

Episode 3: The People Behind San José 's Homeless Response Team

Welcome to Dwellings, a podcast from the City of San José Housing Department, where we talk with experts about ending homelessness, building affordable housing and exploring housing policies at the city and state level. I'm your host Alli Rico.

On today's episode, I'm joined by Kelly Hemphill and Darius Brown from the City of San José's Homeless Response Team, to learn more about the work they do to help our unhoused residents here in San José.

Alli Rico (AR): What does the Homeless Response Team for the City of San José do?

Kelly Hemphill (KH): So we are a very small team, responsible for ensuring that our homeless residents in San José have the resources they need, um, in order to resolve their homeless episodes. So we focus on housing-based solutions, as well as crisis response interventions, uh, the housing is always a priority. And with every contract that we, that we develop, housing is always the end goal. Housing-based solutions, examples of that are interim solutions. So, um, very temporary situations while people are searching for permanent homes. And then of course, permanent solutions, which are housing-first based programs. So we try to get people into housing first, before addressing any of their, their, uh, individual issues. Um, we know that permanent housing works. And so we have a variety of different ways to address permanent housing. We have a system where we keep data of, all the homeless people that we come into contact with called the Homeless Management Information System, or HMIS, and at least 60% of the people in that system fall into a range where they need minimal, um, minimal assistance. So like a couple years of financial assistance, through rental subsidies and supportive services, then they can usually transition into, uh, self-sufficiency after a couple of years. So rapid rehousing is that solution. So we provide about two year, up to two years of rental assistance and supportive services. We have a really great relationship with the County and in making sure that that strategy is at the forefront in Santa Clara County. But I think one, um, one thing that our team really focuses on and, and as a result of prioritizing the 84% of the homeless population in San José that's unsheltered, um, because there are 6,000 people unsheltered in San José and the large majority of them live literally on the streets and in encampments across the city. So we really want to focus our work on crisis response and, um, and ensuring that we can reach the people who are unsheltered. So we have a lot of outreach programs, we can go to where people are to make sure that they're in HMIS and that they are offered shelter or safe parking or motel vouchers or, um, just a multitude of different ways to get them out of the situation, um, on the streets and in encampments and into, um, a different solution so that they can head towards permanent housing. What'd I miss, D?

Darius Brown (DB): I would just add on that, you know, the Homeless Response Team, we, we are like problem solvers, like daily problem solvers. Um, you know, when folks and residents, constituents, whoever is needing to find out about homeless services and they, uh, reach our homes, concerns, hotline, or contact us directly, it's a crisis situation that we're

dealing with, you know, for the folks that are on the verge of, you know, going into their first episode of homelessness. We try to respond with our partnerships, uh, with the Homeless Prevention System, which is County-wide. And then folks that are experiencing homelessness, you know, when you're going through that, that stress, in survival mode. And so it's like, it's hard to then try to, you know, go through the whole system of like, are we, I get in contact with. So we kind of play like a mediator row where we are like basically connectors and, you know, relationship builders on the Homeless Response Team. It's really, really important that people know that they can reach out to us and we will do our part, you know, how to make sure that they have that information because sometimes that's the biggest thing with, with experiencing homelessness is like not having the right information on, you know, whether it's eligibility, or what program has vacancies. So, you know, it goes on our, on our team. We're, you know, we're good, we're all good on the Homeless Response Team with building partnerships and collaboration, because we know no, no one agency is able to tackle this homelessness issue. Um, so, you know, having had the access to us is really important. I would say when we get it done it's so it's a good feeling because that's what the system is set up to do. Um, so just making sure that people know how to get in touch with us and making sure that we have the right relationships set up to actually respond to that crisis situation for that person. It's tough, it's definitely challenging because we're, we're dealing with people's livelihoods. Um, and you know, whenever you're dealing with, you know, that real experience, you know, it, it, it takes, takes a lot emotion out of you sometimes, you know, because we, we, we put our hearts on our sleeves every day we do this work. Um, and you know, I know if we were in that situation, we would want somebody to be helping us and serving us, like we serve the community. So, um, that's what we do. We, we are agents of change and, we are, you know, relationship builders and connectors.

AR: What is the biggest misconception that the public has about what your team does?

KH and DB: I think there's a lot, actually. Yeah.

