

FEATURES ([HTTPS://WWW.PHOENIXMAG.COM/CATEGORY/FEATURES/](https://www.phoenixmag.com/category/features/))

VALLEY NEWS ([HTTPS://WWW.PHOENIXMAG.COM/CATEGORY/PEOPLE/VALLEY-NEWS/](https://www.phoenixmag.com/category/people/valley-news/))

# Exile on Oak Street: A Snapshot of Homelessness in Phoenix

JIMMY MAGAHERN ([HTTPS://WWW.PHOENIXMAG.COM/AUTHOR/JMAGAHERN/](https://www.phoenixmag.com/author/jmagahem/)) | May 5, 2022

## Photography by Jason Grubb of Camerawerks

*Homelessness has spread to neighborhoods all over Phoenix. And the remedies are as varied as the people the solutions aim to repair – or remove.*

On a warm Monday night in April, about two dozen homeowners from neighborhoods all around the city are gathered in a 61-year-old Masonic lodge building in North Phoenix to finally

l  
sta  
o

discuss, in person, the matter they've been hotly debating on Nextdoor for most of the past year.

The event announcement on the curtain-peeping social network called it simply, "A community meeting to discuss the homeless in our neighborhoods."

One by one, representatives of the neighborhoods, invited by organizer Doug Fry of Moon Valley, take their turns in front of the anxious group. Sergeant Kane Kimble, a community action officer with the Mountain View Precinct, reminds residents they can't simply have someone arrested for sleeping in a park.

"That's not a crime," he says. "Now obviously, there are certain behaviors associated with homelessness that can be a problem. But somebody sleeping in the park? That might make people uncomfortable, but it's not criminal."



*Blake, who asked that his last name not be used, at Eagle's compound in Glendale in April*

Mary Ramirez, a specialist from the City of Phoenix's Neighborhood Services Department, hands out business cards inviting residents to call her with complaints about homeless encampments, but cautions, "The city cannot just create some type of ordinance and think that we're going to be able to enforce it. It's not going to work that way, because we have county policy, and we have state law, and then we have federal. So, you also want to contact your county supervisor, you want to contact your state legislature and your state representative."

Finally, from a table way in the back, a 60-something man from the neighborhood surrounding Pierce Park on 46th and Oak streets in East Phoenix, an area Kimble singled out as one of the homeless hot spots on the city's radar, speaks up.

"You keep telling us these organizations are here to help us," says Clayton Lord, who's lived for the past 45 years in a house bordering the most populated part of the park. "Help us do *what*? Get you to talk to them? Try to move them along?"

"What we want to hear is, what can we do *now*?" chimes in a woman from a neighborhood running along Greenway Parkway, where the homeless have taken to camping under the pedestrian bridge on 20th Street. "Every day under the bridge there's cups of feces, bottles of urine, feminine products all over the place. If we can't get the health department involved, can we at least put in a porta-potty?"

“At what point in time,” asks an exasperated Lord, “do you finally decide a park isn’t even worth staying open? They don’t play softball at Pierce Park anymore. We *won’t* take our grandkids down there anymore. The pool’s open maybe four weeks out of the year. At what point do you just give up on a park and close it down?”

All across Phoenix and neighboring cities, the homeless population, once relatively confined to the Human Services Campus in Downtown Phoenix run by Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS), has spread out into neighborhood parks, alleys, desert washes and bus stops.

According to the latest Point-in-Time Unsheltered Street Count conducted by the Maricopa Association of Governments in January, there are nearly 3,100 homeless people in Phoenix living outside the shelters – 716 more than two years ago, before the start of the pandemic. And that’s likely an undercount, given the difficulty of locating all people experiencing homelessness on a single day, as the PIT survey is conducted. Police have reported large homeless encampments in West Phoenix, Sunnyslope, South Phoenix and the area around Sky Harbor and the Interstate 17 corridor, as well as in Glendale, Tempe, Mesa and Chandler.

“They’re not popping up in Paradise Valley or Arcadia,” says reporter Jessica Boehm, who’s covered the homeless beat for *The Arizona Republic* almost exclusively since August of 2020. “We know where they’re popping up, and it’s in mostly working-class neighborhoods, where people are less likely to complain and less likely to vote. And so the city doesn’t put as many resources towards solving the problems in those areas.”



“Street boss” Afro

A lack of shelters is one reason we see so many people out on the street. Maricopa County has fewer than 2,000 emergency shelter beds, and the shelters are operating at full occupancy nearly every night. In March, the Human Services Campus opened a heavy-duty tent with heating and air conditioning, funded with federal COVID-19 relief funds, that it

filled with an additional 100 beds, and a new 100-bed shelter, operated by Community Bridges, is planned for Sunnyslope, where homelessness numbers are particularly high. Additionally, a 130-bed shelter for older homeless adults is planned for the area around Northern Avenue and Interstate 17.

