Addressing Homelessness in National City

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Disclaimer

This report represents original student work and recommendations prepared by students in San Diego State University’s Sage Project for the City of National City. Text and images contained in this report may not be used without permission from San Diego State University.

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About the Sage Project

The Sage Project is a partnership between San Diego State University (SDSU) and a local government in the San Diego region. Students, through their course work, engage in meaningful real-world projects and contribute to pressing social needs in a community in SDSU’s service area. Students from across the University assist local governments with partner-directed projects that address their livability and sustainability goals. SDSU students and faculty connect with high-priority, high-need, highly interdisciplinary community projects, thereby generating interest and fresh ideas that create momentum and provide real service to the community. Each year, the Sage Project at SDSU engages hundreds of students from diverse disciplines who invest thousands of hours assisting communities in our region as they seek to build a more equitable and sustainable future. The Sage Project is part of the Educational Partnerships for Innovation in Communities (EPIC) Network, and is based on the highly successful and award winning Sustainable City Year Program at the University of Oregon.

About National City

National City is a highly urban community of about 60,000 residents in south San Diego County. It is the second oldest city in the county and boasts a rich history, a diverse community, and is known as one of the most walkable cities in San Diego County. Located just south of downtown San Diego and just north of the US–Mexico border, the city is flanked by freeways and is home to large-scale industries. National City is a mid-size city that faces big city challenges, and, like many municipalities, the city is challenged to meet community needs and new demands of sustainability. By providing new ideas and human capacity, this partnership with the Sage Project will help National City implement sustainability concepts and practices into projects that will improve livability.
Executive Summary

Like many cities in the United States, National City is experiencing an increase in its homeless population. Around the city, homeless encampments have been built in areas near shopping centers, by local waterways, and in neighborhoods. This increase has prompted the city to work at addressing the issue of homelessness as both a public safety and economic issue. Based on meetings with city staff, their concerns include acquiring a more accurate count of the homeless population, quantifying the strain that this population places on the city police force, and the lack of resources in the city to address this issue. The proposals in this report reflect students’ attempts to address these concerns using both tested methods and novel approaches.

This report is comprised of summaries which detail the components of policy programs as well as the political and fiscal feasibility of each. They are grouped by policy area; these areas are: housing, prevention and partnership, mental health, and infrastructure based recommendations. While each recommendation attempts to address the city’s concerns related to homelessness, both cost and political feasibility must be taken into account. Cost is an obvious concern for a small, local government entity, and political feasibility, or the likelihood that there will be community support for the tools, is an important factor to consider. At present, it may be that only a few policy tools are feasible for the city to pursue, however other tools may become more feasible over time. This report acknowledges the challenges associated with each tool, but should the city have the means and motivation, these tools are a logical starting point.

Recommendations most feasible for National City, at the current time, are both the municipal shower program and the extension of the ARTS partnership. These tools take into account existing city resources, rely on nonprofit collaboration, and encourage the city to take an active role in addressing homelessness. The municipal shower program would incorporate public safety personnel and community volunteers in providing open shower times for homeless individuals. The program would rely heavily on community donations for shower supplies. It is a novel approach to the issue of pollution in the waterways and in providing essential or basic services to the homeless in the city. The ARTS partnership has the potential to result in both the beautification of the community and the provision of services to youth experiencing homelessness in National City.

While other tools represent higher costs, at some point in time they may become viable solutions for the city. This report can serve as a guide to a variety of potential strategies for addressing homelessness in National City.
Introduction

This report is a compilation of policy recommendations meant to address the issue of homelessness in National City. Homelessness is a growing issue within the city, fomented by the growth of the homeless population in the San Diego region. The most recent data from the WeALLCount point–in–time count shows that there are around 332 total homeless persons in National City; this represents nearly four percent of the entire homeless population in the region (Regional Task Force on the Homeless 2016). This is a substantial increase from the previous year, suggesting a need to develop policy in this area.

