

# THE HOMELESS VOICES

FLORIDA'S LARGEST STREET NEWSPAPER

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## Homeless People are Synthetic Drugs' Latest Victims. This Activist Has Had Enough.



Robin McKinney, an anti-K2 activist, visits one of the corners in the Congress Heights neighborhood where K2 users often congregate to pass out literature, offer snacks and water, and talk to people about the harms of the drug. Overdoses related to abuse of the synthetic cannabinoid reached new levels in September | Photo by Oliver Contreras

By Terrence McCoy - *The Washington Post*

Robin McKinney wasn't wearing the right shirt. She also didn't have all of her supplies. But the night was warm for mid-November, and that had gotten her worried. So she went anyway, pulling up to a Southeast Washington park hit hard by synthetic drugs, trying to make a difference on an issue she believes is usually met with indifference.

The District had just seen another spike in K2 overdoses, this one smashing previous levels, with 1,054 overdoses in September alone. And McKinney, whose activism represents the latest chapter in the city's ongoing struggle against the drug, wanted to get information to the people most in peril.

Over the past two years, abuse of K2 — a group of synthetic cannabinoids whose chemical composition varies — has increased among the homeless, according to city officials and social workers. The fallout has been visible in some pockets of the city, where users writhe from overdoses on street corners, in homeless shelters and in parks like this one, near the intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X avenues, terrifying onlookers.

Last month, the city passed legislation outlawing certain categories of chemical compounds, easing prosecution of dealers who had consistently tweaked their composition of the drug to stay ahead of law enforcement. City officials have also cracked down on stores illegally selling synthetic drugs, strengthening penalties for doing so.

"It's a drug of convenience," said Tanya A. Royster, director of the D.C. Department of Behavioral Health, adding that overdoses rarely result in

death, killing just eight people since the beginning of 2017. "Whoever's looking for something convenient, and in our community, that happens to be the [chronically] homeless male population, predominantly."

The drug may appeal to homeless people for a number of reasons, according to social workers who serve them.

For one, it's extraordinarily cheap, going for as little as \$1 or \$2 for a joint, which can get two or three people high. It's also easy to produce, even in kitchen sinks and garages. That combination — cost and widespread availability — make it particularly attractive to the chronically homeless who struggle with addiction, especially when they're out of their drug of choice.

Kate Wiley, an official with So Others Might Eat, which feeds between 800 and 1,000 homeless people every day, said K2 has become a bigger presence at the dining hall. Disruptions from people who are high have increased. Homeless people are reporting to staff that K2 dealers are waiting outside. And some clients simply nod off while they're at the table.

"It's kind of like they're narcoleptic," she said. "Our staff has noticed a lot more people passing out, for lack of a better word, and that's one of the effects of K2."

Other effects: rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, nausea and slacked facial features.

Christy Respress, executive director of Pathways to Housing DC, which transitions the homeless into housing, said the drug's recent impact on her clients has been "huge."

That's why McKinney, 45, comes every week to this spot at the park, where homelessness and drugs collide, with seven suspected K2 overdoses on one day in September. She normally arrives wearing a T-shirt that says "Kill K2," but on this day, she showed up in a black coat carrying packs of water to battle the dehydration that can trigger an overdose, as well as reams of fliers warning of the harms of K2.

They are harms she knows better than most.

In the spring of 2015, her son, then in his 20s, overdosed. He and a friend were outside smoking, and first the friend passed out, followed by her son, who was taken to a hospital. Frantic days passed without her knowing where he was, until she discovered he was at the hospital, where he stayed for weeks, the friend even longer.

The story of McKinney's son, who was on probation at the time for a minor charge over riding a dirt bike, was typical of that period, city officials say. One of the most alluring aspects of the drug is that each batch can carry a different chemical punch, so people on probation who faced regular drug tests smoked K2 to try to pass them. The "probation pack," some called it on the street.

Educational efforts by city officials about the dangers of the drug — along with the legalization of marijuana, say Southeast residents and activists like McKinney — made K2 less attractive to city youths.

But what about the people for whom it remains attractive?

Those were the people McKinney thought of this past summer, as the toll of overdoses climbed higher. In the past few months, she estimates, she saw as many as 20 people lying out on the street, overdosing — "zombified." She became convinced she had to do something to help, even if it seemed to her that so many people in Congress Heights, where she raised her seven children, were resigned to the presence of K2 as just one more drug to work its way through the neighborhood.

