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MDS/BAS 495 Undergraduate Capstone
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Spring 2022

Service-Learning: A Homeless Outreach Initiative

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Author Note

Eduardo De La Torre, Sunset Park and Recreations, Boise State University; Acknowledgements to Corina Marquez, Nevada Homeless Alliance, Operations Assistant of Southern Nevada. In complete gratitude, thank you for all your hard work and dedication with organizing such events that provide critical resources to some of our community's most vulnerable.

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Abstract

A capstone project focused at providing resources and assistance to a growing homeless community living at Sunset Park and surrounding areas. Our mission was aimed at providing the homeless immediate access to a pop-up event that hosts numerous onsite resources from a wide range of services. Which included, but not limited to physical and mental health services, information on how to enter substance abuse rehabilitation programs, assistance with both temporary and permanent housing options. Created by joint partnerships between the Nevada Homeless Alliance, affiliated organizations and volunteers who are all committed and dedicated to advocating for the elimination of homelessness in Southern Nevada.

Keywords: Homelessness, Coordinate, Prevent

Introduction to your Capstone Project

A capstone project focused on learning about the most pressing challenges homeless individuals face and about organizations dedicated to helping them change their narrative. Sunset park is a place where over hundred homeless people call home during a given day. We will uncover some of the most common reasons for homelessness at the park. In addition, through an innovative approach an outline will be provided on how a local coalition has made it their mission to eliminate homelessness across all areas of the city including now Sunset park.

Section 1: Innovative Approach

I chose a service learning project that will focus on providing resources to the growing number of homeless individuals living at a Las Vegas, Nevada city park. The main objective was how I might help raise awareness amongst the homeless about the wide range of social services made available for them to change their future life. Particularly for those who might be new to the area or experiencing homelessness for the first time. In prior years I had not ever witnessed the number of homeless individuals living at the park until my most recent visit.

I was inspired and motivated to ensure Sunset park remains a safe, sanitary and serene environment for all visitors. While also making a real effort at providing life changing resources for the homeless. These efforts can be accomplished by community oriented policing who can either initiate weekly sweeps asking the homeless to vacate the premises or ensure community homeless outreach project efforts increase at the park and surrounding areas.

Ultimately my goal is to move away from just complaining about the homeless problem and instead become an ambassador to help eliminate homelessness at both Sunset park and my community. My efforts have given encouragement to the homeless community that resources are available. Despite many homeless who consider their options for employment are limited due to

past criminal convictions. Additionally, the Nevada Homeless Alliance organization I have partnered with, has received affirmation that they are not alone in their efforts with raising community awareness about an area of rising concern. I chose an outreach community approach as criminalizing individuals for being homeless or asking them to leave will not eliminate the problem.

Through these efforts a bridge of communication will be created between community organizations, local citizens and the homeless community. Community members who frequent the park can be provided with opportunities to get involved long after my service learning project. By contacting the department of parks and recreation as they are aware about my efforts with addressing the homeless concern. These individuals will have a more sound appreciation that the issue is not just a government problem left to try and solve but also that of community residents. While altering the perspective for some community residents that the resources provided are wasted and not targeting the appropriate individuals.

As those lines of communication will have been established between organizations and community members about the need to address the rising homeless population at the park. We encourage the homeless community to better communicate the reasons on why they opt to live at the park versus seeking appropriate shelter. Future outreach efforts can also become more consistent in the area. In order to sustain such community efforts we as university students must show gratitude to the organizations we partner with. It will avoid future university student projects to feel un-welcomed by organizational staff who face these challenges on a daily basis. coordination As homeless numbers increase in the area both government and non- government agencies can have a head start with addressing those potential increases. When there is demand there shall be a need.

I discovered that just focusing on just one service of homeless assistance is not as efficient at creating an alliance of organizations that can comprehensively address a wider net of social concerns. As the NHA symbolizes such effort, they partner with government social services i.e., welfare, social security and health department agencies who provide vaccines, HIV, COVID testing. Including non-profit organizations who provide immediate emergency shelter, job rehabilitation programs and lastly a mobile shower where they can shower and receive a pair of clean socks. A one stop destination for homeless individuals to receive the assistance required to start a transition out of homelessness.

