

HERMAN GOLDSTEIN AWARD SUBMISSION

THE VACATION OF “DEVIL’S PLAYGROUND”



Eureka Police Department Mobile Intervention Services Team

2017 Submission

Captain Brian Stephens

Captain Steve Watson

Officer Wayne Rabang

Officer Neil Hubbard

Homeless Liaison Pamlyn Millsap

DHHS Program Manager, Kelly Johnson, M.A.

Participants

City of Eureka Police Department

Parks and Recreation, Building and Code Enforcement, City Attorney

Eureka Police Department—POP team, Old Town Officer

Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services

Betty Kwan Chinn, Homeless Advocate

Humboldt CPR

Friends of the Marsh

And lots of individuals

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Homeless Rates

Per 100K rates of homelessness:

Avg in US 210 per 100k

Avg in highest cities 460 Per 100K

California 294 per 100K

San Francisco 795 per 100K

**Eureka 2,200 per 100K, of which
1,407 per 100k were unsheltered.**



Data Dashboard:

60% reduction in unhoused homeless

43% reduction in theft at the mall

300+ individuals housed

Centered in the middle of Eureka stands the Carson Mansion. It symbolizes the story of a bygone, healthy and vibrant community, that has given way to a catastrophic level of homelessness. Previously the center of the logging and timber industry, time, wear and a declining economy has plunged Eureka into an epicenter of poverty, drug addiction and mental illness. The result was one of the worst per capita homeless problems in the nation.

Eureka has had a severe homeless problem for more than 30 years. The sense of frustration and friction is palpable among the homeless, residents, businesses and vacationers. Over the years the homeless problem concentrated into an area known as the PALCO marsh, a former logging site directly behind the regional shopping mall. This project, began by a group of homeless advocates, government leaders, business owners and police searched for a collaborative solution. They formed a group called Community Homeless Improvement Project or C.H.I.P.s where the crime triangle was used to analyze the problem.

As the group changed and morphed into a leadership group, the in progress efforts changed also based on the effectiveness of the response. Ultimately the confluence of many people, careful planning led by compassion and commitment to use as little force as possible, resulted in housing many homeless and clearing out the marsh, turning it into a hiking trail which now serves as a place holder to prevent re-infestation.

While the city still struggles with a substantial homeless population, the overall numbers are down and the impact in the southern area of the city has been significantly reduced. The key element of this project was the broad collaboration of police, community, homeless advocates, social services and government working together to find sensible, reasonable and sustainable solutions based on analysis, debate and research and compassionate response.

The value of the implementation of Betty's Blue Angel Village was a crucial response that arose out of this collaboration. The ability to house 44 people at a time, transitioning them from the anarchy of marsh to normalcy was vital in the success of this project. The link between businesses, philanthropists and the city was critical. The Village consists of converted shipping containers where homeless individuals were given the opportunity to recover, sleep and become healthy. The person managing this part of the effort, Ms. Betty Kwan Chinn, turned her fear of police into a project with them to reduce the plight of the areas most vulnerable.

This is the story of what many called the Devil's Playground...



BACKGROUND OF HOMELESSNESS IN EUREKA

Eureka has historically had a homeless problem. The 2015 Point in Time (PIT) count stated there were 1,319 homeless in Humboldt County, 730 of whom live in Eureka. Of the Eureka homeless, 469 were houseless, meaning they have no place to sleep at night. Eureka is the county seat and center of services. Eureka is a city of about 30,000. EPD recognized five types of homeless: The indigent or those who fall on hard times; the drug addicted; the severely mentally ill; criminal element and trimmigrants, those who migrate to Eureka looking for jobs in the illegal Marijuana industry.

Types of Homeless in Eureka

- “Trimmigrants”
- Criminal
- Drug addicted
- Severely mentally ill
- Destitute

THE DEVIL’S PLAYGORUND

The environmentally sensitive habitat behind the Bayshore Mall was ground zero for houseless individuals. It was known by the homeless and community as “**Devil’s Playground.**” At one point in 2015, EPD officers counted 253 people living there. If the average person produces two pounds of human waste per day, that equates to 186,000 pounds of human waste flowing into the tidelands annually from this camp. Additionally, HBFD responded to more than 100 intentionally set fires and medical emergencies in Palco Marsh. Heroin overdoses were fairly common in a county with 4 times the state average of overdoses. Stores in the mall were victimized daily by thieves stealing items and running to the marsh. Suspects were often chased into the green belt and marsh by store security and police.