"This community, they accept it," she said. "They ...continued on page 5

# About the Homeless Voice

The Homeless Voice houses, feeds, and finds jobs for anyone who is homeless. We serve up to 500 homeless daily and serve over 45,000 meals each month.

The Homeless Voice distributes a street newspaper in all major cities throughout Florida including Tallahassee, Lake City, Jacksonville, Tampa, Orlando, Daytona, Ft. Lauderdale, and Miami.

**The Homeless Voice Newspaper has three functions.**

- 1-Educate the public on homelessness and poverty issues**
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- 3-Raise additional funds for the Florida based shelter**

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# Homeless Should Be Protected by Hate Crimes Laws, LA Councilwoman Says

By NBC Los Angeles

Following several serious or deadly attacks on homeless people this year, the Los Angeles City Council will consider a resolution Tuesday supporting any legislation that would add homeless people to the list of those protected by the state's hate crime law.

A homeless man and woman were attacked with battery acid while they slept in a Mission Hills park in October, and a man was arrested in September as the prime suspect in a series of beatings of primarily homeless people in Los Angeles and Santa Monica that left four dead and four others seriously injured.

The California Penal Code defines a hate crime as a criminal act committed, in whole or in part, because of the perceived characteristics of the victim, according to the resolution, which was introduced by Councilwoman Monica Rodriguez.

"The current definition of hate crime does not include housing status, even though attacks against those experiencing homelessness are a persistent problem," the resolution states.

A 2015 report from the National Coalition

**"The current definition of hate crime does not include housing status, even though attacks against those experiencing homelessness are a persistent problem,"**

for the Homeless found that California led the nation in attacks targeting people experiencing homelessness, a report from the Office of the Chief Legislative Analyst noted.

The NCH report said the number of attacks against persons experiencing homelessness nationwide has increased over the years, even though crimes against the homeless are reported at lower rates than other crimes. It also said that since 1999, the number of fatal attacks on persons experiencing homelessness exceeds the combined number of deaths in hate crimes that targeted specific races, religions and sexual orientations.

Other states, including Maryland, Florida and Alaska, have broadened their definitions of hate crime to include protections based on housing status, the CLA report said, but that former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed a bill in 2010 that would have added hate crime protections for homeless people.

# There Is A World Cup For Everyone, Including The Homeless

By Leigh Steinburg - Forbes

The world of sports continues to expand its parameters as a way to shine a focus on societal issues and groups in need. The Special Olympics has raised the profile of athletes who are physically impaired and allowed people with special needs to be seen in a more capable and positive light. Recently, an event concluded in Mexico City that spotlighted the plight of homeless people. The 16th edition of the Homeless World Cup took place November 13-18 and featured more than 450 athletes representing 42 countries. This includes competition between 40 men's teams competing for five different trophies and, between 16 women's teams competing for two trophies, as well as mixed events where teams of both men and women compete against others.

This year Mexico continued their streak of dominance in the competition as they beat Chile in the men's championship game 6-3. There is also a women's title game which happened to be their third title in the last four years! Homelessworldcup.org estimated there were 200,000 visitors to the games. The games were live streamed on Homeless World Cup YouTube Channel and on MARCA Claro-Mexican Sports Media Company.



*The South Africa goalkeeper blocking a shot from Team Mexico during the 2012 Homeless World Cup | Photo by Marco Ugarte*

In order to participate in the tournament, athletes must be at least 16 years old and not have competed before. They can be in these categories: homeless, employed as a street paper vendor, in an alcohol or rehabilitation program or seeking asylum without positive status. These are fast-paced 3 on 3 games of street soccer played on customized 22-meter by 16-meter turf fields. The games are 14 minutes

long with two seven-minute halves with the winning team earning points and the loser none. An initial 56 teams in the men's bracket are winnowed down to two finalists.

The Inaugural Homeless World Cup took place in Graz Austria in July of 2003. Two men, Mel Young, and Harald Schmied were attending an International conference of Street Papers and started brainstorming about how they could use a sports event to address a major issue and inspire change in the world. They wanted to teach accountability and confidence to a group that sorely lacked these skills. Definitions of homelessness vary, but a UN survey estimates over 100 million people are homeless. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates there are approximately 554,000 homeless Americans on any given night.

