

Behavioral health expert explains why it pays to have ‘Hope’

February 5, 2017

What began as an idea 16 years ago to alleviate overcrowding at the Bexar County Jail in Texas has grown into the Haven for Hope, a multi-purpose campus in San Antonio that serves individuals with mental illnesses, substance abuse problems and those with little or no means to support themselves – not only saving thousands of lives, but also saving tens of millions of dollars in criminal justice and healthcare costs.

Psychologist Gilbert Gonzales, one of the architects of the Haven for Hope concept and current director of the Bexar County Department of Behavioral and Mental Health, came to Rapid City last week to share the ‘Haven’ story with nearly 200 community members. His visit was made possible by Rapid City Collective Impact and Pennington County, with funds from the John T. Vucurevich Foundation.

Gonzales told the crowd at the Dahl Arts Center on Thursday that Bexar County was at risk of being sanctioned by the state and federal government in the early 2000s because its jail was so overcrowded. County officials were trying to decide if they should build another jail, but a few key players, including Gonzales, took the challenge and used it as an impetus for change.

Their first step was implementing Crisis Intervention Training for city and county law enforcement officers, often the first people to be called on to deal with individuals in crisis. The goal was prevent those who were mentally ill, not criminals, from entering the jail system. Soon after that came the Restoration Center, giving those same officers a place to take individuals for evaluation with little to no wait times, which saved both time and money. The county previously spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in overtime on officers who had to sit with individuals in ER waiting rooms.

A few years after the initial jail diversion efforts came to fruition, the larger Haven for Hope opened. Its Prospects Courtyard welcomes any homeless individual willing to “be nice” and “behave,” while the neighboring Transformation Campus offers a variety of services – from job training to dental care – for those ready to take steps out of homelessness as well as those needing continued support as they cope with mental illness or work on addiction recovery. Haven depends on dozens of community partners, both on- and off-campus, to provide those “wrap-around” services.

Gonzales said it was important for Bexar County leadership to understand that “providing treatment for a person doesn’t mean they’re fixed” and that some people need help for their entire lives. Still, he says, it’s more cost-effective for cities and counties to provide that help.

“It does not pay to believe you can provide treatment in the county jail or the back of a police car,” Gonzales said.

Haven boasts results that would make any community take notice. The organization’s data shows, since 2010, nearly 3,000 people moving out of homelessness into homes, almost 5,000 getting off the streets into higher levels of care, an 80 percent reduction in the number of homeless in the downtown area, more than \$96 million in cost avoidance in jails, courtrooms and emergency rooms, a significantly reduced jail recidivism rate and 1,000 empty jail beds.

Gonzales visited Rapid City six years ago to talk about the Haven for Hope, and three small groups from Rapid City visited San Antonio to see the campus in person. Consequently, the Rapid City Police Department and Pennington County Sheriff’s Office began implementing CIT training for law enforcement officers here, and a coalition formed to create the Crisis Care Center, which functions in a manner similar to that of Haven’s Restoration Center.

The Pennington County Commission approved plans late last year to reconstruct the former National American University building on Kansas City Street into a facility that will house the CCC, several safe beds, detox and other programs. In the wake of that decision, Rapid City Collective Impact and several community partners began to consider again the Haven model – with its comprehensive, coordinated services – as a possible means of reducing homelessness in Rapid City and providing a one-stop shop for community members who could benefit from continued access to wrap-around services. Further exploration of the idea will likely take place in the coming weeks.

Gonzales told those gathered at the Dahl on Thursday afternoon that he had two messages: treatment works, and there is magic in collaboration. In meeting with smaller groups of stakeholders later that night and the following morning, he offered one more piece of advice to those working to solve Rapid City’s biggest problems: stay the course.

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