

Tampa seeing success battling homelessness

Police "homeless liason" is taking action

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Getting homeless people help, instead of a jail cell, is the goal of a specific court that's only been in operation in Tampa for just a little more than a year.

Those involved say you wouldn't even believe how well it's working.

Once a month, all kinds of alleged municipal code violators pack a Hillsborough County courtroom to face a judge and plead "innocent," "no contest" or "guilty."

Many of the crimes include drinking alcohol in public, urinating in public, and most often, panhandling.

That's why the court is often referred to as "homeless court."

"We were just trying to arrest our way out of the problem," Tampa Police Officer Daniel McDonald said. "The problem with that is, it's only addressing the symptoms [and] not really addressing the root cause."

Two years ago, McDonald was tasked with addressing the root cause: Chronic homelessness.

He was named the Tampa Police Department's "homeless liaison," and since then he's worked more like a social worker than a law enforcement officer.

Or as he puts it, it's like being a traffic cop for the homeless.

"It's kind of re-inventing law enforcement," McDonald said.

"If someone's drinking a beer every day maybe they need an alcohol rehab program," said McDonald, giving an example.

By dealing with homeless people on a case-by-case basis, Tampa is seeing a difference.

The Tampa-Hillsborough Homeless Initiative reported a 33 percent drop in the number of non-veteran chronic homeless between 2013 and 2014.

The method is so successful the Tampa Housing Authority is granting funding for two years for a second "homeless liaison" police officer beginning next month.

That officer is expected to begin that job in October by focusing on Ybor City, where there is a significant number of "calls for service" regarding homeless people.

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