Crime was a substantial issue in the marsh and surrounding area. Walmart, a store situated next to the marsh is reported to have a million dollar’s worth of shrinkage each year. Several other stores experienced incredible loss as well. Many of the petty thefts turned into robberies as security guards attempted to apprehend repeat offenders who violently resisted. To better understand the severity of the problem, EPD authored three distinct surveys published on-line: A community survey, business survey and in person homeless survey administered by interns. More than 2,000 people responded to the survey.



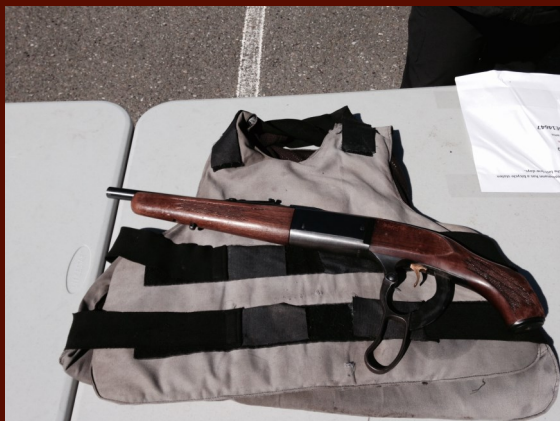
Enforcement Efforts: Minimal Effect

Over the years EPD had done rigorous enforcement. While it would have an impact, the problem continued unabated. From Nov. 2011 to Nov. 2013 EPD made 639 arrests for MC violations. Of the 325 suspects, 22 defendants accounted for 25% of all cas-

But Necessary

EPD had multiple shootings and recovered 17 firearms in the marsh. Given the frequency of drug addiction and severe mental health problems, PALCO marsh was a time bomb.

Gun and vest from PALCO



Who lived in the Marsh

A criminal history was conducted based on random interviews of transients living in the marsh.

- ◆ 99 serious criminal history
- ◆ 38 on probation/parole
- ◆ 9 of the 12 w/ no criminal history and no ID



In 1995 the community held a meeting to discuss homelessness and how to solve the problem. They identified 19 specific issues and 30 possible responses to the homeless problem. In 2011 a group of businessmen helped local government analyze the problem and create a response flow chart. The group fell apart and the problem(s) continued. Many residents blame homeless advocates who feed the hungry, or the Rescue Mission for attracting vagrants. Others blame the Dept. of Health and Human services for giving liberal general relief. Still others claim “homeless dumping” by other cities. While there was considerable evidence of this, it was not the primary source of the problem. Many of the homeless were from Eureka, some came for the Marijuana industry, a few were trapped in drug hazed time warp. Blight, disorder, the “walking dead”, severely mentally ill wandering the city and high crime rates caused most people to believe this was the biggest issue in public safety.



EPD conducted analysis in the following areas:

Meta analysis: Academic, POP Projects/Guides, News

Survey's of Stakeholders: Homeless, Community, Business

Human and Habitat Evaluation: People and Tents

Criminal Activity: Victim survey, CAD/RMS, Prosecution data

Meta Analysis: *Focus Strategy Report*: City Council commissioned a best practices study that recommended Council approve a “rapid re-housing” philosophy. EPD also examined Serial Inebriant Programs, ordinances in other cities that dealt with blight and media research. EPD studied Tiny Villages and Safe Parking programs along with Dignity Villages and safe sleeping spots. Each project had merits and addressed some of the problem, but not all of it due to our unique operating environment. The team reviewed the POP guides and Goldstein submissions for background on projects elsewhere along with site visits to other cities.



Before

After



Survey of Stakeholders

Citizen Survey: Key Findings

- ◆ 73% of residents afraid to walk in open space
- ◆ 80% change their shopping habits due to fear of homeless
- ◆ 65% of businesses report losing customers due to homeless
- ◆ 50% don't feel safe leaving work, 80% receive customer complaints and 83% interact monthly or more frequently with homeless.

