

Street Outreach Team Step in Right Direction

Coloradoan Editorial Board

February 26, 2016

Fort Collins will welcome a new street outreach team to Old Town in May.

The pilot program hopes to reduce tensions among business owners, visitors and the homeless. Three paid staff members will walk the downtown area, developing relationships with all three populations.

They will be charged with proactively identifying problems and responding to non-criminal disturbances. They will offer available services to those in need.

The Editorial Board supports the concept of Outreach Fort Collins.

All of us have a right to enjoy Old Town, and any other public space we so choose. Too, business owners and visitors alike have previously voiced concern over homeless and transient behavior that impacts visitors' experience in town.

Modeled after a similar program in Burlington, Vermont, Outreach represents a concrete step toward addressing challenges in Old Town and around its fringes.

However, there are potential concerns with the program. Chief among them:

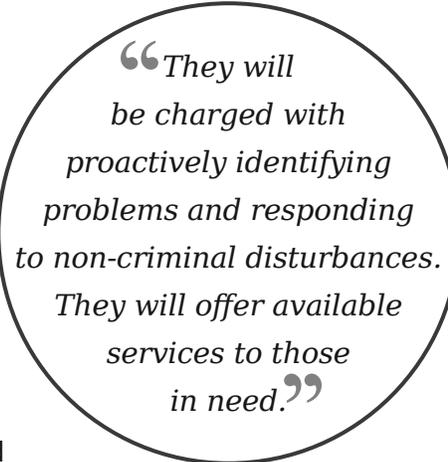
Funding

Last week the Coloradoan reported the program costs \$240,000 a year. Sources include the city of Fort Collins (\$80,000), SummitStone (in-kind at \$60,000+), UCHealth (\$20,000), the DDA (\$10,000), Visit Fort Collins (\$5,000) and the DBA (\$3,000).

That means there are more than \$50,000 to still to find for a program that's set to launch in May. Stakeholders, which in addition to financial backers also include Fort Collins Police and Homeward 2020, would like to give the program three years to determine if it can make a positive and lasting impact. That leaves a gap in year one and two years of funding still to fund.

Measurement

We wonder what subset of homeless, specifically, the program is trying to reach? We know



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some transients come to Fort Collins temporarily in the summer, to enjoy our weather and welcoming downtown vibe. We wonder if these are the folks with which we should be developing long-term relationships? Just as important: developing metrics for success for both the program and its employees.

Outreach Fort Collins' program director will report to a board. Who provides clarity around the job he or she is doing? Should benchmarks for program success include police call volume, the board asked stakeholders during a recent editorial board visit? The answer: yes. However, we also know the number of police calls can increase when there is a liaison working more closely with officers.

Are we measuring complaints from the hundreds of business owners that fall within downtown's boundaries? Surveying them regularly to determine the program's impact? Additionally, should a more clear picture of who our homeless population is emerge from this process? Might Outreach employees provide a more holistic survey than January's point-in-time count, which provides helpful information but can only do so once a year?

Success

It's difficult to measure success when the goals have yet to be defined. Spokeswoman Nina Bodenhamer says the program is not meant to be "a people mover." That is commendable. It also makes defining success that much more challenging. When a component of the program's mission is to prevent an event from occurring, how does one demonstrate value to those that have invested in it financially?

We in Fort Collins have been searching for solutions to a problem that is far from new, just as others across the state — in Boulder, Denver and elsewhere — and the country have. For more than 20 years, transient behavior in Old Town has been an issue. It's not easy to define solutions that work for all.

While the pilot program is more conceptual than foundational at this time, we hope that in years to come it proves to be a valuable asset to the community.

About the Piece

Editorials reflect the views of the board and are written by either Executive Editor Lauren Gustus or Engagement & Opinion Editor Madeline Novey. Meetings are open to the public.

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