

New Orleans CITYBUSINESS

Shelter Shock

by Richard A. Webster

NEW ORLEANS — The photo on the front page of the March 25 edition of The New York Times looked eerily familiar — a patchwork of tents under a freeway overpass, small huddled figures shuffling past piles of debris and shopping carts stuffed with clothes and blankets.

One year ago New Orleans was the only city in the United States where a photographer could have snapped such a dismal illustration of homelessness and want.

Hurricane Katrina forced thousands of former homeowners and renters into the streets where they, along with the chronically homeless, sought safety in numbers. Hundreds congregated in tents first in Duncan Plaza and then under the Claiborne Avenue overpass at Canal Street.

But today similar tent cities are popping up throughout the country, from Fresno, Calif., where the Times picture was taken, to Sacramento, Calif.; Nashville, Tenn.; Seattle; and St. Petersburg, Fla., fueled not by a hurricane but by the deepening recession that has robbed hundreds of thousands of their jobs and homes.

As those cities struggle to cope with this emerging crisis, many homeless advocates are urging them to look to New Orleans for the answer.

Between November 2007 and July 2008, Unity of Greater New Orleans, using city and state funds, successfully dismantled New Orleans' two tent cities, placing 457 homeless people in permanent housing linked with case management.

It was the first time a major U.S. city successfully removed a large encampment through permanent housing.

"The tent cities around the country have popped up so quickly that a lot of communities are struggling to figure out what to do," said Michael Stoops, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless. "But what they should do is emulate what they did in New Orleans. Unfortunately, most people have forgotten about the incredible success they had."

New Orleans' success, however, is fragile at best and local homeless advocates predict that at any moment another tent city could suddenly appear.

Preventing another encampment

In the past few weeks a small group of homeless men and women have gathered under Interstate 10 across the street from the New Orleans Mission at Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard.

Fearing the possibility that the 10 people could explode into 50, the New Orleans Mission took action. On March 30, they reopened their day center that had been closed since August because of a fire code violation and obtained permission from the owner of an adjacent parking lot to use it as a temporary gathering area for the homeless under security supervision.

Tents won't be allowed but it will give people who refuse to go to a shelter a safe and approved place to bring their belongings and rest, said Linda Gonzales, assistant director of the New Orleans Mission.

Ultimately Gonzales would like to purchase the lot, erect a tent for protection from the rain, build a basketball court and construct a large fence around the area to give the homeless inside privacy.

"We saw the crowd gathering under the expressway so we had to nip it in the bud," Gonzales said.

Homeless agencies in New Orleans are constantly on guard against the emergence of another large-scale encampment. Though the two tent cities at Duncan Plaza and the Claiborne overpass are gone, there are still thousands of homeless people in the city.

Mike Miller, director of supportive housing for Unity, said they keep a careful watch on hot spots like the intersection of Claiborne Avenue and Canal Street. He tells the homeless that if they try to sleep under the overpass they won't receive services like before and will be approached by police who also are monitoring the area.

"We're so paranoid about another one of these tent cities occurring because of the conditions at the last two encampments," Miller said.

More than 2,000 people moved through the encampments at Duncan Plaza and the Claiborne overpass over the course of a year, with as many as 300 people present at each site on any given day.

And as the populations grew, the conditions worsened. Both camps lacked sanitation and were fouled with human waste and disease. The inhabitants suffered from severe skin and eye infections and rat bites. Two outreach workers tested positive for tuberculosis.

Drug dealers moved in and preyed on the homeless, selling them narcotics and beating anyone who got in their way, Kegel said.

"It's like they were living in a sewer. Conditions were so horrendous it was scary," she said.

The camps also became a dumping ground for the disabled.

"There were developmentally disabled people whose intellectual functioning was such that we do not believe they could have gotten there on their own and we suspected a family member or friend had dumped them there," Kegel said. "There were also dozens of people wearing hospital bracelets and carrying hospital discharge papers and prescriptions who it appeared had been dumped by hospitals.

