

Tempe

Tempe pilot program targets chronic homelessness

by **Dianna M. áñez** - Jun. 11, 2010 01:31 AM
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Thirteen homeless people now have roofs over their heads through a partnership between Tempe and Valley of the Sun United Way aimed at ending chronic homelessness in Maricopa County.

The Tempe Pilot Project is funded with \$661,447 in federal stimulus money for homelessness prevention. Several Valley cities received similar funding last fall. Valley of the Sun United Way reached out to cities, asking councils to use the money to join the non-profit's effort to reduce homelessness in Maricopa County by 75 percent by 2020.

Tempe was the first city to offer support. The City Council committed its federal money to a three-year program that will provide 35 housing units in Tempe for people who are chronically homeless.

That commitment is proof of Tempe's reputation for tackling the county's homelessness problem head on, said Merl Waschler, Valley of the Sun United Way's president and chief executive officer.

"On any given day there are around 8,000 homeless individuals in Maricopa County. Why should homelessness be an acceptable condition?" he said. "Tempe has and continues to be at the forefront of solving this issue."

Waschler hopes establishing a model in Tempe for effectively combating chronic homelessness will drive support for the non-profit's Permanent Supportive Housing Initiative.

People who are chronically homeless have historically consumed an estimated 50 percent of the county's homeless-emergency resources, ranging from shelters to social services, according to county statistics. A countywide program aimed at serving this population, which includes people who are mentally ill or have drug or alcohol addictions, will free up services for people who have fallen on tough times and need emergency shelter, Waschler said.

Tempe's funding will pay rent on an apartment unit for 18 months while people who meet the criteria for the pilot program work to get their life on track. To qualify for the program, individuals must have been homeless for at least one year and agree to background checks. Applicants must have no violent or drug felonies in the past five years, but if they have participated in rehabilitation to address such convictions, they could qualify.

Valley of the Sun United Way contracted with Urban Outreach, a homeless program of Tempe's First United Methodist Church, to provide case workers who help participants set goals for a stable life. The difference between the Tempe program and other homelessness efforts is that Valley of the Sun is establishing permanent housing for people who are chronically homeless.

Once homeless people have a roof over their heads, they can concentrate on obtaining services and developing life skills instead of worrying about where they'll sleep each night.

Long-term funding for the housing could come from government stipends, charitable contributions and programs that serve people who are mentally ill or disabled.

The pilot program is helping Marty Moritz turn his life around. A rail-thin man with a sweet smile, Moritz has struggled with alcoholism since he was a teen. The addiction made it tough for him to keep a steady job, led to arrests and kept him on the streets for years.

Now in his fifties, Moritz is getting a second chance.

"I knew if I was out there one more summer I'd be dead," he said. "I'm just really thankful to everyone for helping me."

Moritz knows it took committing to a sober life to put him in a position to qualify for services, but he credits program workers for providing the support he needed to stick to that commitment.

Ric Garza and Carol Schottke know Moritz through their work in Tempe's homeless outreach program. They call him a "poster child" for illustrating how stable housing can alter the course of a homeless person's life. But the program isn't all about doing someone a favor. There's a public benefit, said Garza, a retired Phoenix police officer who noted the staggering public resources, ranging from arrests and hospital services to court expenses, spent on the chronically homeless.

"I want (residents) to know this (program) is a great investment of taxpayer money because ultimately it will result in less expense to the taxpayer," he said.