After several failed attempts at asking for direction from government officials, city police department representatives on how to create an outreach project I discovered the government program sponsored by the state called Nevada 211. Was informed about such a program through contacting a catholic charity homeless shelter. The Nevada 211 is a toll free number that individuals can call and speak to a live representative about receiving proper assistance depending on their current situation. It offers a long list of services from veteran assistance to medical services (Health, 2022).

I was put in contact with a gentleman by the name of Paul Fountain who oversees the Las Vegas operation. Unfortunately I was told by Mr. Fountain that “they don't offer any type of outreach projects but that I should contact the NHA because they host monthly homeless outreach pop-up events” (Fountain, 2022). He gave me the contact information to Corina Marquez, the lead coordinator at NHA. Both these services and individuals are by far the most innovative people and approaches to eliminating homelessness.

Section 2: Emotional Intelligence

During the initial research phase of securing a service learning partnership I had minimal

awareness about the current organizational efforts that have been ongoing with eliminating the issue of homelessness here in southern Nevada. Originally I had only considered religious organizations as the primary source for providing homeless assistance. These assumptions were partially influenced from news media accounts about how, for example, catholic charity organizations serve the vulnerable meals during major holidays. I had not considered that non-affiliated religious organizations also provide ongoing resources throughout the community yearly.

Through extended research I was made more self-aware that attempting to help the homeless problem extends beyond just religious organizations. It includes other key affiliates like the Nevada 211 a statewide sponsored program and private industries alike. Caesars Entertainment provides both financial aid and delivers essential hygiene products to organizations who may be in need of those resources. Through Caesars generosity the city now has a mobile shower truck that attends all Nevada Homeless Alliance pop-up events. The Fresh Start Wellness Trailer has, according to the Las Vegas Review Journal, provided over “28,000 showers in the county and 30,000 hygiene kits in 2021 (Ross, 2021). Clearly this help from Caesars and other private corporations communicate they are committed to helping the community.

Meanwhile, the majority of these organizations are staffed with few dedicated employees and toppled with the rise in homelessness they are becoming more dependent on community support. As a direct result my perspective on the issue has dramatically changed since launching my project. I now have a more sense of appreciation for those individuals who spend long exhausting hours planning how to best serve those in need. When approaching those dedicated to helping the homeless one must refrain from complaining that not enough is being done rather

one should ask where and how can I be of assistance.

Those operating these social organizations routinely mention how much they are grateful for the volunteers and donations made to help the cause they are so passionate about serving. From interviewing several homeless individuals who live at the park I discovered that shelter dysfunction with how they house such individuals is the main driving force behind why they decide to live at the park. Statistics show when homeless people are surveyed about a potential disability the majority answer one, substance abuse 84% second, mental health 68% third, physical/ medical 64% fourth, developmental 46% and last HIV/ Aids at 4% (Grisby- Thedford, 2022). Now when I interviewed three separate homeless individuals each had the same to say, that “the shelters are overcrowded and they can’t tolerate sleeping next to someone who has a severe mental disorder” (Rasta, 2022).

With the majority of homeless people suffering from substance abuse it can help understand why so many are choosing to live at the park. These individuals are a direct result of not being tolerable to the other top disability of mental health. If the odds of sleeping next to someone with a mental health disorder is threefold they say why bother seeking shelter or assistance.

Such critical insight can serve the homeless population at the park, the organizations who operate the shelters and the government agencies dedicated to serving the homeless.

It provides an opportunity for the homeless who live at the park to be seen in a different light than just rebels. Who simply just disobey city ordinances just cause. While the shelters can become more empathetic to the needs of the people who they serve. Through listening and being more dedicated to humankindness these shelters can serve as a starting place to create positive change in the lives of the homeless. Plus having discovered the true reason behind the increase of

homeless at the park can help community residents hold state officials accountable for addressing the mental health crisis in the state.