The Homeless World Cup provides an opportunity to this socioeconomic group of individuals and serves to illustrate the importance of sports in society.

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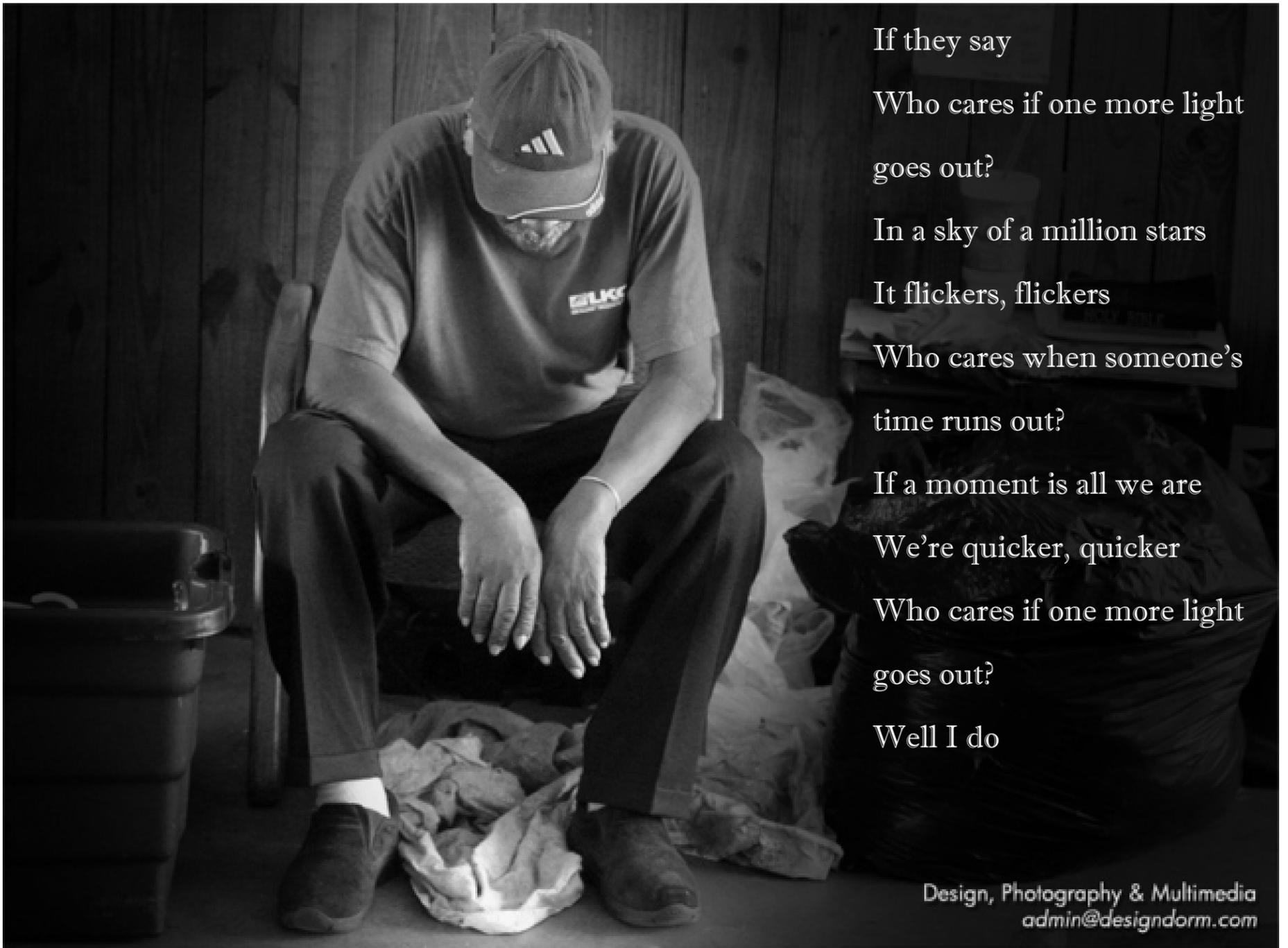
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# THE HOMELESS VOICE



...continued from page 1

accept it, and I didn't want to."