DB: I feel like one of the big ones is like they think that we, on the Homeless Response Team, they think that we like, build the housing and we have the housing, like we are the developers for apartment buildings. Um, so I mean, you know, that, that comes up all the time. Another misconception... um, yeah, I mean, I feel like people that, that are looking for resources, let's say like, somebody has someone who's homeless and they're looking for a resource and they immediately connect with us, I feel like they think that, you know, we can just place somebody directly into the program as soon as they get in touch with us. Um, and as that's not, not the case always unless there's, there's an opening or availability in a program and, you know, we have that, that partnership in place. Um, so that's another one. It's like, if, if you reach us and you know, you need somewhere to go like that, tonight, we're going to do everything we can to get you somewhere. But sometimes, you know, it's, you know, it's a lot of people we have, we have so many people that are dealing with this, this issue. Sometimes there's a waitlist, you know, there's gonna be a waitlist for a lot of programs. Um, so that's another misconception that kind of comes up.

KH: I would also add that, you know, we're, we're the Homeless Response Team. Our focus is to help homeless people and provide the resources that they need, but we also have this

encampment abatement program. And so it's almost like a conflict we're constantly, um, saying to the people that we exist to serve that we're here to help. And then the next week we're coming to displace and it feels very, um, it's, it's certainly, uh, it hurts. It hurts my heart. And I think, you know, the people who should be, um, supporting us the most, which is our homeless advocates, um, see us also as, um, sometimes the enemy and it can be very hard, but I think brought more broadly, um, I, I do feel like the general public doesn't really feel like we're doing anything about homelessness and that's because it's just so, so visible. And, um, but we actually do know how to end homelessness. We just don't have the support or resources needed to get it done. Um, as we house one person three more and to our system as newly homeless. And so it's almost like we just don't have enough resources to catch up. And, you know, just to look at it as a, um, as just a bigger problem. It's just so expensive to live here, and people just don't understand. They think that homeless people, it's because of their individual, um, choices, um, because they're lazy or they're on drugs or, um, it's their fault that they're homeless. But really, you know, if you think about it, our area median income is over \$140,000. Minimum wage is \$15.25, fair market rent for a one bedroom is like \$2500. So it's just it...the math doesn't add up. If you're earning \$31,000 on minimum wage, full time, that's like \$2600 a month. That's even that's before taxes. And that, what if you have a big family? A one bedroom is \$2500, just the math just doesn't add up and people don't understand it's just really hard to live in San José.

AR: Like you said, your team has the other responsibility of encampment abatement, but we're not doing that right now because of the pandemic. And so how has your team had to, um, kind of pivot a little bit to respond to the pandemic? And if you also want to talk about like standing up shelters, cause you guys have done an amazing job standing up all of those shelters as quickly as you did. Um, and then just like servicing the encampments. Uh, if you want to talk a little bit about that.

KH: So yeah! So back in March, the City in partnership with our Emergency Operations Center, decided that we would follow the guidance of the Center for Disease Prevention and Control, CDC and, um. And stop abating, stop moving people around so that they could shelter in place and not spread any potential, um, illnesses. And, um, and so we stopped abating, and it did end up bringing us closer to the advocates. It ended up, uh, looking at a different way of approaching encampments. And one example is we implemented a program called SOAR; that's Services, Outreach, uh, Assistance and Resources. And it's focusing on our largest encampments in San José. Providing enhanced outreach with clinical services for people who desperately need them. Um, we're providing meals, we're providing advocacy, um, hygiene items. We enhanced trash and waste pick up. Um, we have porta-potties and we have hand washing stations and, um, and this is across about 17, very large encampments with 25 people or more. So we have been looking at how we can do better, um, with addressing the unsheltered population, rather than moving people around, but rather provide more services so that we can solve the problem rather than move it around. Um, in addition to all that encampment work, we've been the County and Destination: Home on standing up four congregate shelters. So we have three shelters for individuals, and one for families. And, um, that has provided over 400 additional beds for, for our vulnerable homeless population who needed to, um, to thin out, uh, we needed to thin out our existing shelters to account for social distancing and also, um, people who just really

wanted to come inside. And so our general, those shelters were for our general homeless population while the County set up a whole bunch of motels for our more vulnerable homeless population, people who are over 65 or have, uh, multiple medical conditions or issues. So, suspending the abatements was a big, big, big deal. Opening up four shelters is a big deal. Uh, we got really creative and, um. And it was also a huge opportunity for the City as a whole to address, um, to address blight. And, you know, I think trash has always just been something that our, our home, our San José residents, housed residents and business owners who just really wanted the City to step up on.

