

Homeless get help with legal troubles

An outreach program gives legal consultation to the homeless, some of whom are mentally ill.

ROBBYN MITCHELL - ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

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Monday through Friday, Stacy McNally hops into her car carrying a huge case-file folder and her laptop, headed to Pinellas County homeless shelters and soup kitchens.

When she arrives, she tries to find a private corner where she can meet with clients, some of whom are mentally ill, to help them make sense of the confusing language in documents relating to legal problems they may face.

"Sometimes it's difficult for people with a college education to understand this stuff," said McNally, who works for the public defender's office's Homeless Outreach Program. "That's why the ... program was created."

Bob Dillinger, the 6th judicial circuit public defender, started the program to help keep that target population out of jail for petty violations such as loitering, as well as help with larger legal problems.

"Bob started this program with the department of mental health because there were just too many cases of people having to go to jail because of some fine they couldn't pay or some order they didn't understand," McNally said.

The original program was such a success that Dillinger got a grant from the Pinellas County Sheriff's to hire people to work it full time. He enlisted McNally and her partner Luis Almodovar.

McNally, who'd recently left the public defender's office before the program was started nearly a year ago, jumped at the chance to return when she heard about the job.

Almodovar, who is not an attorney, was brought in because of his organizational skills and knowledge of how the system functions.

"He's really what keeps everything together, and we call him the forensic liaison," McNally said.

The two began visiting homeless shelters, soup kitchens and mental health treatment centers such as the Suncoast Center for Community Mental Health Inc. until they got into a regular rotation.

Just five months ago, Almodovar and McNally added bi-weekly visits to the Suncoast Drop-In Center at 1001 16th St. S in St. Petersburg.

Team leader Beverly DeHaven couldn't be more thrilled.

"She is great," DeHaven said via e-mail. "I have actually seen her hand carry someone's community service hours to the judge so that the person did not have to go all the way up to Clearwater."

But McNally and Almodovar provide more than just delivery service. The two offer confidential information to homeless and mentally ill people on fines, probation requirements and warrants they may have with the legal system.

In some cases, they can get fines turned into community service for those who can't pay and connect them with a business or agency where they can fulfill their hours.

"It just gives them the opportunity to get a clean legal slate," said Patsy Luehmann, manager of Suncoast's intensive recovery programs. "For so many of our population, legal problems are such a barrier for recovery, so this service is a great thing."

The Drop-In Center is a refuge for the mentally ill who have been or are in treatment, and many of the homeless members come in every day.

"They've got no other place to go so we choose to be open every day to provide them with a safe place," Luehmann said.

The **public defender** service has become just another part of the safety net it creates.

"I try to get clients to trust me and to know that I'm here to help, not to turn them in or send them to jail," McNally said.

Offering legal aid

The **Public Defenders Homeless Outreach Program** meets clients at the following locations throughout the month:

St. Petersburg:

Salvation Army Shelter: 1400 Fourth St. S, first and third Tuesdays from 4:30 to 6 p.m.

ASAP Homeless Services: 423 11th Ave. S, Tuesdays from 8 to 11 p.m.

Beacon House: 2151 Central Ave., fourth Tuesday from 5 to 7 p.m.

Suncoast Drop-In Center: 1001 16th St. S, first Wednesday from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. and third Wednesday from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Turning Point: 1801 Fifth Ave N, second and fourth Wednesdays from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Clearwater:

St. Vincent De Paul Soup Kitchen: 1345 Park St., Fridays 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Clearwater Homeless Intervention Project: 1339 Park St., Thursdays 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Pinellas Park:

Suncoast Haven of Rest: 5625 Park Blvd., Mondays 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Tarpon Springs

Shepherd Center: 101 W Court St., first Wednesday from 9:30 a.m. to 10:45 p.m.

Shepherd Center Soup Kitchen at St. Timothy's: 812 E. Tarpon Ave., first Wednesday from 11 a.m. to noon.

For more information, call Stacy McNally at (727) 464-6446 or Luis Almodovar at (727) 453-7469.