Now, on one more evening trying to get people not to accept it, McKinney, along with a representative from the local Advisory Neighborhood Commission, placed the packs of water and a box of chips, crackers and cookies atop her Camaro's trunk. They took out a small stack of leaflets. "EMERGENCY ALERT," they read, warning of how dehydration can exacerbate the danger of smoking the drug. "K2 ... may lead to overdose or death."

People in the park and from nearby gas stations started lining up. Some weren't homeless. Others were.

"You want a bag of chips?" McKinney asked one person.

"You want a water?" she asked another, as the ANC representative, Mike Austin, passed out supplies, too.

"You all know the info I pass out regarding K2," she said over the clamor, dispensing the fliers. "I pass out these."

"Who are you?" one person called.

"Just a community activist, coming out to help out," she called back.

The people took the offerings and retreated into the darkness of the park or to groups standing outside the convenience store. Some weeks, McKinney didn't know how much she was actually helping the problem of K2. She thought she was. But who could know for sure?

One young person now approached in a winter hat. It was one of McKinney's young relatives, whom she had watched grow up. The young woman's eyes were glassy. Her facial features were slack. She was high, McKinney realized — clearly high. The young relative took the food and water and walked away, leaving McKinney worried and feeling helpless.

"You can't help your own," she said. "It hurts. I couldn't even help my own child, and it does hurt."

But then she was on to the next person, and the next after that. More and more were coming to take the food — and another flier warning of K2's dangers.

"I notice this isn't being talked about," she said. "I want to achieve getting the word out."

# Florida Ranks 4th in Total Population of Homeless Students

By Andrew Fraieli

**F**lorida falls only behind California, New York, and Texas in total population of homeless students in elementary school and high school according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES).

As of 2016, 72,042 students — or 2.6% of the 2,770,846 students in the Florida public school system — are homeless. This is 20,000 students higher than Illinois who ranks just after, and 45,000 students less than Texas. "Homeless" is generally considered "without a permanent residence" in these statistics, it doesn't necessarily mean they are living on the streets. The 2014-2015 NCES statistics tells the exact extent of the homelessness of these students in major counties across the nation.

The highest percent population and total population of homeless students in Florida is in Osceola county south of Orlando with 4,664 homeless students — or 7.9% of their total enrollment. Osceola also ranks 5th for highest percent of homeless student population of any county in the country. Of these 4,664, 117 are without shelter, and 115 are considered, "unaccompanied homeless youth" according to the same study.

In comparison, Broward county has the lowest percentage of homeless students at 0.9% — or 2,264 students of a total 266,265. Of these, 58 are unsheltered and 411 are considered, "unaccompanied homeless youth."

Looking at homeless students as a percent of the total population of the state though, Florida ranks 12th at 2.6%, with D.C. at the highest of 7.6% and Alaska just above at 2.9%.

All information so far has been for students in the public education system, elementary school to high school. Information for homeless students attending college and universities can be found through FAFSA data, but according to the U.S. Department of Education's preamble to the data it should not "be construed to be representative of the entire population of homeless applicants."

They go on to explain how the question of housing is brought up in the application not to find data on homelessness, but "for the sole purpose of determining an applicant's dependency status." This leads the data to be a lowest estimation and not representative of the possible total amount of homeless college students.

According to the FAFSA data, hosted by the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHHE), there are at least 1,991 homeless college students in Florida. Specifically students who not only applied for the FAFSA, but completed it, did not skip any questions leading to a question to housing, answering that question, and actually enrolling in college.

In the U.S. the lowest estimate is 57,641 homeless college students, under the same stipulations.

There are some programs meant to decrease these numbers though. According to the Florida Department of Education, there is the Homeless Education Program (HEP) meant to ensure "that each homeless child and youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as other children and youth."

This only includes children from grades PreK to 12, but homeless children are considered any "children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." The program ensures that students can attend the school that last attended before losing their homes, and won't be treated any differently within the school systems.

This data for homeless students is varied and spread across multiple platforms and the numbers have not improved since the data has been available, since 2013.

# Miami News

## Entrepreneur's Gift Feeds Culinary Center at the Miami Women's Homeless Shelter

By Jane Wooldridge - Miami Herald

Once-homeless women will soon be training for jobs in the restaurant and hospitality industry, thanks to a multi-year, multimillion-dollar pledge from a Miami-born entrepreneur.