Of 51 violent crimes examined in one quarter, 22 of them had either a transient victim or suspect.

52% of the assaults involved a transient.

32% of robberies involved a transient.

33% of rapes involved a transient.

“I am moving my company out of Eureka because of the homeless problem. It's just not safe for my employees.”

President of large construction company



Sample of Eureka Homeless

In person Interviews:

Average age 38

67% have drug history

60% have a history of theft

49% have a history of serious violence

“I have worked with the homeless all over the nation. Eureka, shall we say, has a very challenging homeless population.”

Megan Focus Strategies
City Council Meeting

Hypothesis: In order to manage the homeless population in the PALCO marsh, the idea of isolation, easy access to services and presence of dogs must be reduced or eliminated. In essence their concept of comfort must be challenged.

Result of Homeless Survey

57% of homeless report being the victim of crime

12% report frequent victimization

91% desire housing (Their terms)

52% chose where to sleep based on safety*

Majority lived in Humboldt 5+ years (self reporting)

> 50% have severe mental illness (Police believe 85%+)

90% have a substance abuse addiction/most heroin or meth

50+% have one or more dogs

Homeless don't want to be victims of crime (violence and theft). So isolation was identified as the second most important element in choosing a camp site.

Respondents rated safety, being left alone and access to services as the three top reasons they liked PALCO marsh.

Closeness to friends and possession of dogs was an important topic to many. Most of the camps were in groups of 6-10 tents. It would be a leverage point.

Police learned campers wanted isolation, easy access to services, protection from one another and being hidden from the police. They felt there was strength in numbers and used it to their advantage with each other and the police. This became very apparent as officers worked in the marsh.

Many campsites were fortified, some had locks and makeshift doors, perimeter fences or buried in thick vegetation. A few homeless had burrowed into the bank of the bay, living underground. Others had vicious dogs tied up on chains and several were armed with firearms. Many found that a barrier to housing or a convenient excuse not to get housing was dog ownership. A few breed dogs to raise money for drug habits, others liked the warmth and companionship, but most just wanted protection. Overall they were passionate about their dogs.

Analysis: Draw conclusions

Hypothesis: In order to manage the homeless population in the PALCO marsh, the idea of isolation, easy access to services and presence of dogs must be reduced or eliminated. In essence their concept of comfort must be challenged.

“The Police cannot afford to wait and see if a problem self corrects. They must take decisive action as they figure things out.”

The working theory for EPD and its partners was to:

1. Focus on rapid rehousing (F.S. report and other academic material.)
2. Increase our capacity to manage by helping the mentally ill.
3. Destroy their sense of comfort and entitlement.
4. Reduce the inflow of “trimmigrants.”
5. Reduce the visual blight associated with the visual and ecological disaster of the marsh.

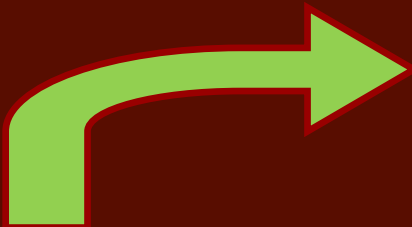
Actions to test the theory or main goals

- ◆ Rapid rehousing is a great goal, but there was little money, staff or housing stock to immediately reduce the problem. EPD, DHHS and Betty Chinn all housed people independently though personal leverage, but an overall rapid re-housing plan was not probable in the near term.
- ◆ EPD formed a team with DHHS to help the mentally ill homeless. The Mobile Intervention Services Team (MIST) was used to contact and help the severely mentally ill (SMI), navigate the system and avoid putting the houseless in jail. In 2016, 3,138 people were contacted by team members, of whom 353 unique and individual contacts.
- ◆ EPD and DHHS worked to re-purpose the Multiple Assistance Center (MAC) to now take homeless adult males and females. They were unable to take SMI or those with a violent past.
- ◆ MAC became a de facto *triage center* where on average 32.9 people were housed nightly for 30+ days and assessed for housing and help. The idea was to stabilize, provide services, house them and move on. The average stay was 58 days.
- ◆ EPD and MIST worked with the hospital to institute a frequent flier list. Some were responsible for millions in services. Housing just two individuals reduced hundreds of calls for service each year.



