

HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

City reaches out to help chronically homeless

By Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje
STAFF WRITER

The man poked his head through an opening in his weather-beaten tent, hidden by tall brush and trees in a vacant field on the city's Northwest Side.

"Hey, Mike!" exclaimed Nancy Williams, special projects manager with the San Antonio Department of Human Services. "How ya been?"

Mike Stephens, homeless for three years and addicted to opioids, smiled shyly at the woman who wanted to help him. He's known Williams for two years. On this morning, she brought him some good news: A bed had opened up at the city's detox facility, the Restoration Center, where he would have a chance to recover from heroin addiction and start his life anew.

"Do you still want services?" she asked.

"Yes, I do," said Stephens, 57, as he emerged from the tent to wrap Williams in a warm hug.

Looking on were a handful of city officials, two San Antonio police officers, a local pastor, the outreach director from Haven for Hope, the city's homeless center, and others. It was the fifth stop on the morning's "coordinated encampment outreach," an initiative begun by the city last year to help get chronically homeless people off the streets.

Hope continues on A9



Photos by Jerry Lara / Staff Photographer

Above: City of San Antonio Homeless Services Division Special Projects Manager Nancy Williams greets Mike Stephens, 57, at a homeless encampment near Potranco Road and State Highway 151. Top: San Antonio Fear Free Environment Officers Elliott Valdez, front, and Johnny Perez, check out a homeless encampment under a bridge on Westwood Loop.



Jerry Lara / Staff Photographer

Haven for Hope Director of Outreach Ron Brown, right, signs up Mike Stephens for detox during a visit Tuesday to a homeless encampment.

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A collaboration of Haven and seven city departments, the program's goal is to persuade homeless people to enter Haven, where they can receive emergency shelter and hot meals, along with mental health and substance abuse treatment, among other services. If they aren't ready for such a step, outreach workers provide coats and other supplies that make life on the street more endurable.

"We're trying to help people survive but also thrive," said Morjorie M. White, a homeless services administrator for the city.

Since the program began in 2017, the outreach team has made more than 200 visits to almost 150 encampments, offering services to more than 500 homeless people, White said. Of those, 120 people accepted services at Haven, she said.

A number of City Council members have gone along on outreach efforts in their respective districts. On Tuesday, it was District 6 Councilman Greg Brock-

house's turn to tromp through vacant, often trash-strewn fields.

"We're trying to get them to take services," he said. "We've got mental health counselors here, we've got VA counselors. This is about building relationships. The second piece is for the community; it's a safety issue. People live around these encampments, children walk by them. We have to clean them up, but in a way that shows the homeless we care about them, we have compassion for them."

The problem of homelessness is deeply entrenched: The 2018 annual count of homeless people in San Antonio and Bexar County, whether on the streets or in shelters, held on one night each January, found the number had increased to 3,066 from 2,743 the prior year.

During Tuesday's outreach, the group visited 10 encampments in District 6, where workers gave out eight coats. At one camp near the Culebra Creek Park, a worker gave Leland Ray Woods, 51, a winter coat for the coming cold. Woods, from California, said he had been living on

the streets for 10 years, including two in San Antonio.

"What I really need are some gloves because my hands freeze," he told a worker.

Ron Brown, who has overseen an established outreach program at Haven for Hope for years and is well-known among homeless people, said success with this wary population depends upon building trust.

"You got to do the soft approach, offering what it is they need, not what you want them to do," he said. "And you have to be persistent."

Brown told Stephens he would be back the next morning to bring him to the detox center.

"This is overwhelming," Stephens said, looking at the small crew of people who showed up unannounced to help him.

He had gone through the detoxification process before, he said, but perhaps this time he could enter a long-term recovery program at Haven, instead of being discharged back to the streets.

"I'm hopeful," he said.

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