When David Centner and his family moved to Miami from New York about 18 months ago, he and his wife Leila looked for charitable opportunities that aligned with their focus: helping women and children through sustainable programs. The culinary training program at Lotus House Women's Shelter, for women and children experiencing homelessness, was the right fit.

"We heard about Lotus Village and fell in love with it," he said. "We're not the types who just write out a check; we like to be intentional with philanthropy. We learned they have a fully equipped kitchen with the goal of helping women transition into careers. It had sustainability written all over it."

Thursday, the David and Leila Centner Culinary Center at Overtown's Lotus House Women's Shelter will serve the first of a half-million annual meals to Lotus Village residents. In the process, the center will also offer nutritional education, menu planning, food preparation and safety for the 400-500 women and their children in residence at the

transition facility.

"This gift is life-changing for the women and children we shelter," said Lotus House founder and executive director Constance Collins. "Knowledge is power. This gift seeds the culinary center. It doesn't just feed the shelter, it feeds minds. It empowers women to develop a new skill base, job

**"This gift is life-changing for the women and children we shelter,"**

readiness, work experience, references ... it really empowers them to enter the work world and succeed."

While the farm-to-table food movement has been embraced by restaurants and households nationwide, institutions on tight budgets— such as homeless shelters — tend to be filling but low in nutrition, said Collins. Lotus House — now a campus of buildings known as Lotus Village — is seeking to change that through the new culinary center and through existing partnerships with firms including Hungry Harvest,

Hammock Greens, Zak the Baker, Bunnie Cakes and Goya. Its facilities include a rooftop garden of vegetables and herbs.

The Centners' gift to the Lotus Endowment Fund will provide funding for the program into the future. "The hearth is the heart of the home," said Collins. "I see the culinary center as heart of Lotus Village....I see this gift as the backbone, as the underlying foundation, particularly of the educational and job-readiness program."

Lotus House seeks to empower homeless women through counseling, education, job training and enrichment. Though it has the physical capacity for 500 women and children, plus infants, Lotus Village currently serves only 400 due to tight government funding, Collins said.

Centner, who attended Miami Central High and Wharton, founded his most recent firm, Highway Toll Administration, in 2002 to facilitate digital toll payments for fleet vehicles. He and his wife, Leila, the company's chief financial officer, sold the company earlier this year.

# Fort Lauderdale News

## Christian Group Continues Showers For Homeless in Fort Lauderdale

By Brittany Wallman - Sun Sentinel

A Christian group will continue offering outdoor showers to homeless people, after Fort Lauderdale commissioners resolved a code enforcement issue.

The city had ordered a stop to the mobile showering in August. The nonprofit HOPE South Florida put the showers on hold briefly until it could obtain a special event permit. The 90-day permit was renewed Tuesday night.

The city is attempting a new approach to the homeless problem, with help from the county, nonprofits and local businesses. Fort Lauderdale officials also Tuesday agreed to contribute \$800,000 to the United Way toward a new "rapid re-housing" and supportive services program aimed at eliminating a homeless encampment downtown.

The city had temporarily shut off the showers in August, saying they weren't allowed under city codes. The Christian-based HOPE South Florida runs a homeless feeding program, and added the free showers in April 2017.

"A shower is a way of giving people a little sense of dignity," Jeff Weinberger, a homeless activist, said at the time the showering was halted.

County commissioners — often at odds with the city on the issue of homeless — were critical of the city's decision to turn off the showers. They passed a resolution in August urging the city to allow the homeless showers to continue "without requiring an extensive application and approval process."

Nevertheless, the city required HOPE South Florida to obtain a \$200 special event certificate. The approval is for showering from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. on nine dates in December, nine dates in January and eight dates in February. City Manager Lee Feldman said they'll need a new permit every 90 days.

The showers are offered at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church at 318 NW 6th Ave, and at the Vision of Hope Family and Worship Center at 1100 N. Andrews Ave.



Holly Grant ready to leave the shelter | Photo by BLa BLah

The North Andrews property already was permitted as a feeding center for the homeless and a food distribution center.

The city's sometimes harsh response to people helping the homeless has brought international publicity. The city has arrested people feeding the homeless, and brought front-end loaders to a homeless encampment to toss trash and belongings.

Assistant City Manager Chris Lagerbloom, recently selected for the city manager job, said the city and county are cooperating now to find housing for the 75 to 80 people living outside the Main Library downtown, off Broward Boulevard between Andrews and First avenues. He said the county has installed an "incident command system" to work at the camp daily, finding housing for each willing person.