But there are also many homeless people who avoid the shelters, either by choice or because of restrictions: Pets and partners are prohibited at CASS, and many shelters put a limit on the amount of belongings that shelter guests can bring in. Additionally, about 18 percent of the homeless people surveyed in a 2019 report by André House, a ministry that serves the homeless and poor near the Human Services Campus, said they avoided shelters for fear of exposing a personal history of addiction or a criminal background, and another 20 percent could not cope with the curfew and rules.

Addressing the homelessness problem in Phoenix is one of the key goals Mayor Kate Gallego affirmed in her State of the City address in April. But finding a workable solution is a task that has vexed administrators in major urban centers across the country.

Conservative GOP candidate for Arizona governor Kari Lake is running on a campaign to give the “drugged-out and deranged individuals” living on the street a harsh choice: “Get treatment, go to jail, or get going” – namely to “blue states willing to indulge their destructive behavior.”

But homelessness is by no means a partisan issue. Even leaders in more liberal cities that have long turned a tolerant eye toward people living in homeless encampments are now considering strict measures to clean up their streets. In March, Seattle mayor Bruce Harrell removed tents in a two-block area across from city hall in a battle that pitted him against activists defending their occupants. Mayors in Portland, Washington, D.C., and Austin are proposing similarly aggressive measures to sweep encampments. Portland mayor Ted Wheeler is even reportedly considering a controversial plan that would force homeless people into temporary shelters staffed by the National Guard. Meanwhile in San Francisco, journalist Michael Shellenberger, a former progressive, is running for California governor on a “tough love” platform to shut down the encampments and make subsidized housing earned only when street drug users go through recovery and get a job.

Observers say the COVID-19 pandemic lightened the oversight of visible tent cities as the world, in general, took an extended break from business as usual. But now that normalcy is beginning its slow comeback, and as untended homeless populations are surging to new heights, cities are rethinking how they address the problem.

And the remedies being floated in Phoenix are as varied as the people the proposals aim to repair – or remove.

## **Street Boss**

In an alley just behind the Fry’s supermarket on 35th Avenue and Peoria, Sunny, a winsome 25-year-old woman with long red hair and an engaging smile, tries out a small magic trick on Terri Jennings, a volunteer with the outreach group Arizona Friends of Homeless, who

stops by frequently with sandwiches, snacks, water and first aid supplies.

“Put your hand out,” Sunny says, folding a crumpled dollar bill so that only the top half of the back side is visible. “You see this part of the bird?” she asks, pointing to first the left, then the right side of the American eagle illustrated on the dollar.

“Wing, wing,” Jennings replies, gamely.

Sunny flips the folded bill and repeats the question, then opens the bill at the fold and performs an elegant bit of origami to collapse the top and bottom edges while bending the left and right sides at 45-degree angles.

“Now what do you see?” Sunny asks, pointing to each quadrant.

“Wing, wing, wing, wing,” says Jennings.

Sunny promptly picks up the dollar bill, puts it to her ear and says, “Hello?”

It’s a clever variation on a two-year-old Tik-Tok joke, but most of the people in the alley, including Jennings, haven’t seen it, and it sends a gale of laughter down the dusty path at 7 a.m. on this

Wednesday morning.

On a talk show couch, she’d be America’s sweetheart. “I try to make the people out here smile,” Sunny says, beaming. “Give them a sympathetic ear to listen to their problems, and a shoulder to cry on.”

But the alleys of West Phoenix are not exactly Jimmy Fallon’s sofa. “I cry a lot,” confides Sunny, who says she left home at 14 and eventually landed in an abusive relationship that resulted in her being homeless again for the past two years. She says she was working two jobs before COVID hit but was laid off from both gigs. “People are so quick to judge and shun you when you live out on the street. They automatically push you away, yell at you or threaten you. Not to mention the predators out here. Like, you know, I’ve been sexually abused so many times and I’ve been attacked a lot. So, it’s hard.”



*shopping cart pleas*

Fortunately, she has two friends now to protect her, a couple of young African-American men, also homeless, named Afro and Caesar. As the sun rises, both are quietly stripping the insulation wrap off two large spools of likely-purloined copper wiring tied to their shopping cart. At Phoenix scrap yards, shiny bright copper wiring can fetch up to \$4 per pound, enough to finance another day or two on the street.

Sunny carries a little knife and a loud battery-powered siren that can summon both men quickly, if necessary.

“Most guys out here are like, ‘You need to put out for protection,’” she says.

Jennings, 69, likens the transactional nature of street protection to the “gas, grass or ass” hitchhiking ethos of the Summer of Love, only with much darker overtones.

“But Afro’s a gentleman,” Sunny continues. “He’s a sweetheart.”

