

PROBLEM SOLVING WITH SDPD'S SERIAL INEBRIATE PROGRAM

When encountered with a problem, the first thought is usually to solve it. With regard to the chronic homeless alcoholic population, the problem was public intoxication and the solution was detox or jail. Once released, they were back on the street, likely with a bottle of alcohol in hand. The solution already in practice was only temporary and didn't reach far enough down to the root of the problem.

All of that changed in 1998 when Officer John Liening and Officer Juan Cephas, at the time patrol officers at Western Division, grew frustrated that they and their colleagues were constantly dealing with the same chronic alcoholics many times in one week, weekend, or even day. Officer Liening approached Sergeant Rick Schnell with an idea to tackle the root of the problem – chronic homeless alcoholism was a revolving door. Chronic inebriates would move from the hos-

Care for chronic inebriates costs San Diego County taxpayers \$20 million annually



pital to the sobering center to jail and back to the streets until they were arrested or hospitalized again.

The concept for the Serial Inebriate Program (SIP) was the first of its kind in the

nation and a pilot program was in place by 2000. SIP is a comprehensive, collaborative effort to get chronic homeless alcoholics the help they need to get their lives back on track while simultaneously ending, or at the very least slowing, the major economic drain that chronic homeless alcoholics pose to the community.

Staggering statistics regarding the chronic inebriate population consist of the \$20 million annual cost for San Diego County taxpayers to care for chronic inebriates, which includes over 3,800 hospital visits, 2,700 paramedic transports and 760 hospital admissions.

In a 1998 study of 15 chronic inebriates, UCSD Medical Center found that the 15 individuals were transported by ambulance to the UCSD emergency room 299 times in one year at a total cost of \$967,000 to the public health system. One individual racked up 51 paramedic transports and 51 hospital admissions at a total individual cost of \$91,000.

SIP is an innovative program that involves the cooperation of numerous individuals and agencies across the county.



When first advocating for the program, Officer Liening met with the San Diego Police Department, the San Diego City Council, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors, the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, the Superior Court, San Diego City Attorney, County of San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services and the San Diego County Office of the Public Defender to create a key partnership. Previous task forces that aimed to deal with this problem were established only to disband a year or two later. By engaging all of the different agencies, the SIP program has a broad base of support. All of the agencies understand their respective roles and work together to effectively solve a problem.



Funding for the first few years of the program was provided by the San Diego County Board of Supervisors who designated \$400,000 of the tobacco settlement for SIP. To sustain the program, the County of San Diego provides \$120,000 per year to cover the treatment costs and the City of San Diego provides \$80,000 per year to fund housing for program participants.

An individual is classified as a "chronic inebriate" after being admitted to the Volunteers of America sobering center five times in a thirty day period, though some chronic inebriates can reach the five visit threshold in far fewer than thirty days – one chronic inebriate spent time in the sobering center up to 200 times in one year. After being classified as a chronic inebriate, the individual is rejected by the sobering center and can be booked into jail upon their next public drunken-

ness incident, where they will await their court date. At this point, SIP takes action.

The Serial Inebriate Program uses the drug court model to divert offenders away from custody and into treatment. Following a drunk in public conviction, the city attorney presents

the opportunity for the chronic inebriate to participate in the program. The client now has an option to enter treatment in lieu of jail time.

Once the chronic inebriate indicates that they would like to be assessed for the program, a case worker from Mental Health Systems, Inc. determines if the inebriate is eligible to become a client and he or she is provided with all of the tools to succeed.

The Serial Inebriate Program is a comprehensive, collaborative effort to divert custody into treatment for chronic homeless alcoholics

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The Serial Inebriate Program has a 64% success rate

Mental Health Systems, Inc. provides alcohol recovery treatment to SIP clients and is developing a rehabilitation curriculum that is specifically tailored to treat the chronic inebriate population.

After the assessment, Officer Liening picks up the client and takes them to St. Vincent de Paul's Medical Center. St Vincent's now

becomes the client's medical home where he or she is provided with medicine for any health conditions. This is the final stop before being taken directly to treatment program.

Treatment varies for each client from extremely structured environments to sober living arrangements depending on their individual abilities. The average SIP client is 40-50 years old and has lived on the streets for 10-15 years. Those living on the streets often feel hopeless and have very little interest in anything. When presented with the opportunity to be involved in SIP, many clients feel that they have a chance to live again when there is a way to get out of the revolving door that they shuffled through from the hospital to the sobering center to jail. It's the beginning of the road to recovery for them.

"It's the most rewarding thing when you see someone who has been on the streets for 15 or 20 years get their life back and start to feel good about themselves. They can start de-

veloping relationships again and get a job," said Officer Liening. "It's just amazing."

The Serial Inebriate Program has a 64% success rate. The individual who was once ranked number seven on the list of most paramedic runs is now enjoying over a year of sobriety. Individuals who do not make it through the program are offered the program again, with modifications, to enable them to continue to head in the right direction. SIP is directly responsible for a 58% reduction in arrests and a 54% reduction in Emergency Medical Services and hospital runs within this population.

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The Serial Inebriate Program is a ground-breaking program that has received numerous accolades and awards since its inception. Phillip Mangano, executive director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, has praised the Serial Inebriate Program as a part of the plan to end chronic homelessness. Mental Health Systems, Inc. and SIP are recent recipients of the County Alcohol and Drug Program Administrators' Association of California (CADPAAC) Treatment Award for Collaborative Partnerships for 2008.

The Serial Inebriate Program and the San Diego Police Department Homeless Outreach Team are listed as two of the top ten best practices in the nation for working with homelessness. For the San Diego Police Department to have not one, but two programs in the top ten nationwide is nothing



short of remarkable. And other cities have taken note. Cities across the country turn to Officer Liening, Sergeant Rick Schnell and the San Diego Police Department to learn how they can enjoy the same success.

The Serial Inebriate Program is advantageous for everyone involved. The City and County of San Diego have fewer chronic inebriates on the street. San Diego Police patrol officers spend less time with the chronic inebriate population and can focus their time on other im-



portant public safety efforts. Chronic inebriates take up fewer bed spaces at local emergency rooms, hospitals and at the sobering center. The cost of treatment is far lower compared to the cost of jail and hospitalization to

taxpayers. Finally and most importantly for the individual clients, the program offers a unique opportunity to become active members of the community.

The Serial Inebriate Program is only possible through the commitment of each of the agencies and help from outside individuals. The funding from the City and County of San Diego, the cooperation and encouragement from the Superior Court, City Attorney's Office and Office of the Public

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Defender, the medical care from St Vincent's de Paul Medical Center and the counseling and treatment from Mental Health Services, Inc. and San Diego County's Drug & Alcohol Services Departments have enabled the program to come this far and many lives have been changed.

Contact the San Diego Police Foundation if you or someone you know would like to contribute to the Serial Inebriate Program.



Sergeant Rick Schnell, Susan Bower, Director of the County of San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services, and John Richardson, Vice President of Mental Health Systems, Inc. attended an award ceremony in May to accept the CADPAAC Treatment Award for Collaborative Partnerships - statewide recognition for a phenomenal program.