DB: COVID-19 has definitely highlighted the discrepancies with, within, you know, socioeconomic classes. And I feel like us being on the Homeless Response Team and working in homeless services, we see it every day. And then when the pandemic hit, everybody got to see it, especially when people were doing the pandemic buying and unsheltered residents could not do any pandemic buying at all. They just had to continue to live in their environments. Um, so I, you know, do you know, it suspending abatements was really good and big because essentially, you know, we, we know our unhoused residents are in these encampments and you know, when people drive past, you know that the freeways and, you know, on the streets, sidewalks, you know, it, it doesn't look like much, but it is a home that they have made for themselves. So being able to turn these encampments into, you know, semi-neighborhoods essentially, by providing city services, um, was a huge win for the City. Um, and definitely for, for the, the [Beautify](#) team for, for our Homeless Response Team. I, I think that partnership, um, is really needed and, you know, I hope other, other cities, other localities see, like, you know, it can work. And this is a way that it needs to work because yeah, with the response we were trying to, you know, mitigate all transmission of the virus within encampments. And, you know, we did a damn good job that, you know, with the testing and the partnership with the Valley Homeless Healthcare and, you know, making sure that those residents did not get displaced from, uh, abatements. And that was a big thing, cause when you abate, they go, they go, they go, you know, they move to the next open area. So having an exact location where providers could go and do routine testing is also important, but people don't understand what, what we, well, we kind of did at the beginning. Like we literally turned are our Monday through Friday, you know, eight to five jobs into like 24 hour jobs at the beginning.

DB: And we're literally working night and day, around the clock. Everybody, every, I feel like everybody did so much that it's so hard to capture everything like even just setting up and, you know, doing the, making sure that our congregate shelters can, can be socially distanced. Like that was a lot and, you know, seeing the inspectors taking the measurements and all that, you know, this is the stuff that I don't think people really take into consideration with what we did to put these programs together. But moving forward its like, do we, do we...You know, COVID is going to be here another year or so, you know, do we continue to, you know, keep this energy and momentum with how we serve unsheltered residents? Or is it going to kind of drop off, and then we go back to the status quo where our services were before? I think it was also good, you know, having a lot of disaster service workers, people that, you know, really had not worked with unsheltered residents and, you know, getting that experience. Um, and you know, I think, I think it makes employees better, honestly, you know, that's, that's something that came up a lot with folks that, you know, aren't on the

Homeless Response Team and you know, that were there and, you know, working around, saying “this is, this is good work, like I want to do this work,” you know? And you don't, you don't hear that often. You don't hear people saying, I want to, I want to work in homeless services. It came up a lot because it is rewarding. When you see the outcomes from all the behind the scenes planning, the development...because it was definitely a lot and you know, everybody had a hand in doing it, everybody needs a medal of honor.

AR: So among the, all of the services that your team provides, uh, which, which ones have you found to be the most effective or have the greatest impact on the people that you're trying to help?

DB: Going, going into sheltering. I mean, um, building shelters, that's, you know, we, we have, uh, contractors that, you know, run their shelters, that we fund, but us, you know, taking the lead on building shelter, um, I think that was super rewarding, especially just, you know, hearing the stories where people were coming from, individuals and families and, um, you know, having, having them at a safe location where they, they feel pride in it, you know, they're so, you know, so grateful, you know, that's, that's the biggest thing, you know, we, we build these programs, um, just to really serve the individual, to serve the family. But I feel like we, you know, we don't get to always hear how thankful folks are. Right? And, you know, during this pandemic, you got to hear it a lot. Like people really appreciate having these congregate shelter programs, because homelessness looks different, you know, every day there's not one face to homelessness is not, not just one thing that homelessness is it's, there's so many different things. And being able to build this response and this network for people that needed it and we're super thankful and appreciative was great. Um, so I mean, honestly, the biggest thing I would say is being able to have a facility that we can say, you can, you can stay here. Um, that was a great takeaway. And they've had just honestly like the response to being able to, I feel like this response time to turn around was, was pretty spot on. I don't, I don't think there's ever been a time where somebody has reached out needing somewhere to go where it wasn't like, boom, okay. Immediate response. This is what you have to do. Just get in contact with this number. And that was, that was another great partnership that we have with the County with creating that centralized referral system. Me and Kelly talk about referral systems all the time and you know, they could be a little disjointed. So having during, during COVID just one agency that was being able to refer clients to these shelter types just really, uh, made it more efficient. And, uh, I would say just, it makes a difference. It does, you know, it makes a difference when you can call a number, knowing that you're going to get served that same day.