This is why Unity is so diligent when it comes to preventing another tent city, Miller said. All it takes, however, for a small group to blow up into a mass gathering of 100 is the offer of free food, Miller said.

The homeless group that appeared under the overpass across from the mission was steadily growing because charitable organizations were handing out hot meals.

"That was the problem we had at Canal and Claiborne — these missionary groups that would come and feed them," Miller said. "And there was nothing I could say to them to get them to stop. As missionaries they feel like they have to be out there in the street feeding and praying and laying hands on the homeless."

Their intentions may be good, Miller said, but it discourages the homeless from going to shelters to seek help or permanent housing.

"If you're hungry and tired of shelter food and it's 75 degrees out with a breeze and you know someone will be by at eight at night with food, why not sleep on the street? And those people cook well," Miller said.

"At Canal one dude was out there making omelettes to order. I've never seen anything like that before in my life. Another dude broke out barbecue with an industrial grill. They weren't handing out ham and cheese sandwiches."

If a group of homeless people begins to gather like they did under the I-10 overpass, Unity is careful not to encourage them by sending outreach workers to offer assistance.

"Anytime Unity outreach shows up, our reputation is such that we draw a lot of attention," Miller said. "People will just stay out there and not go into a shelter in hopes we show up will come out."

In addition to Unity's efforts, the encampments haven't reappeared in New Orleans because, unlike most cities, it has more than 70,000 abandoned buildings, Kegel said.

More than 64 percent of the people in the Duncan Plaza and Claiborne camps came from abandoned homes, and Kegel suspects that when the tent cities came down, the people who did not receive aid went back to living in the blighted structures.

Instead of 10 people living under an overpass there are now 10 people living in an abandoned building, Miller said.

Permanent solution is key

As New Orleans works to prevent another tent city from reoccurring, cities nationwide are trying to figure out what to do with the ones that have suddenly appeared in the past several months.

There are three major homeless encampments in Fresno populated by up to 500 people. The tent cities, called shantytowns by some and modern-day Hoovervilles by others, appeared 18 months ago.

Much of the responsibility for finding a solution falls on the shoulders of Gregory Barfield, Fresno's homeless prevention and policy manager.

Just 90 days into his job, Barfield faced a daunting task. Under Mayor Alan Autry, who left office at the end of 2008, Fresno treated its homeless with tough love — either arresting them or tossing them in temporary shelters, Barfield said.

Such attitudes toward the homeless are typical in many cities.

"In most cases, as encampments grow and become more visible and newsworthy, people complain and moan and call the police and mayor and then the police do sweeps and shut down the tent cities with force," Stoops said.

But when Autry left office, he admitted that his efforts failed and hurt those he was trying to help, Barfield said.

In the search for a new approach and an effective way to deal with the sudden emergence of the large homeless encampments, Barfield looked to strategies that proved successful in other cities such as San Francisco and New York. He also read a case study on Unity's permanent housing solution in New Orleans and is in the process of implementing a plan based on that strategy.

"We're trying to do what's right instead of sweeping people down the street," Barfield said. "If we don't step up we'll continue to bury more and more people lost every year to the streets."

In eight months using city and state funding, Unity found housing for nearly 500 people and effectively shut down both homeless encampments.

The key was implementing a permanent solution instead of a temporary answer that would only hide the problem, Kegel said. New Orleans could not arrest its way out of the problem and it couldn't herd the homeless from the camps into temporary shelters.

Criminalizing homelessness only serves to waste taxpayer money and dumps people back on the street in a few days, Kegel said. And forcing disabled people into emergency shelters not equipped to handle

their complex needs also does not solve their homelessness.

"Emergency shelters are typically best suited as short-term way-stations for people who are temporarily down on their luck and do not require a lot of services to get back on their feet. Typically the majority of people you see in a homeless camp or sleeping outside anywhere tend to have a high rate of mental and physical disability," Kegel said.

The real challenge came in securing the money to provide permanent housing. To spur the city and state into action Unity framed the issue as an imminent health crisis.