EPD had grave concerns over vigilantly activity and spill over violence. In addition, the City lost a \$400k trip and fall law suit of a woman trespassing in the marsh while feeding the homeless.

The city obtained funding to build a walking and bicycle path right through the heart of "Devil's Playground." They had to be moved before construction.



Large Marijuana grows attract trimmigrants. Trimmers are often abused, murdered, trafficked and left destitute.

Actions to test the theory or main goals

Due to additional violence and our analysis that isolation is desired, EPD decided to ***compress the living area*** of the marsh from over a linear mile of space to about 1/2 mile. The thought was use the ***leverage of space to encourage the homeless in order to deter violence***. So in phases EPD began to compress the open space. Officers told the homeless where the "no go" zones were, painted the ground to put a literal line in the sand and enforced the rules.

Park and recreation along with Friends of the Marsh (homeless advocates) cleaned up tons of refuse each Thursday. Staff collected hundreds of "borrowed" shopping carts and removed camps outside of the zone. In the short term, it seemed to control issues.

EPD conducted a large warrant sweep and probation search seizing additional weapons and made 27 arrests. All were released in a short time.

EPD and DHHS MIST team made thousands of contacts with the homeless explaining services, making referrals and holding service fairs by the camps to bring the services to them.

EPD took out Craigslist ads to warn those coming to Eureka of the danger of "trimming" in Humboldt. There have been numerous murders, sexual assaults and fraudulent employment practices. Those who answered the add, several hundred, were directed to send a photo and when they did a warning letter was sent to them.

Lesson: Somethings worked well, while ideas were less useful. MIST was successful as many individuals received help.

Compressing hundreds of people with mental health and addiction issues into a small area did not work. It was somewhat easier to manage for police, but caused other problems. Other tasks had little measureable effect, such as the "trimigrant" sting.

Space compression had mixed results. It was helpful to police as the reduced space made it more accessible and less fortified.

When you place 250+ unhealthy people who get little sleep in close proximity, violence is more likely. It also did not deter additional campers, but became more of a party atmosphere.

Mission: Construct a broad collaborated effort focused on execution of a plan for the city and its partners to eliminate the stronghold of “Devil’s Playground” while providing services to reduce the number of homelessness.



Implementation of Efforts

EPD spent months ahead time warning the residents of “Devil’s Playground” (DPG) of a pending removal. The Chief of Police held a meeting with the homeless telling them to make plans. Each person was handed fliers, cajoled into services and walked to DHHS employees.

EPD and partners held monthly service fairs at the DPG to provide resources to the homeless. This continued through the eviction process. EPD through DHHS and Betty Chinn provided transportation assistance to those who wanted to return home. Must have a willing recipient on the receiving end. The MAC was repurposed into a homeless/mental health triage center.

EPD, DHHS and Betty found emergency temporary housing for more than 100 people. Threat/rumors persisted of homeless making a “Ruby Ridge” stand in DPG. In the weeks leading up to the eviction, many people left the DPG. On move out date only 143 campsites were left, some of those abandoned and several set on fire.

May 2, 2016, EPD removed all those living in the marsh, their property and waste. 114 tons of waste was collected and seven (7) shipping containers of items were collected and held for 90 days. There was one arrest, a protester exercising her 1st amendment right of civil disobedience. Several others were arrested for other offences off site.

The City and DHHS began a campaign to house 30 people in 60 days. They accomplished that mission and it continues in less than 60 days, although few were from the marsh.

The business community partnered with Ms. Betty Chinn, a local homeless advocate, to build 40 houses to live in made of shipping containers. To date, Betty has housed 221 people. Many of those now have found permanent housing and jobs.

The City then implemented a panhandling and shopping cart ordinance that improved the aesthetics of the city. The city established temporary sleeping facilities in the city. There were four separate locations rotated to monthly that could house up to 60 people. They were highly compressed and became magnets for crime.



Assessment: The project is still on going

Theft at the mall decreased by 43%. Calls for police service decreased by 30% at the mall.

EPD anticipated and planned for displacement. EPD arrested those who chose to trespass and set up on properties adjacent to the marsh. Eight people were arrested as a result.

