelessness. There are 225 officers who participate in the specialized training. The following are examples of positive changes since the program began:

- Crisis response is immediate.
- Arrests and use of force have decreased.
- Underserved consumers are identified by officers and provided with care.

- Patient violence and use of restraints in the ER has decreased.
- Officers are better trained and educated in verbal de-escalation techniques.
- Officer's injuries during crisis events have declined.
- Officer recognition and appreciation by the community have increased.
- Fewer "victimless" crime arrests are being made.
- Liability for healthcare issues in the jail has decreased.
- Costs are down.

Policy Changes in Chicago

Recently, Chicago has made some positive moves to address the issue of community and police response to homelessness. In the last year, two city ordinances were overturned. One prohibited begging and one prohibited vagrancy. Often these ordinances were enforced only when neighborhood residents complained or put pressure on the police to "clean up" the neighborhood by getting rid of homeless people who live on the streets. One was overturned because it was extremely antiquated. The other was overturned as a result of a lawsuit.

In addition to the law changes, some attempts have been made in specific neighborhoods to design a new response that finds permanent solutions to the problem. Neighborhood organizations, the police and homeless people have worked in collaboration with area businesses and residents to provide opportunities and assistance to homeless people.

POSITIVE COMMUNITY AND POLICE RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS

10th District Connects Homeless People to Services

In the fall of 2002, Sergeant Avila from the 10th District in Chicago contacted CCH regarding complaints by business owners in the district. The owners complained that a group of homeless people was hanging out in the alley behind their businesses. The officer did not want to respond to the problem by simply arresting people or moving them on to another place.

CCH facilitated a meeting between police officers from the district, a local shelter, the Chicago Department of Human Services (CDHS) and two programs that provide outreach to homeless people with substance abuse problems and mental illness. At the meeting, people brainstormed positive solutions. Soon thereafter, CDHS sent out its health van to the community. On that day, 35 homeless people were screened for health problems and referred to substance abuse and mental health treatment. Most of them had never received these services before. The police district now plans to use this approach on an ongoing basis.

Clean Street Program at Breakthrough Urban Ministries

Clean Street is a unique partnership between Breakthrough Urban Ministries, a social service agency that works with

homeless people, and the Andersonville Chamber of Commerce to provide street-cleaning services to the Andersonville business district. The Chamber contracts with Clean Street for services, and Clean Street pays homeless participants to work in the program. Through Clean Street, homeless individuals are given employment opportunities, and the community receives a valuable service in return.

Looking at the models from other cities and from Chicago we begin to see the elements that must be included in a comprehensive, citywide strategy for police response to street homelessness:

- 1 Police must be properly trained to respond with referrals to the varied needs of homeless people including mental illness.
- 2 A strategy must provide homeless people with options both in treatment services and in employment opportunities.
- 3 A strategy must balance the needs of the community with the needs of homeless people.
- 4 A strategy must involve others besides police officers in the response, including service providers, businesses and residents.
- 5 The strategy must be cost-effective.

We are encouraged by the positive moves in some Chicago neighborhoods and we hope that in the future we can expand on these and move towards a model that recognizes that people experiencing homelessness are members of the community whose needs must be balanced with others.