"It's all focused on finding an exit strategy through housing,"

Lagerbloom said.

After years with a persistent homeless problem, the business community, non-profits, courts and local government teamed up recently to put the chronically homeless people into housing with services.

Commissioner Ben Sorensen set up a makeshift office in the camp in order to focus attention on the problem.

"We'll soon see the elimination of the encampment," Mayor Dean Trantalis said Tuesday. "Just keep our fingers crossed. The best of intentions are being fulfilled."



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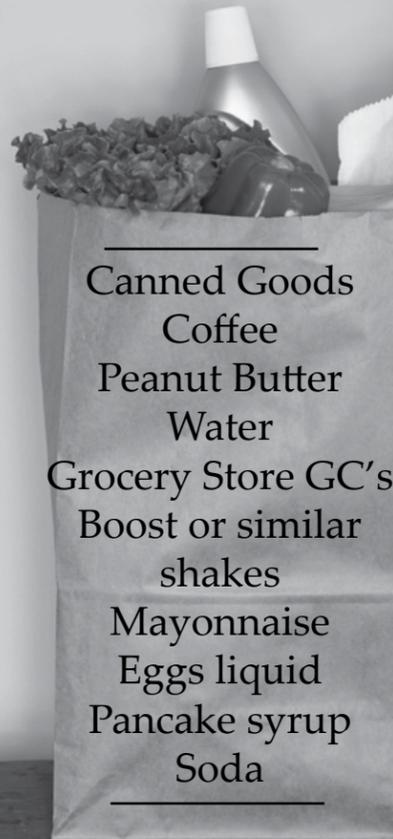


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# Gainesville News

## These Lanier Village Estates Residents Help the Homeless By Using a Unique Item

By Layne Saliba - Gainesville Times

Karen Blaser held up her phone to show photos of the work she's been a part of for the past few years. Flipping from picture to picture, Blaser showed homeless men and women under a bridge near Atlanta's Grady Memorial Hospital, holding and using handmade mats that had been woven by residents at Lanier Village Estates back in Gainesville.

The independent- and assisted-living facility in North Hall has two different Mats for the Homeless groups that make the woven mats, some crochet

and some use peg looms. But it's the material they use that makes them unique: grocery bags.

"People just drop bags off," said Barbara Heartz, 95, who helped put the groups together and got others interested back in 2016. "Bags that they use, we take them, flatten them and cut them."

It's as simple as that. They take recycled grocery bags and weave them into a tool to take a bit of the sting out of on-the-streets homelessness.

Before starting a weave, the bags are cut, flattened and sliced down the middle to create even strips. They tie the strips together, end-to-end, to make what they call "plarn." From there, it's used just like yarn in a crochet.

"It takes about 60 hours to do a whole mat, when you're crocheting," Gail Werner said. "And you can't do it for more than three hours at a time because your hands hurt. But it's a good thing to do in the evening. You just sit there and watch TV while you do it."

Janet Hutts, 93, said she can't watch TV like Werner, though.

She is legally blind, so it's hard for her to do much of anything while she's working on her mats.

"I like to take a nap," she said, laughing.

But still, even though she can't see well, Hutts has used a peg loom to make five mats for the homeless and she's working on her sixth — that'll be 360 hours on the loom, if you're counting, or 15 solid days of work. She likes to use the bright-yellow bags because she enjoys the colors.

"I like to be busy and this is a great way to be busy and do something for somebody," Hutts said. "And I know it's appreciated because I've heard some of the remarks from people who receive them... It's my way of being happy by doing for somebody else."

Blaser said one of the mats Hutts made brought one man to tears because he couldn't believe someone, especially at Hutts' age, would make something for him.

The mats are meant to be slept on, but they can be used as blankets or even rolled up and used as pillows, too. And since they're made of plastic, they can be washed off and air-dried quickly.

Altogether, the residents at Lanier Village have crocheted 88 mats and they plan on continuing until they can't find any more bags to use.

One of the most important things Blaser tells everyone who talks to her about making the mats is that it doesn't matter what they look like at they end of the day. As long as they hold together and serve their purpose, the mats will be used.

"There's no right or wrong," Blaser said. "My motto is, 'They may not be perfect, but they're made with love.'"