The recommendations in this report come from students of the public policy process who worked to understand National City, its resources, and what homelessness looks like in the community. With this perspective, students developed innovative approaches to help the city address homelessness. The report has been divided into the broad areas of housing, prevention and partnership, mental health, and infrastructure based recommendations.

It is our hope that this report provides National City with ideas from which to begin addressing the growing issue of homelessness in the community. The recommendations that follow include best practices from other cities as well as the expansion of current city projects and partnerships. Some policies require substantial funding, while others require relatively simple changes that can have lasting impact. While no one tool may ever fully address homelessness, these tools represent the kinds of collaborative approaches that can be effective in a community like National City.
Policy Recommendations

Housing

Shelter Program
High cost, low political feasibility

Proposal: A small, city–funded shelter program.

Summary: At the present time, National City does not have resources to help house the approximately 150 homeless in the community; this shelter would be the first of its kind in the community. The proposed shelter, is a small city–funded shelter that would be managed by police officers, social workers, and college–level interns. The shelter would provide a short-term housing solution for the homeless population in National City.

Shelters are a means for providing both housing and services to individuals experiencing homelessness, this recommendation

Political and Fiscal Feasibility: The city would need to first determine a site for this shelter. As mentioned, there is no community resource of this kind in the city at this time. The city may not have the ability to finance this expense or to assign officers who can staff the proposed shelter. It may be challenging for the city to find a location for their shelter as homeless shelters are often politically unpopular due to public safety concerns. This proposal may be best left for future planning.

Housing First Policy (monetary assistance)
High Cost, low political feasibility

Proposal: Provide monetary incentive for families to house homeless individuals and provide skill development and employment opportunities to the city’s homeless population.

Summary: This policy addresses the most visible issue related to homelessness by finding housing options for the homeless population in National City. The program takes two approaches with both an in–city and out–of–city housing program. The program should involve service providers who can assess the needs of individuals to determine if support can best be provided within the city or if the individual’s network of support is found in another city or state. This determination would help to identify how best to serve the city’s homeless and potentially result in more success for the individual.
For homeless individuals not from the National City area, the program would provide the cost of transportation to their home city. For National City residents, housing would be sought either with family members or with members of the community who volunteer their homes. The housing would last for 18 months, and a stipend of $800 per month would be provided to both those providing housing and the formerly homeless participants. The ultimate goal is to help individuals to gain skills and, ideally, employment so that at the end of the 18 months they become self-sufficient.

**Political and Fiscal Feasibility**

On an annual basis, this program would cost upwards of $3 million. Additional resources are needed for seeking out housing volunteers and to provide support services to the homeless participants in the program. The cost and parameters of this program make it politically questionable. Should the city be interested in pursuing this program, it would benefit from emphasizing the benefits of getting the homeless population off the streets, including impacts on environmental health and public safety.

**Prevention and Partnership**

**Vocational Training and Tax Breaks**

High cost, low political feasibility

Proposal: Provide tax incentives to local businesses that employ and train homeless individuals.

Joblessness is the main focus of this policy tool, which hopes to promote job creation and skill development. Through tax incentives, this policy encourages local businesses to create jobs for the homeless that provide them with the skills they need to become self-sufficient. Individuals working in this program would develop skills necessary to retain jobs and contribute more positively to the National City community.

**Political and Fiscal Feasibility**

The city is not authorized to provide tax incentives of the nature described to local businesses. Therefore, this policy is not fiscally feasible in its current form. However, incentivizing job creation for the homeless population is an avenue to consider for the city. Perhaps there are other means by which the city can implement this program.
Partnership w/ ARTS

Figure 1: A Reason To Survive (ARTS) Logo

Low cost, politically feasible

Proposal: Commission a mural or other community based artwork that brings attention to the issue of homelessness in National City.

