



Street alcoholics still cost millions

LARRY HENDRICKS Assistant City Editor | Posted: Sunday, June 13, 2010 5:20 am

First in a three-day series

The sight is common in Flagstaff in the summer. A street alcoholic has passed out drunk in the middle of the sidewalk, or in an alley, or in front of a business.

Despite some new programs -- a detox center, a rehab program at the jail, a DUI court, a new homeless shelter -- the problem is still costing police, the jail, the hospital, emergency responders and social service agencies thousands of hours a year in services costing millions of dollars.

But the programs have made a difference. The crime rate is down. Length of visits at the hospital are down due, in part, to the presence of a detox center in the city. And the reoffending rate of inmates who go through the jail's in-custody alcohol and drug treatment program is half that of the national average.

A broad-based community task force on Wednesday is working on the assumption that about 20 individuals out of about 100 street alcoholics identified are responsible for the majority of the costs.

And after sorting through various options, the group settled on two main ways to stop the revolving door:

- Get the hard-core alcoholics off the street and into housing even if they aren't sober.
- Monitor them intensively through formal caseworkers to get them firmly on a path to sobriety.

Additional costs to complete the continuum of services are still unknown.

9,100 DAYS IN JAIL

In an April meeting of the committee, Lt. Dan Musselman of Flagstaff Police Department had identified 106 people who fit the definition of street alcoholic, or serial inebriate: 5 alcohol-related police or medical contacts in a month, or 10 in a year.

Of those, some committee members said there were probably 20 who were responsible for a majority of the contacts on whom efforts should be focused.

For example, Flagstaff Medical Center staff identified one person who had contact with the hospital 37 times in a one-year period.

Guardian Medical Transport identified five street alcoholics who each had 20 or more transports to the hospital in a year.

At the jail, the 106 identified street alcoholics logged 9,156 days in custody since January 2008.

POSITIVE STEPS TAKEN

Deputy Chief Kevin Treadway of the police department said there is a continuing downward trend in the city crime rate and a higher quality of life for residents and business owners due, in part, to the presence of programs aimed at impacting substance addiction.

Programs now operating that focus on the impacts of substance addiction include:

- An Intake Triage Unit at The Guidance Center that offers a variety of services including detox that costs about \$700,000 a

year. Flagstaff Medical Center staff report that the presence of the ITU has reduced length of emergency department visits by street alcoholics.

-- The Exodus in-custody drug and alcohol treatment program at the Coconino County Detention Facility that costs about \$200,000 a year. In the first three years of operation, reoffense rates are 38 percent versus the 70 percent national average.

-- A DUI/Drug Court at Coconino County Superior Court that costs about \$390,000 a year. Of the first 125 graduates, 62 percent have not reoffended.

-- An initiative to identify repeat offenders and sentence them to longer jail terms.

-- A secular homeless shelter run by Flagstaff Shelter Services that had a budget of about \$205,000 its first year to augment services provided by the faith-based shelters run by Sunshine Rescue Mission, Inc.

TWO KEY CHANGES NEEDED

During Wednesday's meeting, attendees identified more housing and early and close monitoring through case management as essential to getting hard-core street alcoholics turned around. Treatment and other service options become palatable and more effective with permanent, stable housing. Costs still haven't been explored by the committee.

The next step is to get the funds and other resources needed to act on those priorities, said Lucinda Andreani, who is spearheading the effort through the county's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. Local residents and businesses will need to get involved, she added.

And what will success look like? The group set the following benchmarks for progress:

-- 25 percent reduction in hospital emergency room visits;

-- 10 percent reduction in police arrests;

-- Transitional or permanent supportive housing for five to eight individuals within 12 months;

-- Increased numbers of street alcoholics completing treatment;

-- Further reduction of crime rate;

-- Reduction in costs to affected agencies;

-- More court diversion programs to reduce jail impact.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Committee members also wanted to create a set of principles which will guide any effort to reduce street alcoholic impacts on community resources.

Some proposed principles were:

-- Treat individuals with respect, dignity and cultural sensitivity, and keep them accountable for their behavior.

-- Sobriety is not a condition of receiving assistance.

-- Individuals have a right to basic needs of housing, food, shelter, clothing and medical care.

-- Coordination of effort among affected agencies.

-- Measure outcomes and identify best practices.

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