That is, until someone threatens Sunny – or any of the other alley denizens in his charge, which today includes an elderly wheelchair-bound man and his wife of 26 years, both living in a cardboard shelter fashioned out of a discarded HDMI TV box just a few feet away.

“The other night, Tim [a 63-year-old homeless man who also frequents the alley] was sleeping and another guy was rooting through his shopping cart,” says Jennings. “And Tim woke up and threw the cart at the guy, knocked him off his bike, and next thing you know, Afro’s standing over the guy with a gun to his head. It was just a BB gun, but the poor guy pissed his pants! Because there’s no rules out here, you need friends like that to protect you.”

Jennings calls them “street bosses,” and she knows most of them along the many homeless encampments scattered around Sunnyslope and northwest Phoenix – an association that has given her a slightly sketchy reputation among other homeless advocates. “She goes out and panhandles with them and has slept in the ‘Slopes and things like that,” says one outreach provider. “She functions on a wholly different wavelength than most of us.”

A self-described “habitual runaway” as a teenager growing up in Iowa, Jennings pulled out of her adolescent nose-dive and got her life together, eventually working as a software quality engineer for Rockwell International, a job that, suitably, came with a lot of travel. It was while later working for a financial firm in Downtown Los Angeles that she first began engaging with the homeless.

Thin and wearing her years like someone who’s spent a good share of them outside in the harsh sun, Jennings fits in with the population, and she’s masterful in her knowledge of street codes and secrets, occasionally spilling frightening particulars – including tales of Mexican drug cartels trafficking homeless teenage girls to drop houses in Peoria and North Phoenix. “They take them to the house and it’s just purely for sex,” she says. “They drug them and they never let them go, just use them until they’re dead.”

*Republic* reporter Boehm says she’s never heard of such cartel activity, although she did report on a 2022 ASU survey that found 40 percent of the people interviewed who were experiencing homelessness between the ages of 18 to 25 had experienced sex or labor trafficking. “We don’t always know what it looks like, but we are certain that it is happening.”

For her own safety, Jennings travels with a street boss of her own: Jody Cottrell, 52, who goes by the nickname Ghost. Raised in an abusive family, Cottrell was sent to prison at 15 after pulling a gun on his father to protect his mother. There he was indoctrinated into the Hells Angels, which became his new family, in prison and subsequently out on the streets.

For two years, Cottrell kept Jennings safe on her visits to the seedier hangouts until cirrhosis of the liver and a bone infection in Cottrell’s right foot from diabetes made it hard for him to get around. Now he rides along in her car – and sleeps in her old Mercedes SUV. Jennings has tried to get him medical help, but Cottrell distrusts hospitals (“He thinks they use the homeless as guinea pigs”) and grew agitated when he was transferred from one facility to another and had to wait hours to get started on antibiotics.

“I don’t want to die on the street,” he says, “but it seems like I can’t get off the street.”

Sadly, just one week after his interview with *PHOENIX*, Cottrell does die, but in an acute care facility that Jennings gets him into. In her last phone conversation with him, Jennings says Cottrell complained of being neglected by staff.

“I flipped out once when I heard a nurse walk by his room and say, ‘Oh, he’s homeless,’” she says. “You put them in a box like that, and of course everyone’s going to treat them differently.”

---



*Charles and Bonnie Price in the alley camp*



*Jody "Ghost" Cottrell*

## **Stray Cats**

Street outreach groups like Arizona Friends of Homeless, which keeps Jennings' car stocked with food, clothing and hygiene products, are one invaluable source of assistance for the unhoused and unsheltered, and by and large the volunteers who engage with people living on the streets, in cars, parks, abandoned buildings and encampments, are some of the most caring, empathetic – and fearless – people you'll ever meet.

But such street outreach nonprofits, funded through a patchwork of government programs and private donations, are often criticized for further supporting the street life, rather than demonstrating commitment to the larger goal, as stated by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, of helping people move off the streets and into shelters and established support systems. Without that piece, outreach volunteers can be seen as enablers, keeping the street's dangerous alternative ecosystem functioning.

"I've been told that: 'You're an enabler!'" says Sarah Tokosh, who runs a small nonprofit outreach called Never Alone, Inc. "We're just making their journey to getting out of this life a little bit easier."

Tokosh was working as a teacher's aide for Paradise Valley Unified School District when she met her soon-to-be boyfriend, Brad Ray, as an unemployed construction worker living in Cortez Park. Now they run Never Alone together, visiting the parks in North Phoenix twice a week and handing out donated supplies to those in need. In the summer, they head out every day there's a high heat advisory and distribute Powerades and Medi-Lyte hydration packets, each containing two electrolyte tablets with potassium chloride for heat fatigue and exhaustion.

Tokosh says she's seen people passed out under a tree literally brought back to life. "If that's enabling, fine."

