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For the Homeless, a Gentler Approach

Police and Outreach Group Join Forces to Patrol and Offer Help



MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Brian Houghton, left, of the Bowery Residents' Committee, and Michael Venckus, standing, a police officer, talked to homeless men in Lower Manhattan last month.

By ROBERT F. WORTH

Police Officer Michael Venckus has been doing homeless outreach work since 1991. He has arrested many vagrants over the years, and sent thousands of others to shelters, detox centers and hospitals. He has seen the city's homeless population rise and fall, and has witnessed varying approaches to the prob-

lem, like sealing subway tunnels, ignoring the homeless and arresting them.

But in the last few months, Officer Venckus, a member of the Police Department's Homeless Outreach Unit who looks like a huskier version of the actor Kevin Spacey, has been trying something new. He and other officers throughout Manhattan have been going on joint street patrols with a downtown homeless outreach

group, the Bowery Residents' Committee, which is training the officers to help the homeless without arresting them.

It may seem like an obvious solution. The police and advocates for the homeless share the same goal: getting the homeless off the streets.

Yet in the past they have often clashed, with advocates accusing the police of viewing the homeless as criminals rather

than as people in need. Six months ago, an advocacy group sued the city over what it and others called a deliberate policy of arresting homeless people instead of trying to help them.

In the new collaboration, outreach workers show officers how to approach and better understand homeless people and where to take them for shelter or help. The police, in turn, provide protection, allowing the outreach workers to go into dangerous areas where they have not felt safe on their own.

It is too early to say whether the new approach is a success. Arrests of homeless people by the Homeless Outreach Unit jumped sharply after the unit was reorganized last fall. But there have been no arrests during joint outreach patrols. And this year, arrests of the homeless citywide dropped to 1,719 as of May 28, compared with 2,225 in the same period last year. So far about 100 officers from nine Manhattan precincts and the Homeless Outreach Unit have gone through the initial training, and 50 have been on the joint patrols.

"Some people might assume that we'd be less successful working with cops," said Muzzy Rosenblatt, the executive director of the Bowery Residents' Committee. "That's not been true at all. The more we train and coordinate with them, the more effective homeless services will be."

Not everyone's attitudes have changed. Some advocates say they are still wary of the police, who they believe are still far too prone to arrest the homeless.

Patrick Markee, a senior policy analyst for the Coalition for the Homeless, criticized the joint effort. "The reality is that it essentially makes outreach workers an extension of the Police Department," he said.

The program is also not the first of its kind. The Bowery Residents' Committee has worked with local precincts on an ad hoc basis for several years, and there was a similar effort on the Lower East Side in the 1970's.

But the new effort is the first time an outreach group has trained and worked systematically with police officers throughout Manhattan. The Residents' Committee received a contract to do outreach work in late 2001. After starting

with downtown precincts, it began working with the department's newly expanded Homeless Outreach Unit in November.

Officers from the unit and local precincts receive a one-day training session at the Midtown Community Court, and then go on a trial run, with coaching from Residents' Committee workers. The patrols usually involve one officer and one outreach worker, traveling either in one of the committee's vans or in a marked police car.

A 'slow and steady' approach is applied, aiming to gain people's trust.

"Sometimes I've approached someone who's chronically homeless, and I'll just call Andrew at the Residents' Committee and say, 'Can you send a team out here?'" said Capt. Neil Farrell, who, until recently, was the commander of the Homeless Outreach Unit. "Other times I'll get a call from them letting me know that the Madison Square Park homeless population has moved a couple blocks east. That stuff really helps, because the homeless population is very mobile."

But Officer Venckus said the most important lesson for rookie officers was how to approach the homeless.

"You're never sure who you're dealing with," he said. "You've got to be slow and steady, give them time to trust you."

That technique was used on a recent rainy afternoon in a downtown park. Officer Venckus and Brian Houghton, a senior outreach worker for the committee, walked up to a homeless man sprawled on a bench.

As they approached, the homeless man, who identified himself as Kevin Washington, shook his head, as though he expected trouble. But Officer Venckus introduced himself in a gentle voice, explaining that he and Mr. Houghton were only trying to

help. He held his hands out, palms up, to manifest his intentions.

"You can see I'm not going to hassle you, and I'm not going to preach to you either," the officer said.

Within a few minutes, Mr. Washington was telling a long story about living in a crack house in Harlem, becoming homeless to get away from the drugs and receiving \$200 from a mysterious benefactor. Warming up to the two men, he even apologized for having been unfriendly at first. By the time Officer Venckus began urging him to try to find permanent housing, he was nodding his head.

Ultimately, Mr. Washington refused to leave his bench, but Mr. Houghton gave him a letter to help him get into the committee's shelter in the Bowery.

The trickiest cases for the police are often people who are mentally ill or addicted to drugs or alcohol. An hour or so after leaving Mr. Washington on his park bench, Officer Venckus and Mr. Houghton were cruising lower Broadway in a Residents' Committee van when they spotted a homeless man they recognized, lurching around and giggling to himself.

This time Officer Venckus let Mr. Houghton take charge, explaining to a reporter that mentally ill people are sometimes frightened of the police.

The man, who gave his name as Willie Sanchez, appeared to have been drinking. He got into the van, where Mr. Houghton tried for 15 minutes to persuade him to go to a detox center. But he insisted that he would never stop drinking, and pulled a whiskey bottle from his pocket to prove the point.

Reluctantly, the two men let Mr. Sanchez go. It is pointless, they later explained, to put a client through rehabilitation unless he or she expresses some willingness to change.

As he got out of the car, Mr. Sanchez recognized the police letters on Officer Venckus's jacket.

"Are you a cop?" he asked.

Officer Venckus said yes.

Then Mr. Sanchez broke into a smile. "Why didn't you tell me?" he said. "My whole family are cops and they work on Wall Street!"

Officer Venckus smiled and waved as the man walked away.