Section 3: Creative Thinking

When I had first approached the idea behind how to place individuals in contact with services that could help them I considered just shelter options. However through field research that included direct interviews I began to see the value of addressing multiple issues that plague the homeless population. Which included, food scarcity, both mental and physical health services, veteran services, job connection opportunities, access to apply for government assistance. All key areas that are proven effective at addressing homelessness. An effective crisis response system is able to identify and quickly connect people who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing homelessness to housing assistance and other services. It works because it aligns a community, its programs and services around one common goal — to make homelessness rare, brief, and nonrecurring (Grisby- Thedford, 2022).

Once the root causes to homelessness were identified I researched how I could place those services geared at helping within their immediate reach. Many complained that the services were too far and required a bus pass. After listening I began to devise a further plan on how to use my immediate resources to inform those about an event near the park they could access without the use of public transportation. Which later progressed me to partnering with the Nevada Homeless Alliance that lent to address all those needs during their pop-up event.

Through using observation, communication and coordination I managed to develop a strategy that could have a measurable impact. From discussing the issue with park management I learned that anywhere between 20- 100 individuals were living at the park at any given time (Volunteer, 2022). With those high numbers and the area being a heavy transient place for them I

had a solid chance at helping some at a pivotal time. As some may have just experienced homelessness and data shows the best way to combat homelessness is to address it sooner rather than later. As it becomes much more expensive and time sensitive the longer individuals experience homelessness.

After discussing the best way to approach the issue of homelessness at the park with Corina, NHA executive coordinator, she recommended that the event be held nearby. Particularly at a location where they have an established relationship with like a community center or a religious institution. As the city permits required to host the event on public grounds could take more than two months to procure.

As a result, I developed an idea of creating small care kits that would include toothpaste, toothbrush, a small hand sanitizer and a cereal bar. Attached to the care kits I placed the flier to the event. All the important information was clearly outlined like the location, times, and what they could expect by attending the event. I created over twenty-five care kits that I used to distribute to the homeless community.

I hand delivered each one and provided them with encouragement about the importance of attending. Plus I highly recommended them to share such information with others who could use the assistance. I dressed in business attire so as to not portray as aggressive and was as soft spoken as possible when I distributed the care kits. I wanted them to feel comfortable with attending so they could maximize from the services.

Section 4: Your Innovative Solution

Homelessness in and around the southern Nevada area has seen a steady increase due to numerous factors. Which begins with the rising cost of living in surrounding western states. Where access to affordable housing has positioned some to seek alternative housing in other less

populated and expensive cities like that of Las Vegas. While the global COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the situation. For some individuals taking shelter at Sunset park has been their only option at escaping overcrowded poorly organized shelters.

After researching why so many have chosen to live at the park through personal interviews, reading current local and state policies I was able to identify a strategy with how to encourage those to seek assistance. I had communicated with several local homeless organizations about how to address the rising concern of individuals living at the park. Which led me to the Nevada Homeless Alliance, an organization that partners with a multitude of agencies that are focused at providing low barrier access to a wide range of social services. They host monthly pop-up events around the city in direct response to the areas of high homeless concentration. They are all members of the Nevada coalition against homelessness where they aim at prevention before elimination (Nevada, 2022).

Only providing one type of social service at these events can prove very timely and quite honestly should be considered a complete mismanagement of resources. It's critical to address all four cornerstones with raising individuals out of homelessness. Which include health services, access to government subsidies, job and shelter solutions. Through such a coalition of agencies the pop-up event is able to provide same day services in order to have a solid impact on addressing all the root causes behind homelessness. Be them lacking access to medical care due to substance abuse or mental health, veteran services that can help those suffering from PTSD, or on-site same-day registration to receive medicaid/ medicare, SNAP, social security benefits. A low barrier community outreach initiative that targets areas where access to such services can be very challenging.