Tokosh is also well-versed in navigating the support systems that help the homeless get into housing. "They have to have their birth certificate, ID and social security before they can even apply for the voucher to get into an apartment," she says. "It's usually Section 8 housing, and it's mixed. Some of them get in through contracts with Terros [the 16-site



health clinic specializing in mental health and substance-use issues], if they're deemed mentally ill. Some will get SMI [serious mental illness] vouchers, which is a lifetime voucher. We help them work through all that."

Jennings has heard the enabling charges, too. "If you quit feeding them, they'd go away," she quotes, shaking her head. "Well, they're not feral cats! That's not the way it is out here."

But she also recognizes there are some people who will never get off the street, no matter how much she tries to help.

Jennings' morning rounds lead to a spot by the Arizona Canal on 51st Avenue and Cactus Road, where another street boss named Mike, who goes by the nickname Eagle, presides over a long stretch of about 15 shopping carts positioned just far enough off the Salt River Project access path that nobody bothers him.

Also a lifetime Hells Angels member (he has the name of the outlaw motorcycle club tattooed in giant letters around his neck), Eagle was released from prison last year after serving a nearly 20-year sentence, he says. He subsists on \$350 per month in food stamps and scours the alleys and dumpsters for the miscellaneous goods – from bikes to electronics to children's toys – that overflow his carts.

His goal is to sell enough stuff to buy the tools and vehicle he needs to get back into the construction business, but until then, the 55-year-old would rather live on the street than in a shelter.

"I used to be at CASS, when I first got out of prison," he says. "I can't be there. It's disgusting. My first week there I witnessed a murder and everything else you can imagine."

"Plus, you have to be in by 3 o'clock every day and out by 6 in the morning," he adds, clutching the Bud Light tall boy he says is today's breakfast. "It doesn't work for me."

He's tried to make friends with the community. "One time, I took the last bit of my food stamps and bought hamburgers, hot dogs, steak and threw a barbecue for anybody that was in the tunnel," he says. "There were a few people from the neighborhood riding their bikes. I said, 'Hey man, I got hot dogs. You guys hungry?' A few of them came. Some even thanked me. They said, 'Hey, we appreciate how you guys are keeping it clean.' They're seeing that we aren't garbage. We just don't have anywhere else to live."

## **Park Place**

George "Country" Roberts calls from his hospital bed at Circle the City's Downtown medical respite center on 12th Avenue and Madison Street, near CASS. The facility opened in 2012 as Arizona's first medical center for the homeless. Today the organization also operates a Midtown respite center, an outpatient center and a busy mobile medical outreach.

"The people here are really awesome," attests Roberts, who says he was rescued by Circle the City's mobile care team about two months ago in Cortez Park at Dunlap and 35th avenues after suffering right-sided heart failure brought on by pulmonary hypertension.

He confesses the condition was caused by excessive drug use. “You see a doctor every day, and nurses,” he says. “It’s almost like a mini community when you’re here.”

Roberts, 34, grew up in West Phoenix and got into the street life early. “It started around the time I was 19. I lost my job, lost my place to live and then I just started to run the streets for the most part.”

Roberts says for the first couple years he was only smoking weed and drinking beer. Then he started using methamphetamines and heroin. He’s proud that he never got into “blues,” the counterfeit pills laced with a mix of oxycodone and fentanyl that have become the new favorite of the younger homeless on Phoenix streets.

“When I started using heroin, one friend described it as like a mother’s love,” he says. “Because everything that’s wrong in the world and the problems you’re going through kind of melt away, it all goes into hiding in the corner.”

Roberts has been in for treatment before. He’s also done time in jail, for stealing a car and possession of drug paraphernalia. Each time he got out, he returned to the park.

“When I got out of prison, the first place I went when I got off the bus was right back to Cortez,” he says. “Because that’s home. There’s people out there that I’ve known for the last 13 years. We do the same stuff constantly. I know what to expect from them. It’s a comfort zone. If anyone asks for my home address, it’s 35th Avenue and Dunlap.”

According to a 2021 report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 19 percent of the unsheltered homeless population in the Greater Phoenix area are people considered chronically homeless, defined as those who either have been homeless for a year, had at least four episodes of homelessness totaling 12 months within the last three years, or those who are too disabled to work. (Kari Lake’s campaign puts the estimate higher, at 30 percent of the total homeless population.)

While our better angels like to view the homeless as unfortunate, downtrodden victims of circumstances beyond their control – job layoffs, rising rents, unexpected expenses – it’s an inescapable fact that many on the street are dealing with a substance-use disorder. According to the 2019 report by André House, nearly 26 percent of people who were experiencing unsheltered homelessness admitted to a drug disorder. But that figure is likely low, as people in general are reluctant to self-identify as addicts. A more reliable indicator may be the county medical examiner’s office: During the first nine months of 2020, almost 300 of the 484 deaths among people experiencing homelessness in metro Phoenix were accidental deaths involving drugs or alcohol.