Legally blind, Lanier Village Estates resident Janet Hutts weaves a yellow and white mat Tuesday, Nov. 20, 2018, out of plastic grocery bags to be donated to the homeless | Photo by Scott Rogers

## Federal Appeals Court Affirms Right of Homeless Persons to Not Be Punished for Sleeping in Public in Absence of Alternatives

By National Law Center for On Homelessness & Poverty

On September 4, 2018, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed that homeless persons cannot be punished for sleeping outside in the absence of adequate alternatives in *Martin v. Boise* (formerly *Bell v. Boise*), a lawsuit challenging Boise, Idaho's ban on sleeping in public. In so holding, the court of appeals permitted various homeless individuals who have received criminal citations under Boise's policy to proceed with their constitutional claims against the City. The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, which filed the case in 2009 with co-counsel Idaho Legal Aid Services and Latham & Watkins LLP, hailed the decision and looks forward to a final decision in the case.

"Criminally punishing homeless people for sleeping on the street when they have nowhere else to go is inhumane, and we applaud the Court for holding that it is also unconstitutional" said Maria Foscarinis, executive director at the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. "It's time for Boise to stop trying to hide its homelessness problem with unconstitutional ordinances, and start proposing real solutions."

The case challenges Boise's enforcement of its Camping and Disorderly Conduct Ordinances against persons experiencing homelessness who need to sleep in public in the absence of adequate housing or shelter. Today, the 9th Circuit agreed with the central premise in the suit, holding that "as long as there is no option of sleeping indoors, the government cannot criminalize indigent, homeless people for sleeping outdoors, on public property, on the false premise they had a choice in the matter."

"Cities with similar bans against sleeping in public should redirect resources to constructive solutions to homelessness, such as affordable housing and health services," said Eric Tars, senior attorney at the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. "Getting homeless people into housing is a win-win approach, benefitting both the individuals helped and the communities that no longer have to deal with the negative impacts of people living in public spaces, at lower cost than cycling people through the criminal justice system."

**“Criminally punishing homeless people for sleeping on the street when they have nowhere else to go is inhumane,”**

The case gained national attention in 2015 when the U.S. Department of Justice filed a Statement of Interest brief in the case, arguing that making it a crime for people who are homeless to sleep in public places unconstitutionally punishes them for being homeless.

"The outcome of Court's decision will ripple across the

country. Cities will have to address real solutions to the complex issues faced by homeless individuals and families rather than just create more barriers and fill more jails with persons who only needed a place to sleep for the night," said Howard Belodoff, of Idaho Legal Aid Services, Inc.

"We are pleased that the Ninth Circuit held that the Constitution 'prohibits the imposition of criminal penalties for sitting, sleeping, or lying outside on public property for homeless individuals who cannot obtain shelter,' said Michael Bern, lead pro bono counsel from Latham & Watkins, who argued the case before the 9th Circuit. "As the Department of Justice recognized earlier in this case, '[c]riminalizing public sleeping in cities with insufficient housing and support for homeless individuals does not improve public safety outcomes or reduce the factors that contribute to homelessness.' With today's decision, we hope that cities can redirect their efforts to identifying meaningful and constitutional solutions to the problem of homelessness." Latham & Watkins.

This case is part of a nationwide movement against the criminalization of homelessness, spearheaded by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and more than 700 groups and individuals who have endorsed the Housing Not Handcuffs Campaign.

# Jacksonville News

## New Work Boots From Jacksonville Nonprofit Provide Opportunity and Hope

By Mark Woods - Jacksonville.com

**W**hen Mark O'Neill got a construction job through the day labor pool, he made sure to put a roll of duct tape in his pocket.

The tape wasn't for fixing anything on the site.

It was for his work boots.

His boots once were shiny black and new. But when O'Neill walked into the home of the Downtown Ecumenical Services Council — the basement of First Presbyterian Church in downtown Jacksonville — his boots were falling apart, kind of like the 56-year-old Army veteran's life had.

"I'm on the streets right now, trying to find a place to stay and get myself back up," he said. "Nothing comes at a good time, but you can see what's going on."

He pointed at his old shoes.

It wasn't just that the shine was long gone. The soles were peeling off, the toe of the left shoe wrapped in layers of black tape. That helped. But when he walked, the heel still separated from the shoe.