Section 5: Results

On March 18, 2022 at the Lutheran social services building in partnership with over nine local service providers the pop-up event managed to serve over one hundred and fifty total homeless individuals and those who are socio-economic disadvantaged. An effective strategy with combating homelessness is prevention. Through the hosting of a low barrier access event numerous individuals and families received prevention type assistance. We proudly had service providers from multiple agencies, non- for- profits, government i.e., SNAP, medicaid/ medicare, health and human services, Touro University medical school, and U.S. veteran services. Below are the numbers behind how much resources were distributed including how many people received assistance from each specific entity:

Pieces of Clothing- 250	Flu vaccine- 7
Hygiene kits- 200	Needle Exchange-17
Mobile Showers- 17	Safe sex- 23
Sunglasses- 26	Medical insurance info- 117
Food pantry- 4,878 pounds of food distributed	SNAP-1
Government issued phones- 5	Medicaid sign up- 2
Medical check- ups- 21	EBT card reissued- 3
COVID vaccine- 15	Job Connect- 50
	Pet Services- 59

My key service learning partner (NHA) and all others were positively impacted by the sheer amount of people who turned out to receive resources and assistance. It confirms that organizations of these types are warranted and should not be at the mercy of local government budget concerns. These organizations must be applauded for their unwavering support with raising awareness about the services currently available to those experiencing homelessness.

While they truly benefit and appreciate the simple fact that community members care enough to volunteer to help spread the word about the support services available.

Community pop-up events provide encouragement to the homeless that they're not alone with attempting to reach for a better future. When they are ready they can be assured that someone will be ready to listen and help. With rising home prices and minimal affordable housing available the need to help those unfortunate couldn't come at a more critical time. However, the issue on homelessness is not a seasonal cause to support but instead requires consistent attention on eliminating.

I've been able to learn about the ongoing support services offered by local organizations in the effort to eliminate homelessness. Prior to researching my capstone proposal I had limited knowledge about the current state of homelessness. Totally inspired by all the efforts being done from both private and non private organizations with attempting to address the growing problem. It has encouraged me to not make assumptions on why people choose to be homeless. My perspective on the current state of homelessness remains free from implicit biases. My level of empathy and compassion has definitely been heightened considering how I would want to be treated if in their situation. While I learned that effective outreach workers have a good sense of boundaries, life experience, integrity, and a knowledge on how to properly distribute community resources (NAEH, 2019).

Section 6: Different Approaches

With a city park being made available for all community residents I could have leaned more heavy on gaining more of their support. By creating a grassroots effort demanding for local county officials to get better involved with addressing the homeless problem at Sunset park. This may have been accomplished by developing fliers or cold calling local residents asking them to

contact their county commissioner requesting for the issue to be addressed. Such efforts are great catalysts into holding more of our politicians accountable for what is occurring in their respective jurisdiction. Raising community awareness provides a platform for some to voice their concerns and or positive suggestions through scheduling town hall meetings.

Furthermore, the issue could have been spotlighted by contacting local news television media outlets to cover the story. With regards to how local agencies are addressing the homeless problem here in southern Nevada. There is a negative public stigma attached to how certain agencies use their resources. With the city population over two million having that exposure for these agencies to express what they have accomplished through their services can decrease some of those negative public opinions.

As the executive director Nevada Home Alliance, Catrina Grisby- Thedford is a beneficiary of those services. She faced homelessness for nine years until she received help from local organizations. Where she would later turn her life around and become a licensed social worker and certified drug and alcohol counselor. While also graduating from University of Las Vegas- Nevada with both her bachelor's in social work and a master's degree in public administration. A true success story that changes the narrative on how individuals who are homeless should never be counted out. In hindsight I would have wanted to shine more public attention onto her amazing inspiring story.

Section 7: Conclusion

My chosen method for completing my capstone project focused on the service learning model. Where I gathered personal first hand knowledge and experience from doing field interviews, and partnering with numerous agencies focused at eliminating homelessness. I discovered the challenges homeless face go beyond just economics, substance abuse and mental

health instead the real challenge lies within the length of time being homeless. The more time an individual remains destitute the more likely they will remain into the future. However, the (NHA) and their affiliates have a mission to help those who recently succomond to homelessness. By providing convenient low barrier access to essential resources and assistance.

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