Obviously, there’s a bidirectional association between homelessness and drug use: drug abuse can often be a side effect of homelessness, not just a cause. “Oftentimes they’re not houseless because they use drugs. They use drugs because they’re houseless, they’re living on the street,” says Lee-Ann Dunton, director of The Sidewalk Project – Phoenix, an

offshoot of the program started on Los Angeles's Skid Row that focuses on harm reduction, a controversial practice that maintains those unable or unwilling to stop using drugs still deserve a safe and hygienic environment.

“We’ve seen a lot of folks on the street that do methamphetamine because they don’t want to go to sleep at night, because they’re afraid that their possessions are going to be stolen,” she says. “And so, they’re doing things like meth in order to stay awake. Some of these things are actually survival tools.”



*Eagle's campground*

Adhering to a no-judgement ethos – and abiding by the Needle and Hypodermic Syringe Exchange Bill the Arizona House passed last year – Dunton and her core group of volunteers go out at least twice a week to the larger encampments (Thursdays at the Human Services Campus, Sundays at Cortez Park) and distribute to the homeless sterile syringes and other drug paraphernalia, as well as food, clothing and hygiene essentials.

“We give out sterile syringes and take in used syringes,” she says. “We also provide safer injection supplies – things like cookers for heating up drugs, tourniquets and cotton pellets for filtering injectable drugs. We also distribute and train people to use Narcan, or naloxone, which is used to reverse an opioid overdose.”

Dunton has a ready answer for her many critics. “Everyone deserves autonomy over their body,” she says. “People are going to do what they want to do. So why don’t we treat them with respect and help them stay safe?”

Roberts was firmly in that mindset, until the Circle the City mobile team jump-started his heart at Cortez and brought him into its integrated care system. Now, for the first time, he's rethinking whether he wants to return to the park.

"I redid the housing assessment and I qualified for what they call permanent supportive housing," he says. "I'm looking for housing that's a good distance from the park. Because I don't want to continue to think that Cortez is home. Going back in that area poses a risk of screwing up what I'm doing for myself right now. My doctors are all in the vicinity, so I'll go there to see them. But I don't want to go back to visit."

That's how an integrated system of care is supposed to work, says Lisa Dailey of the Arlington, Virginia-based Treatment Advocacy Center, a national nonprofit that advocates for changes in state and federal law to improve treatment for individuals with severe mental illness.

"Obviously, there are a lot of people who might be homeless due to reasons that are related to poverty, the high cost of housing or loss of income," she says. "But that's different than somebody who is homeless because they're trapped in a psychosis. In that case, what that person really needs is treatment, intervention and then a prolonged investment to ensure that they're able to remain stabilized so that during that vulnerable period, they're not likely to go back into a cycle of homelessness or incarceration."

Dailey says Arizona actually has some of the nation's best continuum of care programs set up for people in that category, and singles out Tucson-based Connections Health Solutions, which also runs the Urgent Psychiatric Center in Phoenix, as a model. Under their system, 85 percent of the people who go from calling their crisis line to being released from care remain stable after 45 days in community-based supervision. "It's basically like you go there and every one of your needs are met, and they have an outpatient program that is integrated into the system as well."

Margie Balfour, a psychiatrist at Connections, says often the hardest part is just getting the chronically homeless to seek help.

"Both of our centers see between 700 and 1,000 adults a month, and probably half of those are brought in by the police," she says. "These are people who are deemed a danger to themselves or others, psychotic, agitated, intoxicated or in withdrawal. If we didn't have centers like ours, they would be put in jail or the emergency room. But over 60 percent of E.R.s report that they don't have any psychiatric capability whatsoever."

Balfour hopes the new three-digit code for suicide prevention and emergency mental health services that goes into effect across the U.S. this summer will make it easier for people to get help.

"Starting July 16, all anyone will have to do is call 988, and that will connect you to mental health services," she says. Adding, with a laugh, "We're going to be busy!"

## **Stacy's Mom**

It's 2 p.m. on a Sunday, and Carla Schrum is just setting up her card tables on the north side of Cortez Park for her regular Sunday Funday luncheon. It doesn't take long before the 25 or so homeless people scattered beneath the trees along the Arizona Canal begin making their way toward the food.

"Their favorite thing is my bow-tie pasta," Schrum says, stirring the black 8-quart stockpot to bring out the rich aroma. "I use ground round and Italian sausage, sweet peppers and onions and lots of fresh tomatoes. I spend two days a week making these meals for these people. These are my people."

They weren't always. Schrum's politics lean conservative, and she still has strong opinions about who deserves her help, bordering on the xenophobic. "We have these Sudan refugees who always show up," she complains, pointing toward a group of dark-skinned women dressed in beautiful long saris and Islamic head coverings. "They *have* homes. But they'll get in front of *our* homeless people in line."