"Imagine walking around the construction site, wondering when your boots are going to fall off," he said. "I was constantly taping them up."

He took what was sitting on the table — a box with new, size 12, steel-toe, brown boots — and opened it.

"Do you mind if I change into these right quick?" he asked.

He unlaced the old boots, pulled out the old Dr. Scholl's inserts and put them in the new boots. He slipped his feet into them, tied the laces and grinned. "Oh, that's perfect," he said.

These boots, he said, provide opportunity. They mean that he can keep doing the day labor jobs that require steel-toe boots. If he can do that consistently, he can save up a little money. And if he can save up a little money, he figures he can get his life back on track.

**"Imagine walking around the construction site, wondering when your boots are going to fall off," he said. "I was constantly taping them up."**

So when he laced them up, they provided more than warmth against the winter cold. They provided hope that 2019 will be better than 2018.

This is what happens again and again in the basement of First Presbyterian Church.

Founded in 1981 by churches in urban Jacksonville, DESC provides food, clothing and financial help to the poor and homeless. It has just one full-time employee, executive director David Clark, and five part-time employees.

"We're small but mighty," Clark said. "Our volunteers are tireless and passionate. We literally could not do this without them."

To tell the story of what one of them has done, follow Clark through the basement of the church that was rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1901, past pallets of food and refrigerators, to a room crammed full of donated clothing, neatly organized by sizes.

Some of those volunteers are busy sorting clothes near a wall with a quote attributed to Margaret



Mark O'Neil gets handed his new pair of work boots by the Director of Programs Beth Wilson in the clothing closet run by the Ecumenical Services Council | Photo by Bob Self

Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

DESC gave away 130,000 pieces of clothing last year — including hundreds of pairs of new work boots.

Linda Ferrigno made the boots her mission.

In 2017, her friend Julie Handley convinced her to come to DESC and see what was happening there.

"Julie is a dangerous friend to have," she said with a laugh. "They were showing me all the wonderful things they do, and they told me about this one lady, Salli Sollow."

Sollow, a volunteer, had decided that for her 70th birthday, she wanted people to give boots. Not fancy boots for herself. Steel-toe boots for others who, without them, wouldn't be able to do some jobs. She wanted to raise enough money to buy 70 pairs of boots.

Ferrigno opened up her purse and gave them all the money she had on her.

A few days later, she got a thank-you note for her donation and a picture of the recipient of a pair boots.

His name was Randall. He was 51 years old. He described himself as a family man, working two part-time jobs, one at Jacksonville Veterans Memorial Arena, another detailing cars and cleaning carpeting.

"Randall called to me," she said. "I just couldn't forget him."

She was about to turn 70, too. She knew her husband, Vince Ferrigno, probably was going to throw her a big surprise birthday party. She sat him down and told him she wanted him to spend the money on something else. Boots.

She said she was going to raise enough money to buy one pair of boots for every day of her birthday year. The boots cost about \$25, so that's close to \$10,000.

She asked her family and friends to donate. And they did. In no time, her son said that maybe her goal was too low. So she doubled it. "Linderella," as her family calls her, said that if she reached her goal by a certain date, she would wear a crown.

Where?

"Everywhere," she said. "Church, the grocery store. ... People thought I had gone bonkers. They probably thought I was bonkers anyway."

Before she retired, she was a wedding consultant and worked for the government, running programs for senior citizens. She now has a business card, with a photo of her wearing the crown, holding a sign that says: "One Shoe Can Change Your Life."

She also has a scrapbook with the stories and photos of the people who ended up with boots. Randall is No. 1.

On a morning November, the count was up to 763, including the additions of O'Neill and Scottie Rewis.

Rewis, 47, describes himself as a "country boy from Georgia." He had been homeless before moving into transitional housing, a room with a shared bathroom. He was riding his



Mark O'Neil puts on a new pair of work boots, given to him by the Downtown Ecumenical Services Council | Photo by Mark Woods

bike to a bus station to get to a job. He was hoping to get more work.

"I have a good work ethic," he said. "I show up every day and give 110, 115 percent. But to do the jobs I do, I need work boots. I can't do it in tennis shoes or flip-flops."

So when he opened a box, pulled out the new work boots, size 11, he had a similar reaction to O'Neill. He sounded hopeful.

"I'm getting my life back together," he said. "These can make a big difference."

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