

Homeless program looking for permanent home in New Braunfels

Steve Knight | The Herald-Zeitung

Organizers for a local homeless program are searching for a permanent home to move the program forward.

About a year ago, a collaboration of community organizations, including the Comal County Homeless Coalition, NB Housing Partners, McKenna Foundation and Serve Spot, a coalition of local pastors and their congregations, began operating a short-term, motel-based homeless shelter for adults using a coordinated entry shelter model.

The “First Footing” program provides shelter, support and solutions to move people in New Braunfels from homelessness to housing stability.

The program has been leasing local motel space to provide services for community members who are at risk of homelessness or have recently become unhoused.

Nonprofit organizations experienced in shelter care and navigating social needs have collaboratively established a program plan, budget and logistical arrangements for lodging and food.

Kellie Stallings, the program’s coordinated entry administrator, said program organizers are studying some properties, including the Comal County Senior Center building on Landa Street, but no deals have been finalized or imminent and there is no timeline to move to a new location.

“The reason we haven’t posted anything about any location yet is because nothing is a done deal,” Stallings said. “Ideally, we’d be able to have something sooner versus later because we’re still paying rental costs.”

A permanent space, she said, would provide some advantages in helping those find housing and other needs.

“We don’t own anything,” Stallings said. “We would like to own something. One, that allows us to divert more resources to actual direct care. Two, we think that if we are working with other agencies, then that also makes it easier for someone who is seeking help to be able to access services if there is more than one service at one location.”

Not a typical shelter

The First Footing program is not a shelter where people come in, bed for the night and leave the following day — what is typically the public’s view of a homeless shelter.

The program’s plan includes using a non-congregate shelter for homeless adults in

a hotel or motel setting with dinners and morning snacks provided. Shelter stays are extended based on individual participation in case management services.

The program's focus is primarily to serve single men and couples. The program refers youth to Connections Individual and Family Services and, whenever possible, refers single women and families to the Crisis Center of Comal County and Family Promise of Greater New Braunfels.

Case management is available to help individuals and families review risk factors that threaten housing stability and develop and implement plans to remove those barriers to improve health and sustainability.

Along with finding permanent housing, additional resources include assistance with job searches, health screenings, crisis intervention and mental health counseling, substance abuse recovery groups, linkages to spiritual support and guidance from the faith-based community, as well as assistance with overcoming obstacles to employment and housing, such as obtaining IDs, training or benefits.

Getting started

Stallings discussed the program's origins and why community groups collaborated to start the coordinated entry shelter model concept here.

"In the last seven years, we as a community had noticed that the number of people who had experienced homelessness more than once and for longer than six months was growing," Stallings said. "For the first time, we were starting to visibly see people who were experiencing homelessness. That's the tip of the iceberg. It's been going on in the community much longer than that, but they have been staying hidden."

Many homeless people, Stallings said, were couch-surfing, finding remote locations where other people are not going to find them or they were sleeping in their cars.

"When we are starting to visibly see them, for us and seeing the results of the Point-in-Time count, we were concerned that we needed to move fast or we were going to get to a point in the community where it was very problematic for those experiencing homelessness as well as for the community who doesn't like to see that."

Tracking the issue

The Point-in-Time count is a snapshot census of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development requires each year.

"The other thing that we've noticed is that 82% of them have been in the community at least six months," she said. "The average length for all of them is 11 years, and so we see that these are our neighbors. They are not people coming in from Austin or San Antonio, (cities) with their own resources. That is even more of a sign to us that this is a community problem, and we need a community solution. The best way to do that is not just to give them a blanket or a hot meal on the street to provide a shelter, so there is a head in a bed for the night, but to look for that long-term solution. And that is finding a home."

Finding success

The First Footing program has connected 95 of the 242 people served to a housing solution or to family members who agreed to provide long-term housing, Stallings said.

“The goal, ultimately, is finding a home,” she said. “If all we were doing is providing a place for someone to stay for the night, then we are enabling that homelessness. That’s not what we’re about.”

Funding for the First Footing program has come from a variety of sources, including state and federal grants specifically designated for these kinds of projects, such as the Community Development Block Grant program from HUD and the Healthy Community Collaborative program through Texas Health and Human Services, as well as local and regional foundations and individual donations.

Also, the Salvation Army has been assisting with meals, and a group of churches has come forward committing funding.

First Footing and NB Housing Partners has also collaborated with the Crisis Center of Comal County and the Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Center to create a program called “Next Step,” which combines housing and mental health services provided for homeless individuals.

Want to help?

Tax-deductible donations can be made to NB Housing Partners and mailed or dropped off at 801 W. San Antonio Street, New Braunfels, TX 78130.

Individuals can volunteer for the program through the Serve Spot website at servespot.org.

For additional information regarding donations or the program, email admin@nbhousingpartners.org or call 830-606-9526.