But the Sun City mom has her own personal reason for frequenting the park, along with other places around the city known for harboring the homeless. In October 2020, Schrum's daughter, Stacy, walked out on an abusive boyfriend and Schrum lost all contact with her. After several people viewing her poster on Facebook reported seeing someone who looked like Stacy hanging around the homeless encampments, she began searching the city's parks, alleys and tunnels trying to find her daughter.

"I started going into parks, talking to the homeless, hearing their stories. And I realized I'm hearing my daughter's story over and over again," Schrum says, fighting back tears. "My daughter was a registered

## **Homelessness RX?**

*Six potential remedies commonly cited by experts to fix the Valley's unsheltered crisis.*

### **HOUSING**

In June 2020, Mayor Kate Gallego and the Phoenix City Council approved the Housing Phoenix Plan, a list of strategies that included creating nearly 1,500 subsidized housing units for persons experiencing homelessness, along with more affordable housing for low-income renters. The plan comes with \$6 million in nonprofit grant opportunities and incentive benefits to landlords for participating in the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

### **POLICING**

Under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice since last August regarding the encampment sweeps it conducts around CASS, the Phoenix PD is looking into enforcing park curfews and partnering with businesses to file trespassing charges on loiterers.

### **MENTAL-HEALTH SERVICES**

Crisis centers are counting on the July launch of the new 988 Implementation Act, which uses the GPS location of anyone dialing 988 to instantly connect those experiencing mental illness or drug problems with integrated care systems in their area.

### **SHELTERS**

In March, the Human Services Campus in Downtown Phoenix opened an additional tent with 100 beds, and a new 100-bed

nurse, with three beautiful young children. She went through a really nasty divorce, was unable to get proper childcare during the pandemic, one thing led to another and she lost custody to her ex. Got into an abusive relationship with a new boyfriend, and just let her life go.”

Schrum says she did finally get a glimpse of Stacy earlier this year – on a virtual Maricopa County Superior Court hearing she watched over Microsoft Teams. “I found out that she’s got a drug charge on her, and the night before the online hearing, oh my God,” she pauses, and starts to cry. “She got raped and beat up really bad. I saw my daughter for the first time in over a year through an online hearing, and her face was all black and blue.” Schrum says the judge gave Stacy a grace period, ordering her to return for another online hearing in late February. “She didn’t show up for that, and now they’ve got a felony warrant out on her.”

While she still hasn’t found Stacy, Schrum found a new ragtag family among the homeless people she serves every Sunday. Robert Weinbrenner sits at a small table beside Schrum’s, pouring iced tea and Kool-Aid for thirsty park dwellers. An unemployed Chicago transplant who says he used to sing in a band called Plum Loco, Weinbrenner tells of having a housing choice voucher through HUD that covered enough of the rent at Belcourt Apartments on Seventh Avenue and Earll Drive to keep him housed. The complex, now renamed Ellis Midtown, recently phased out Section 8 housing vouchers and raised its rents, forcing Weinbrenner and many others back out on the street. Last February, another Belcourt tenant told ABC-15 reporter Joe Ducey she was planning to use her last bit of rent money to buy a sleeping bag and a tent.

“They raised the rent from \$980 per month to \$1,350,” Weinbrenner says. “And it’s a dump. I had roof rats in my apartment.” Now he’s living in an old van he bought with his last COVID-19 stimulus check from March 2021, but even that’s been impacted by the

shelter, operated by Community Bridges, is planned for Sunnyslope. Additionally, a 130-bed shelter for older homeless adults is planned for the area around Northern Avenue and Interstate 17.

#### **LEGISLATION**

Arizona statutes have done a good job of defining when a homeless person has an acute need for treatment, which creates a pathway off the streets. “But your emergency evaluation hold period is kind of short compared to the rest of the country,” says Lisa Dailey of the national Treatment Advocacy Center. “It’s 48 hours, and we recommend at least 72 hours to ensure that a person is fully evaluated and hooked up with services before discharge.”

#### **BUSINESS INVOLVEMENT**

City officials have been working with Valley store operators to change some policies that invite vagrancy and theft, according to E. Mari Herrera-Daniels, a neighborhood specialist with the city of Phoenix. “We’ve met with QT, for example, and made this request: Lock your bathrooms, hire security guards, trim your trees,” she says. “It’s a process, but they’re working with us.

homelessness crisis.

“The other morning I came back to my van and somebody that got released from the hospital was sleeping in it,” he says, with a laugh. “They kicked him out of hospital at midnight, in the rain, with no coat, no blanket. He said, ‘They helped me with my physical problem, but not my mental.’ I just let him stay there. It was probably my own fault for giving my van that name,” he says, pointing to the vehicle in the parking lot. On the back door, crudely scrawled in black marker, are the words “Crash Van.”

