



Advocates fight to break homeless cycle



JASON BEHNKEN/STAFF

John "Tony" Brooks, who is homeless, passes his time in Lykes Gaslight Square downtown. The Tampa area has the nation's highest proportion of homeless people.

By KEVIN WIATROWSKI | The Tampa Tribune

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John Brooks starts his day at 6 a.m.

"Got to get going before the cops change shifts," he said.

Brooks, a lean 55-year-old with a wiry beard, gets up from a park bench, packs his bedroll into a battered gray rucksack and leaves his cardboard sleeping pad tucked behind some bushes downtown.

After breakfast at a local church, Brooks spends his day in the city center. He waits with other homeless people for the library to open at 10 a.m. He roams the city parks. He reads.

A carpenter by trade, Brooks hitchhiked here from Michigan after his marriage broke up. He has spent the past two months living on the street. He has plenty of company.

On a recent afternoon, Brooks and several other men staked out benches in Lykes Gaslight Square downtown. While they sat, read or slept, a white-haired woman in a green shirt wandered among them, ranting.

The Tampa area has the nation's highest proportion of homeless people, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The alliance's list of top cities for homelessness in 2012 is a gallery of areas devastated by the recession. After Tampa are New Orleans; Fresno, Calif.; and Las Vegas.

Last year, the Tampa region — Hillsborough, Pinellas, Pasco and Hernando counties — had more than 15,000 homeless people, based on counts made by local homeless advocates.

About 17 percent of them are like Brooks — chronic cases, spending their days and nights on the street.

They absorb millions of dollars in government and charitable services every year, driving local officials and business leaders to work to get them off the streets and into jobs, health care and government benefits.

"Our hope is that we can stabilize these individuals enough that they can be trained with a skill to go back into the workplace," said County Commissioner Sandy Murman.

Murman leads the Chronic Homelessness Solutions Committee, an informal group that has met privately over the past year. Members include Mayor Bob Buckhorn, Tampa Bay Lightning chief executive Tod Leiweke and other local business leaders.

The group is promoting an approach known as "housing first," focused on getting chronically homeless people into apartments before treating their underlying problems.

"It's easier to get those services to people if you know where they are and they're living inside," said Steve Berg, vice president for policy and programs at the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Chronic Homelessness Solutions Committee's pilot project will be the publicly funded redevelopment of a 24-unit apartment building near East Fowler Avenue and North 15th Street.

The county will use more than \$2 million in federal Community Development Block Grant money to buy and renovate the building with the help of Mental Health Care Inc., a nonprofit organization specializing in affordable housing.

"We're going to take one building that's in sorry shape and make it better," Leiweke said. "We're probably going to house people living in that area already."

The program will address people left out by short-term, family-oriented homeless programs offered by Metropolitan Ministries and other charities, Murman said.

During the next five years, Murman's group wants to create enough housing for 500 people.

The north Tampa project, which should be finished late this year, will be the model for future Tampa efforts to house the homeless, Murman said.

Tad DeHaven, a researcher at the libertarian Cato Institute, offers a different view: Pouring public money into homelessness simply repeats the same mistake governments have made for decades.

It's also risky, DeHaven said, at a time when federal spending is shrinking.

"How much time and effort are you going to end up spending on lobbyists in Washington to get more money?" DeHaven said. "If your commitment revolves around hoping you get more money from Washington, I'd be concerned."

That's where people like Leiweke come in.

During his previous job with the Seattle Seahawks NFL franchise, Leiweke worked on combating homelessness as chairman of that city's United Way chapter.

County and city officials here hope Leiweke's experience and prominence will help lure private money to expand the "housing first" effort across the region.

"If this is ever going to work, we've got to have a public-private partnership," Leiweke said. "You can't just say this is the government's problem. To say this is a government issue is just not fair."

Leiweke said putting a roof over the heads of chronically homeless people can save the government millions of dollars now being spent in emergency rooms and jails.

"If this project works, starting out with 20 people, and we can inspire the private sector so they join us on the next project," Leiweke said, "then we've made a true dent."

Leiweke and Murman acknowledge their project faces hurdles. Neighbors may resist housing homeless people in their midst. Donors may resist yet another effort to solve an intractable problem. People placed in housing may return to the habits that put them on the street in the first place.

County Commissioner Victor Crist said residents in the USF area initially worried the housing project was just Tampa trying to dump its problem on the county. During months of discussion, those worries dissipated, he said.

Crist said the program even fits into the county's effort to develop a new vision for development in the area between Fowler and Bearss avenues.

"The community understands there's a homeless issue in the university area and we need to address that," Crist said.

Murman said the people chosen for the program will be screened for criminal histories.

"Nobody dangerous is going to be allowed into the program," she said.

The program's housing units will have on-site managers to work with tenants and guarantee they get services — from Social Security payments to mental health care and drug treatment — to which they're entitled.

"This is one of the most privileged countries in the world," Leiweke said. "Having people living in this situation is unacceptable."

So what does John Brooks think about the Tampa community's efforts on his behalf?

He's a little ambivalent.

A permanent home could make it easier to get work, he said. At the same time, he has spent years roaming the countryside.

"I usually don't have in one spot more than two months," he said.