Summary: This policy tool is meant to help create community awareness about homelessness in National City and to improve public perception of the homelessness issue overall. The recommendation is to leverage the existing partnership between National City and the non-profit, A Reason To Survive (ARTS) to commission a community mural.

Integrating the transient population into the community through community murals is a concept emerging in cities across the United States, including Baltimore (2010), Philadelphia (2011), Dallas (2015), and the Chicago Metropolitan Area (2015). The overall goal of the community mural is to make the homeless population more visible, resulting in more societal inclusion and ultimately reducing the number of homeless individuals residing in National City.

ARTS identifies itself as the “anchor institution leading the three-year Creating Vibrant Neighborhoods Initiative” (A Reason To Survive 2016). This Initiative seeks to create “projects [that] will transform underutilized and blighted areas into welcoming, inspiring public places to improve livability, health and safety” (A Reason To Survive 2016). This initiative, which already outlines a partnership with National City, can and should be leveraged to improve public spaces that may attract the homeless population. In 2013–14, ARTS reported that they received nearly $15,000 from National City for projects throughout the city (A Reason To Survive 2015). By continuing or expanding their collaboration with this nonprofit, National City can potentially identify sites for future projects and show local support for the initiative.
Political and Fiscal Feasibility
The program will rely heavily on community outreach and donations, both of which would be administered through ARTS. Based on past projects with ARTS, this is both fiscally and politically feasible for the city.

Mentorship Program
High cost, low political feasibility

Proposal: Design a mentorship program for homeless youth to end the cycle of homelessness.

Summary: The proposed mentorship program aims to end the cycle of homelessness with one of the most vulnerable homeless populations, children. According to research, one in 30 children in the United States experienced homelessness in 2013 (National Student Campaign Against Hunger & Homelessness 2016). The goal of this program is to intervene in the most formative years to help young people develop positive relationships with supportive adults. The components of the program include: mentor recruitment and training, a staff psychologist, a drop-in center, and a homework club.

The mentorship component of the program involves the recruitment of adults who have a vested interest in working with the target population and who may have had some experience with homelessness in the past. The mentors will be trained regularly and required to meet once a week or more with their mentee.

The drop-in center and homework club would be staffed by community volunteers, some of whom may be individual mentors. The staff psychologist would be available to assist in situations where more care is required for youth.

Political and Fiscal Feasibility
Political and Fiscal Feasibility: This program relies heavily on volunteer labor and therefore the major costs would be the staff psychologist and the costs related to the building where the program will be housed. Taking into consideration the political environment, residents may be hesitant to support a homeless youth program in their neighborhoods as it may cause an increase in the homeless in their area. Additionally, there is not currently a budget item for National City that would cover the costs of this program, nor is there a current city space that can be used for such a program.
Mental Health

**Assertive Community Treatment (ACT)**

High cost, politically feasible

Proposal: Implement a mobile team of service providers who do outreach to homeless individuals.

Summary: The Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Program is a multidisciplinary approach to the issue of mental health among the homeless. It typically involves a team of 10–12 professionals in the fields of psychiatry, nursing, and social work who comprise a mobile unit meant to do outreach to the homeless population. These professionals provide counseling, medication, and other support as needed. This program has been found to be very effective for the severely mentally ill and has helped to reduce homelessness among certain populations (Coldwell & Bender, 2007).

**Political and Fiscal Feasibility**

ACT programs are already in place around San Diego County and have been shown to be politically neutral. The mobile nature of the program distinguishes it from programs like homeless shelters and other service providers who draw homeless populations to the site. It is important to note, however, that the ACT program would likely not be run through the city as they are not necessarily the primary beneficiaries of the program and lack the technical expertise to facilitate a program of this nature. In addition, the cost of this program may be prohibitive for the city; we recommend potentially partnering with a providing agency or another small city nearby.

**Crisis Intervention Training**

Moderate cost, politically feasible

Proposal: Train officers to recognize mental health conditions and intervene appropriately to link individuals with mental health services.