A family approaches the food tables, Lonzell and Tamika Williams with their two young kids. Lonzell says he moved the family from Memphis to Phoenix about five months ago for a job offer that he says “disappeared” by the time they got here. They used what money they had on extended-stay hotels, which he says was costing them as much as \$700 per week, while they both searched for work.

The family got a housing voucher, but it expired after three months – not long enough for them to find an apartment complex accepting Section 8 vouchers that had a vacancy. So, they’ve been sleeping in their truck, in the parking lot of an apartment building where the manager doesn’t bother them as long as they’re out each morning by 6 a.m.

In the meantime, the couple got the kids into a Glendale school and Tamika secured a job through a temp agency as a claims agent for Scottsdale’s CNA National, which reinsures car warranties. Ironically, it’s a work-from-home position that she’s working without a home.

“It’s at somebody else’s house and there’s three of us working there,” she says. “For the most part, it’s OK, but there’s dogs and people are kind of on top of you there. You can kind of tell the situation is running its course.”

On weekends, she searches for available housing while Lonzell takes the kids to the park, where he gracefully welcomes assistance from Never Alone’s Tokosh and Ray, who’ve become friends. Tamika keeps herself and the kids in flawless appearance, even though they’re limited to washing up at a QT gas station, and maintains a radiant smile.

“I have to stay positive – for them,” she says, motioning toward her young boy and girl. “They don’t complain, they don’t act mad about the situation. And we make light of it. We know things are going to get better.”

Tamika gets a warm hug from Notiosha D’Addabbo, a high-energy, 5-foot-11 dynamo who survived her own harrowing experience out on the streets and now mentors students at after-school programs sponsored by Mesa Community College while practicing her own evangelical ministry.

In 1986, when she was only 4 years old, D’Addabbo witnessed her 16-month-old baby sister get beaten to death by the teenaged boyfriend of her 23-year-old mother. *The San Bernardino Sun* reported D’Addabbo’s mother was working when the abuse took place, but was subsequently charged with negligence.

“That landed my mom and the boyfriend in prison and me and my other surviving sister in foster care,” she says. By the time the sisters were reunited with their mom, D’Addabbo’s mother was suffering from severe mental illness and had become abusive herself, prompting D’Addabbo to run away from home.

“By the time I was 19, I had two felonies,” she says – one for prostitution and one for possession of crack cocaine. “At 21, the voice of the Lord spoke to me and said to move to Arizona.”

She cleaned up, enrolled at MCC and earned an associate degree in chemical dependency counseling, which she followed up with a bachelor’s degree in social work from ASU. She says her experience as a sex worker ultimately helped her in her counseling work.

“When you’re a prostitute, you learn to get close to people real quick – *real* quick,” she says, moving her face in close for emphasis. “But the Lord turned that around so that I’d be able to use it for his ministry, right? So, I can *read* people.”

It was D’Addabbo who persuaded Terros Health to start bringing their mobile health van to the Cortez Sunday Fundays. Today their nurse practitioners are providing free COVID-19 vaccines and boosters and testing the homeless in the park for COVID, hepatitis C and HIV. The Sidewalk Project is here, too, passing out sterile syringes – and happily irritating Carla Schrum by serving food to the Sudanese refugee families.

At times like this, it’s possible to believe homelessness can be remedied organically by the empowered people who’ve come through it themselves. Even Tirso “Tito” Madrid, the Arizona Parks and Recreation groundskeeper whose job requires him to do the dirty work of picking up and discarding the backpacks and sleeping bags left unattended by the homeless, has come to respect the group.

“Once they get to know you, they don’t make a mess, because they like me and I don’t treat them bad,” he says. He’s patient with the addicts, too. “I know what it’s like. I’m not hooked on drugs, you know, but I’m hooked on Scratchcards!”

Madrid grabs a big stack of the lottery cards from the truck’s glove compartment. “Look at these from just the last two weeks – all losers!” he says, with a hearty laugh.

D’Addabbo says she still goes Downtown once a month to sleep among the tents outside CASS. “People don’t know I have a big old house in Gilbert now, but I go sleep with the homeless because I don’t ever want to forget where I came from, and I want to see the heart of God working for the people who were where I was,” she says. “If I can make it out, there’s hope for *every one* of them.”

## **Closing Time**

Back at the lodge, Clayton Lord and his friend Bert Meier talk with Sgt. Kimble in the parking lot. The community meeting wrapped up long ago, but Lord and Meier still have questions for the cop about why the police can’t do something – *anything* – to clean up their community.



“I come out on Oak Street by the QT to head for work, and there’s a bus stop and two trash cans and the trash is always overflowing into the trees,” says Lord. “This is not the neighborhood I grew up in.”