KH: I would agree with the city's shelter response as being a, um, really effective during the pandemic, but I think in general, uh, I wouldn't know how to pick a program because one size doesn't really fit all. Um, but you know, housing is the most effective, obviously because it ends the problem. And then coupled with support, um, you got a win-win. I think, you know, our team, we've, we've built this kind of a really cool system as far as, uh, our rapid rehousing system, because we have all of these interim housing programs in the forms of tiny homes and modular units and even a motel. And so people have a temporary place to stay where case managers can find them, where they can stabilize and, um, and move into a permanent place, just have a place to, to situate while they're searching for permanent

housing. And, um, and then they go into this rapid rehousing program, get some rental assistance. And then on the back end, we have some really great partnerships with, um, with developers and owners of affordable housing complexes. So we have this almost system of care where we can ensure that people don't fall back into homelessness.

AR: So did you get involved with homeless services? Like what inspired you to do this type of work?

KH: I grew up in the Haight Ashbury in San Francisco. So I was around homeless people. Um, since as far back as I can remember. And I had a mom have really instilled some, you know, community service was, was a huge part of my life growing up, especially when I was much younger. And so I found myself in homeless shelters, um, you know, as young as 12 and then throughout high school, I just really dove in and I provided childcare and, and to a lot of the kids at this family shelter and the [Hamilton Family Shelter](#) down on Waller St, when I was growing up, I was there at least twice a week. So it was just a part of my everyday life. And then, um, and then when I was in high school, my mom actually did become a drug addict and left our family and became homeless. And so she was homeless for about 25 years, recently housed. Um, so that was an, and you know, she didn't really...she was just one of the very few who really wanted to live that vagabond life. Um, and so I strongly believe that, you know, I was, uh, I was very lucky to have the support of another parent. Um, and it really made me reflect on what if I didn't have that support? And so many people, um, who are homeless or are affected by homelessness, don't have that type of support. And it really impacts, um, it really impacts how, how they get out of homelessness or how they, you know, how they, they can really, you know, survive. And so, um, and I just dedicated my life to, um, to giving back and, and it was kind of my calling.

AR: Darius, how did you, how did you get involved in this type of work?

DB: As soon as I graduated college, uh, my first job was working in juvenile hall in San Mateo, doing life skills classes. Uh, I remember when I had one of the kids get out and I went to go visit him because I had a good relationship with the youth. I met him at a van and he was living out of a van with his parents. And then like, just, just in meeting his family, seeing the situation that they were in and talking to him and like, he's like, yeah, this is why I'm always out, cause I don't want to be at the car all day. And I'm like, damn, this is why you getting in trouble because you have, you don't have a place to go. That's how it's like it really early on like, hey man, this is, you know, this is something different. I never, never just seen like kids just in the van like this. And this was back when I was like, like 20, 21. When I graduated I was like super young, I still kind of, you know, relatable to the little younger kids, you know? So I was like, dang dude, like, I'm not that much older than you, you know, you 17. Um, so then I started looking for like work in homeless services for transitional age youth. Cause I would just always been, my calling is kind of work with the youth. So I started at the [Bill Wilson Center](#), um, back in the day, and started at the drop-in center. And then we had, uh, we had a, a [?] program, a mental health program. That, that was, yeah, it was, uh, it was eye-opening because we were all, it was almost like a group home. Um, we were all in house. And yeah, that was one of the, the peer partners in there. And just seeing and hearing the stories. And then on top of it, all the, all the youth in that program had mental

health diagnoses. And learning about DSM-IV and all these different type of diagnoses that you could get and then trying to help you either go to job Corps, you know, get back in school, you know, get a job. And then, you know, doing the case management with like trying to find an apartment, are you saving money while you're in a program? And it was a lot, it was a lot to see the system that, you know, youth in this situation had to kind of navigate. Um, and then if they didn't have any family support at all, it's like, damn, how do you, how do you get out of this? How are you pulling yourself out of this by yourself? Um, so from that experience, I, I knew that I always wanted to work in homeless services, always wanted to work with the youth.