Summary: The Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) model has been implemented nationally across many local government jurisdictions. This policy takes into account what is already known about police officers: they are intervening in mental health crisis situations on a regular basis. With this in mind, CIT is a collaborative approach to training and education and is “designed to improve officers’ ability to safely intervene, link individuals to mental health services, and divert them from the criminal justice system when appropriate” (Compton et al., 2011). CIT is traditionally implemented in phases that help to further define the issue in the region, help identify the stakeholders, and establish the specific model of CIT that would be implemented.
**Political and Fiscal Feasibility**

For National City, we recommend seeking out funding from the Behavioral Health Service Department of San Diego County for implementation of this program. The estimated total cost of the program is $810,000, this includes:

- $48,000 for officer training
- $590,000 for hospitalization of patients
- $170,000 for emergency psychiatric evaluations
- $2,000 for arrests

These costs would be shared by the city government and the County of San Diego. (ElMallakh, Kiran, & ElMallakh, 2014).

**CONCRN App**

Low cost, politically feasible

Proposal: Implement a mobile application which allows citizens to report suspected mental illness and connects individuals with appropriate services.

Summary: Concrn is a mobile phone app that provides tools for communities to connect to what the developers call “compassionate response teams.” The app is a tool designed to empower communities to make an impact in situations where they might otherwise call 911 or do nothing at all. Concrn provides trained outreach teams to bridge the gap between individuals who are in need of mental health services and local service providers, support groups and family members.

The app functions as a means for communicating community concerns related to mental health both to the police and to the compassionate response teams coordinated by the developers. Images below show the functions of the application.

![Figure 2: Concrn App Screenshots](image-url)
These compassionate response teams are made up of interested, concerned citizens who receive at least four basic trainings: Compassion Cultivation, Personal Safety, Conscious Communication/Peer Support, and Mechanics of Street Outreach. Once trained, the app can be implemented in the community. More information about this app can be found on their website: https://www.concrn.org/.

Political and Fiscal Feasibility

There is no specified budget for implementation of Concrn, as it has not been tested in enough communities to fully understand its fiscal implications. The Concrn app could provide relief for the National City Police Department by reducing the number of non-critical concerns they must respond to and could prove to be a cost-saving measure for the city.

Infrastructure

Modified Portland Loo

Figure 3: Portland Loo Example

Moderate cost, low political feasibility

Proposal: Furnish a public restroom and shower for use by individuals with a specialized key card entry.

Summary: The Modified Portland Loo provides a public restroom and shower on the streets of National City. The small structure would have a graffiti proof coating, no mirrors on the inside and a revolving door entry that locks after one person has entered to discourage multiple users from entering. The shower, one of the
modifications from the previous Portland Loo system, would be activated by a city–provided keycard. Additionally, the keycard would activate a faucet on the outside of the loo which can be used to wash clothes, for drinking water or even for dog–walkers who need water for their pets. This policy addresses both an effect of homelessness as well as a cause, poor hygiene can have negative health outcomes for the homeless and can prevent them from obtaining jobs.

**Political and Fiscal Feasibility**

One of the first hurdles related to this recommendation is the social and political environment that surrounds this issue. The relative failure of the loo system in nearby San Diego makes this less politically popular. This failure is due to the rising cost of installation and maintenance as well as the overuse of the system. While National City has a smaller homeless population, the city will also need to find locations for the restrooms that are convenient for connecting to existing infrastructure and that satisfy business owners and residents. The city will need to work to mitigate issues like crime and public safety related to the loo. Initial costs for the restroom are estimated at $100,000 for installation and an annual maintenance fee of about $12,000.

**Municipal Shower Program**

Low cost, politically feasible

Proposal: Utilize existing municipal pool showers to provide basic services to homeless individuals.