Meier says he sees disheveled young people all the time grabbing snacks, filling their cups at the QT and walking out without paying. “And the people behind the counter can’t do anything. They say it’s a safety issue.”

Kimble, whose patrol area runs south of the canal system and includes Pierce Park, assures the men he’s working on a loophole. “There’s that after-hours component,” he says. “At 11 p.m., the lights go out and everyone’s supposed to leave the park. Now, enforcing the code of conduct in the park is not supposed to be done by police departments. That’s a park ranger thing. But I need to clarify that if a person’s already been officially trespassed from the park, is that something the PD can handle?”

Kimble also says he’s talked with several businesses in the area –Target, Fry’s, Costco, Five Below and QT – about entering into a multi-business alliance. “That’s where if you are trespassing any one of those businesses, you are trespassing all of them.”

Lord and Meier nod enthusiastically, hearing at long last something resembling an action plan.

“You can feel sorry for the older homeless guy or the woman with her kids that you see out on the streets,” says Lord. “But when you’ve got a group of 30 young adult men sitting in a park, smoking up, harassing the girls, not giving a crap about the neighborhood – where did all these people come from? It’s like a new society of homeless. I mean, are these the guys that went on unemployment and got the \$600 stipend then the \$400 stipend and now just refuse to work?”

Meeting organizer Doug Fry, a local realtor and, in the winters when he grows out his snow-white beard, part-time Santa, disputes Lord’s notion that this is a new post-pandemic phenomenon.

“I’ve been in Phoenix since 1970,” says Fry, still rockin’ the Letterman whiskers in April. “And I can tell you that the main reason the homeless situation looks worse today is because they didn’t use to hang around the city. They would go to the outskirts, to New River, or the old riverbed in Tempe that’s now Tempe Town Lake. Now there’s no more outskirts.”

Fry puts on his hat, calling it a night. “It only looks worse today because it’s in your backyard.”

HOMELESS SHELTERS ([HTTPS://WWW.PHOENIXMAG.COM/TAG/HOMELESS-SHELTERS/](https://www.phoenixmag.com/tag/homeless-shelters/))

HOMELESSNESS ([HTTPS://WWW.PHOENIXMAG.COM/TAG/HOMELESSNESS/](https://www.phoenixmag.com/tag/homelessness/))

LEGISLATION ([HTTPS://WWW.PHOENIXMAG.COM/TAG/LEGISLATION/](https://www.phoenixmag.com/tag/legislation/))

MENTAL HEALTH ([HTTPS://WWW.PHOENIXMAG.COM/TAG/MENTAL-HEALTH/](https://www.phoenixmag.com/tag/mental-health/))

## Related Posts



# PHOENIX

For more than 50 years, PHOENIX magazine's experienced writers, editors, and designers have captured all sides of the Valley with award-winning and insightful writing, and groundbreaking report and design. Our expository features, narratives, profiles, and investigative features keep our 385,000 readers in touch with the Valley's latest trends, events, personalities and places.

## NAVIGATION

*Best Of The Valley* (/2021/07/01/2021-Best-Of-The-Valley/)

*Things To Do*  
(<https://www.phoenixmag.com/Phoenix-Things-To-Do/>)

*Magazine-Things-To-Do/)*

*Food & Drink*

*(<https://www.phoenixmag.com/category/food-drink/>)*

*Travel & Adventure*

*(<https://www.phoenixmag.com/category/travel/>)*

*Valley Lifestyle*

*(<https://www.phoenixmag.com/category/lifestyle/>)*

*News & People*

*(<https://www.phoenixmag.com/category/people/>)*

*The Magazine ([https://www.phoenixmag.com/the-](https://www.phoenixmag.com/the-magazine/)*

*Magazine/)*

*From Our Partners*

*(<https://www.phoenixmag.com/category/partners/>)*



*(<https://servedbyadbutler.com/redirect.spark?>*

*MID=169298&plid=1796236&setID=406590&channelID=0&CID=659982&banID=520678098&PID=0&t*

*on-oak-street-a-snapshot-of-homelessness-in-*

*phoenix%2F&hc=a1b80057e650d406f2afbc467414da8ca40dfff4&location=)*

---

© 2022 Developed for Cities West Media, Inc. (</about-us/>), by Northern Ground

(<https://www.northernground.com/>)

[Terms of Use \(/terms/\)](/terms/) [Privacy Policy \(/privacy/\)](/privacy/)

*Customer Service (<https://www.phoenixmag.com/customer-service-2/>)*

*Careers (<https://www.phoenixmag.com/careers/>)*

*Advertising (<https://www.phoenixmag.com/advertising/>)*

*Contact Editorial (<https://www.phoenixmag.com/editorial-contact/>)*

*About Us (<https://www.phoenixmag.com/about-us-2/>)*