DB: And then I kind of transitioned over to education because I wanted to, I was like, dang man, I'm getting, I'm hitting a wall with [?] youth because it's like, you got youth 16 and 25. And then like sometimes when you get to, you know, 18 and you you've been, you know, surviving, sometimes nobody can tell you anything. So I was like, okay, I kind of want to work with younger kids. You know, hopefully I can, you know, drop some knowledge in younger kids, you know, let them, let them see like a brighter future for themselves. And then I went, went to the school districts and then, um, came across, uh, a homeless education program within schools, which, you know, we, we, I feel like a lot of people didn't really make the connection. I sure didn't make the connection when I first started working in education. And then seeing how homelessness impacted students in classrooms, um, and seeing how the parents needed help within the education system, getting to services and housing services. Um, I just picked, picked up the ball and ran with it. Um, and then I was able to do two jobs in Santa Clara County and Monterey County. Um, and then this is my first time working in a housing space. I've always been, uh, the, the person to rely on Kelly, Vanessa, all the housing providers. So now being on this side, um, it's, it's really, it's really big because it's like, this is how you really help people break this cycle. I'm always big on, you know, kids and the youth and I'm telling people like, you know, this is a cycle of traumatic poverty. Like if we don't put these solutions and interventions in place now, like, essentially we're going to have the next generation of unsheltered adults in these young children, you know? And I, I try to help people understand that because is, I think is real, you know? When I was doing the abatement stuff with Vanessa, that's what I'd be talking to people about in the encampments, you know, which would be tough, cause we're cleaning up the encampments and I'm like, "alright man, like, what was your, what was your experience? How did you get here?" And, you know, let's go back to childhood. Something happened in childhood, in their household that just caused them to, you know, come on hard times and they never had anybody to help, like pull them out of that situation. So that's how I got to where I'm at now on the Homeless Response Team in the Housing Department.

AR: So what, what would be one piece of advice that you would give to people for how they can get more involved? Uh, how they can, they can help with homelessness in their neighborhood, whether it's in San José or elsewhere?

KH: It's a hard one. Um, people often ask us how can we get involved? And, um, and of course, you know, we'll point that first is what your interest? You know, are you interested in, um, you know, a one-time kind of event or do you want to build relationships with people? Get to understand the system of, of, um, you know, homelessness and how people,

you know, how people get here? And do you want to prepare food? Do you want to tutor a homeless child? What do you want to do? Is it monetary? Do you want to put together some, some moving kits for people who are newly housed? Um, a lot of, you know, advocacy is really important. Education, kindness. Um, just acknowledging people, smiling at them can really make their day. Uh, you often hear from homeless people that they're just feel like they don't exist. People walk right past them and, um, just acknowledging their presence and their importance that, you know, the important role they play in the world. They are somebody, they're someone's kid, they're someone's friend, there's someone's brother or sister, you know, just really acknowledging people as you know, how everyone has a story and just listening to their stories sometimes can make a world of difference.

DB: Yeah. It's definitely just seeing what the, what the need is in your community or what the need is in your neighborhood. There's two ways people can get involved. You can get involved with direct action service, just like Kelly said, if you want to volunteer, you know, eventually I'm pretty sure programs will start taking volunteers again, once we get past COVID. Um, but then like an indirect action is, you know, legislation, policy, um, funding, like you. If you want to, you know, [get in contact with your local elected officials](#) and say, "Hey, I see this issue in my neighborhood. We need to bring this program. I want to, I want a shower program in my neighborhood." You can, you can do that! That's another way that I put, like, people don't realize they can help, you know, and that's a, that's a big help because we can't always do it on our own. We need the community to go to their elected officials and say, "Hey, we want this here." We don't, you know, the, the, the NIMBY-ism is big in our County. And, um, we got to figure out how to, how to break that. We have to figure out how to get people to say "no, it's okay. You know, I want to help my neighbor." Cause, you know, everybody's a resident, you know, whether you sheltered or unsheltered, you're still a resident of the City. So I feel like people need to understand that, and they don't, they see homeless people as a, they don't belong out there. They weren't born here, you know, and that's not the case. So, yeah, direct or indirect actions.

Thanks to Kelly and Darius for joining me on today's show. If you'd like to learn more about what the City of San José is doing to help unsheltered residents and how you can get involved, you can log onto our website at sjhousing.org.

Thanks for listening to Dwellings, the City of San José Housing Department podcast.

Our theme music is "Speed City," composed and performed by Ettaine Charles. Thanks to San José Jazz for letting us use your music.

If you like the show, please [subscribe](#) and share with your friends and family.

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