The majority of the tent city inhabitants included the mentally and physically disabled. Many suffered from end-stage heart, liver and kidney disease, full-blown AIDS and cancer. If they didn't receive immediate assistance many would likely die on the street, either in front of City Hall at the first encampment or along the Canal streetcar line at the second camp, where hundreds of tourists could witness what was happening, Kegel said.

In November 2007 the Louisiana Department of Social Services gave Unity a \$3.8 million grant that was dispersed to 11 agencies to provide short- and long-term rental assistance.

It was important to frame the issue as a health crisis to combat long-held views that the homeless are simply lazy or drug addicts, Kegel said.

"We wanted the government to say, 'Oh my God, look at this.' It was horrendous and it had an impact of causing the government to step up to the plate. And that's what you have to do to get someone to go out on a limb. It requires local leaders to step forward and say, 'We're not going to have this humanitarian disaster in our city and we're going to deal with it.'"

Unity also focused on building public support through the media. When news of the camps began to circulate, reporters from as far away as Tokyo, still fascinated with Hurricane Katrina-related stories, descended on New Orleans. The national and international attention turned up the pressure on political leaders to find a solution.

"Before the homeless camps appeared we didn't hold press conferences but we had to bring attention to the fact that there were a lot of resources needed so we turned to the media," Kegel said.

Efforts continue

Nearly a year after the last tent city was dismantled at Claiborne Avenue and Canal Street, Unity continues its mission to find permanent housing for the homeless.

In May, Unity hopes to have access to 752 federal vouchers for permanent housing. Each rent voucher will be linked to ongoing case management assistance provided by the state through contracts with nonprofits. These case managers will visit clients in their homes to ensure they are stabilized, receiving health and mental health care, and doing what they need to do to be good tenants.

Unity is also working to develop several buildings throughout New Orleans into supportive housing for the homeless. Half the apartments will be set aside for disabled, formerly homeless people and the other half for lower-wage workers.

This mix helps to reintegrate disabled homeless people back into the mainstream and provides them with employed role models, Kegel said. Case management and employment services will be provided on-site with the goal of getting each disabled tenant to work at least part-time if possible.

Unity's goal is to create 500 supportive housing apartments and 500 workforce apartments.

Rehabbing more housing — supportive housing for the homeless and affordable housing for the work force — is key to ending homelessness and to the city's economic recovery, Kegel said.

"We're ahead of the game on this and now the rest of the country is realizing it's a problem," Miller said. "But this is one of things New Orleans did really well compared to the rest of the country and in real challenging conditions. We had the worst housing crisis in the country, the fewest resources and one of most high profile encampments probably in the world."

Kegel said she would advise cities dealing with tent cities to treat the situation as an emergency, one that could possibly threaten the lives of the inhabitants. But Kegel said she hasn't received any phone calls asking for her advice.

"I don't know if there was enough national publicity about what we did. There was national and international publicity about the camps and that's the failure of journalism," Kegel said. "A lot of attention is paid to stories that feed the image that New Orleans is broken. But when there is an incredible story about how the community came together to address a problem usually not covered because people don't think it could possibly be true."

New Orleans' accomplishment is even more impressive considering the conditions homeless agencies were forced to work in, Miller said.

The encampments in Fresno and other cities don't have the severe health and drug problems that plagued the New Orleans encampments.

"I don't think the other cities are seeing the issues we saw," Miller said. "The camps here turned into open air-crack markets. The cops wouldn't even go in them. When it started we had zero support and I don't think that is happening around the country. But it was important that we did something and got it right because the city's reputation was on the line and Unity's reputation was on the line as well."

Looking at the success they had in addressing the sudden emergence of two large homeless encampments, Kegel said it was a collective effort and a testament to the people of New Orleans just a few years removed from Katrina.

"The national experts looked at what we did as impossible. You simply can't house that many people off the street in eight months. That we were so successful is related to fact that people here were willing to do heroic things because they love their city so much and didn't want to see people suffering anymore the way they suffered during the storm."•