Summary: With the Municipal Shower Program, the city can address the issue of local waterway pollution. This program involves extending the hours of the Las Palmas pool for use of their existing showers and restrooms. Homeless residents of National City can make use of these showers so that they may stay healthy and the city can avoid the pollution of waterways which are frequently used for bathing and other personal needs. The recommendation includes asking public safety personnel to maintain watch during these extended hours and encourages city staff work as volunteers to provide basic necessities like towels, soap, and other such items. These shower items can be collected via donation either at the pool site or through other community–based organizations. With a recommendation of offering the shower program up to 3 days per week, they city would almost exclusively be covering the cost of the public safety personnel. If National City police officers make up to $39.30 per hour (http://nationalcitypd.com/join/police–officer), the cost of providing this coverage would be approximately $74,000 per year.

By utilizing existing city resources, National City can implement the first municipal sanitation program for the homeless in San Diego County. This program would be run on an after–hours schedule at Las Palmas pool, city employees would be asked
to volunteer their time to open the facility and provide customer service to the program participants. Ideally, first responders would be the primary city employees helping to run this program as it would work as a means to change the dynamics of the relationship between the homeless and public safety officials.

Additional supplies needed such as soap and towels can be provided through community partnerships. The pool site itself could become a donation center, utilizing public contact through recreation services to spread awareness about the program and the need for supplies. Additionally, local churches could help spearhead community donations, existing county non–profits can help subsidize resource reserves, or corporate donations could be solicited from Plaza Bonita companies.

**Political and Fiscal Feasibility**

Funding needed for the shower program would be minimal and once ongoing partnerships can be established, the cost associated with maintaining the program over time will only amount to the water and sewer costs.

In other cities where the program has been implemented there were expressed concerns regarding potentially providing sex offenders and criminals with access to children. While the pool is a public space, creating service hours after the pool has closed will prevent any potential interaction with juveniles. Additionally, utilizing city police as volunteers will likely encourage serious offenders to self–select out of the program.

**Parking Meter Funding**

Low cost, politically feasible

Proposal: Using a modified parking meter, collect donations to supplement city funds for homelessness initiatives.

Summary: This policy tool aims to alleviate the burdens associated with many of the proposals in this document, cost. Dedicated parking meters, set up to take donations of “spare change” have proven to be successful in many other U.S. cities. The goal is both to help fund social services programs for the homeless and to decrease the amount of panhandling in the city.

**Political and Fiscal Feasibility**

This is a relatively low–cost recommendation and requires little regular maintenance, it is also politically neutral. The one challenge faced by some cities who began using these meters was that they received few donations. Other detractors suggested that these meters fell short of addressing the issue of homelessness directly. Depending on which programs the city decides to move forward with, however, the funds obtained through these meters may help to defray the potential burden on the city.
Conclusion

The proposed projects attempt to address the broad issue of homelessness that exists in National City. Throughout this report, feasibility at both the fiscal and political level were addressed; at the present time, two recommendations stand out as most immediately feasible. The extension of the ARTS nonprofit partnership and the institution of a municipal shower program could help the city to begin addressing homelessness at two different levels.

By creating an opportunity for a community art project centered on homelessness, National City begins to acknowledge and bring the homeless population into the fold. This kind of project has the potential to increase outreach opportunities, engage community members in the issue, and beautify areas of the city most affected by homelessness.

The municipal shower program also draws attention to the issue while at the same time creating a compassionate response to a potential environmental concern. The use of public waterways for personal bathing and other needs has caused the city a great deal of concern. By opening the municipal pool during off-peak times, the city can provide an opportunity for the homeless in the community to take care of their most essential needs in an environmentally and physically safe manner.

Our work demonstrates updated approaches, innovative solutions, and time-tested strategies for helping cities better understand how to work with and for the homeless in their community. Due to the size and nature of homelessness in National City, there is opportunity for a real impact to be made on the issue.
Bibliography


Images:

A Reason To Survive: http://areasonsontosurvive.org/


Portland Loo: http://theloo.biz/