There has been some spatial displacement as anticipated by a recalcitrant group who have moved to 3rd and Commercial street, across from Free Meal. They have become the focal point of enforcement activity by EPD and leveraged deterrence is key to controlling their behavior.

Most important, more than 300 impoverished community members were housed as a result of Betty Chin, DHHS, EPD and its partner's efforts. The walking and bike path was completed and there are rarely ANY transient campers in the marsh.

The Federal Court ruled in favor of the City on three of the four allegations made by the ACLU, in a lawsuit to prevent EPD from vacating the marsh. The final item, cruel and unusual punishment is open for additional debate.

Diffusion of Benefit Bayshore Mall

Timeframe	Theft-Citywide	Theft—Mall
May 2 2015-2016	335	196
May 3, 2016 -2017	233	112
	-30.5%	-43%

Adjustments have been made post vacation of the marsh. The group at 3rd and Commercial has caused considerable problems for local businesses. Recently a community meeting was held and efforts discussed. EPD is now using a leveraged deterrence protocol to deter crime there. If you cause problems you don't get services. You can regain your ability to get services through a diversionary process where you help the neighborhood and receive a voucher for your efforts.



After photo of marsh area



Assessment: Lesson Learned

We still have homeless, trimmigrants and SMI homeless in Eureka.

*The number has however been reduced by **60%**.*

Displacement will go to other comfortable locations such as free meal, but in far fewer numbers. A few homeless have **No Intent** or are **incapable of being housed**. Leveraged deterrence seems to be the best policy.

Unmanaged temporary sleeping facilities did not work well. Temporary holding bins helped some, but became an excuse to collect additional items.

The mental health system is incapable of “fixing” those in crisis. They have an almost impossible task and need resources. The worst cases are not being helped and it is a great frustration for MIST team members and the community.

It takes a massive collaborative effort to find any level of success.

Prop 64 (marijuana initiative), the early release of prisoners, homeless dumping by other cities, and an illegal pot industry continues to bring additional people into Eureka. One city advertised on Craigslist that Eureka was looking for homeless to help. “Free housing.” Reverse marketing is the next step.

Drug addiction and mental health are the two biggest barriers to getting people housed. According to DHHS 72% of those referred to the MAC had mental illness. 40% had three or more conditions. 95% of the clients assessed through the VI SPDAT (vulnerability index) needed assistance to find and keep housing. 66% of Eureka homeless need permeant and supportive housing.

The City and its partners have now moved on to address the problems where partial displacement has occurred. The same partnerships are in place and working together in a new location, but smaller numbers. The group of 30-40 persistent people are the focal point of the problem and receive the majority of enforcement, including the ability to use resources as a leverage to deter unwelcomed behavior.

Drone Video Footage of Encampments

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_5G3ciK2Zo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kR6Db9U9hrA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sK-ICsGoyWE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cd9bRaXcibs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyxifdm9xqY>

From the marsh to Chief for the Day...Chief Steven



Betty's Blue Angel Village



Assessment: Rapid Rehousing

Getting roof over heads, allowing sound sleep and reasonable accommodations allows people to stabilize, get healthier and succeed.

The best portion of this project was the successful relationship between the business community, Betty's Blue Angel Village, EPD and the homeless.

By the numbers:

In the first 6 months Greater Eureka Community Outreach Program: 106 homeless persons housed in BAV. 40 obtained permanent housing. 43 homeless persons found employment. 28 people fell out of the program. 19 were asked to leave for rules violation. 64 people received medical attention. 35 have been reestablished with mental health services.

12 months in: 221 served in BAV. 65 obtained identification. 99 received medical attention. 66 re-established with Mental Health Services. 40 entered substance abuse treatment. 73 gained employment. 70 were housed and are no longer on the street. 16 enrolled in GED or college courses. 15 converted arrests to community service hours. 48 exited the program. 47 asked to leave, of those 18 were allowed to re-enter the program. 65 dogs were housed with their owners. 108 were signed up for social services.

In all 300+ people were given, temporary or permanent housing. This does not include EPD and other programs such as the Rescue Mission who is more than 50% of emergency shelter.



