

## The Phoenix Overflow Shelters

Just as the Human Services Campus was getting ready to open in 2005, the weather in Phoenix and the amount of individuals experiencing homelessness became quite dramatic. By the end of July 2005, 30 individuals had died that summer due to heat related causes, most of whom were experiencing homelessness (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4778708>).

A New York Times article focused on the 2005 summer heat noted:

“Daytime highs in Phoenix have remained near 110 degrees for more than a week, and municipal officials acknowledge that it is almost impossible to deal with the needs of the estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people living on the streets. The city has barely 1,000 shelter beds, and hundreds of them are available only in the winter.” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/23/us/ferocious-heat-maintains-grip-across-the-west.html>)

Though there was a winter weather relief overflow shelter (about November – March), until 2005, there was no plan for weather relief in the summer. Even with the weather relief options, there were not (and still are not) enough shelter beds in the community to accommodate those in need. While some were critical of government officials for not acting on the need, St. Vincent de Paul simply responded. At the time the downtown dining room (9<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Madison Avenue) was serving lunch daily, and then they opened up this space at night for a temporary shelter. With cots from the Red Cross, and staff overtime or shifting schedules, about 100 individuals (mostly men) were able to be served every night, staying safe from the heat. This continued until the end of that summer, when Central Arizona Shelter Services (CASS) acquired permission to use an old building (a county records building that was not in use) and temporary funding to host an overflow shelter. Resources were committed to this program in six month increments, thus the community was always on guard, unsure if hundreds of people would be left with no other option than the street. Even with the opening of the new CASS shelter on the Human Services Campus and the overflow building, there were still weather relief nights when the St. Vincent de Paul dining room or the Lodestar Day Resource Center (LDRC) building were used to house those needing respite from the elements.

Although the community was focused on developing affordable housing, these initiatives and the accompanying funding were not moving fast enough to fulfill the community need. In fact, the need continued to grow, and CASS began allowing individuals to sleep in the fenced in parking lot next to the overflow building. At its height, about 500 individuals used this indoor/outdoor shelter every night.

There was now a place for police to take people in the middle of the night and there were few people sleeping on the streets and in alleys in downtown Phoenix. However, the community knew that this “Overflow Shelter” was far from an ideal solution for those in need. There were allegations of violence and drug use in the parking lot, and over the years, the building became more run down. In 2014, a State Fire Marshal inspection resulted in numerous findings labeled “imminent hazard.” The building was never designed nor maintained for people to sleep in. Without funding committed to building repairs, the overflow was in danger of closing without an alternative solution. CASS began to gradually reduce the numbers allowed in the shelter each month in order to prepare for closure.

At the same time, the Human Services Campus (HSC) was increasing its focus on the new “coordinated entry” system – a national HUD requirement in order to more efficiently and effectively serve those experiencing homelessness. With a plan to more systematically engage guests and collect data, the government contract for the overflow was given to the HSC – as another temporary solution. The goal was to permanently decrease or eliminate the need for an overflow shelter and instead to increase capacity at the main CASS shelter, and for the community to implement more permanent housing. The HSC had 60 days’ notice to get ready to open the shelter.

The HSC made the decision to separate women and men

Once again, the SVdP dining room began to be used on a nightly basis for overflow. Operationally run by the HSC, the general male population slept in the LDRC and the women and men with disabilities slept in the Phoenix Dining Room. Every night tables would be swapped out for mats, and at 5 am the guests would be woken, and HSC staff and volunteer guests would transform the overnight shelter back into a dining room for 7 am breakfast.

Although the HSC had success in engagement of guests, after about a year and a half, the situation remained the same: there were just as many individuals in need, and not enough housing. There was a “Funders Collaborative” that had formed, made up of city, state, and county officials and the United Way. The funders wanted to see true change – they wanted to be able to eliminate the need for the overflow. But ending homelessness is not a task that has been mastered yet – by any community. The HSC had committed to running a shelter temporarily while the community worked on a collaboration plan to serve differently and move people more quickly into housing. Once again, the shelter was in danger of closure with no plan, and hundreds of people would be without safe sleeping accommodations. A phase out plan was developed, and caps on capacity began to decrease each month, so as not to leave hundreds without resources at once.

SVdP looked at its funding model, and determined that the estimated costs to keep the dining room opened at night for 250 individuals would be about one third of the cost that the funders had been paying. When we approached the funders with this opportunity, they consider and accepted with gratitude. Even still, the effort was meant to be temporary as the community worked toward more sustainable solutions.

For two years, September 2016 – 2018, SVdP ran the overflow shelter in the dining room, accepting about 250 men and women every night. After about a year, in December 2017, the Funders Collaborative again began to discuss the fact that the shelter was not meant to be permanent; they wanted to reinvest their funds in permanent housing and long-term solutions. SVdP ensured our partners that as long as there was funding and community will, we would continue this multi-use of the dining room. However, as it turned out there was neither ongoing funding nor community will.

Again, the community embarked on a plan to shift resources, and SVdP and campus partners made a plan to engage those in the shelter in housing interventions and decrease the capacity over time, such that at the end of the contract period, hundreds of people were not left with nowhere to go. Of the 328 people who were frequent users of the shelter when the closure announcement was made in Spring

2018, 304 were able to acquire other shelter or housing options or left the shelter on their own. Even the “last man standing,” as he called himself, someone who had been at the overflow for years and would not go into alternative shelter, was able to enter SVdP’s Ozanam Manor transitional housing program.

Ironically, on Oct 1, 2018, the first day that the overflow was supposed to be closed, hurricane-like weather led to the opening of the dining room that night for weather relief. Despite the fact that an overflow shelter is no longer funded on an ongoing basis, the need remains.