

The Downtown Ambassadors are playing a key role in a program that is taking a new approach to fighting homelessness.

Changing Lives, One Home at a Time

The Downtown Ambassadors are collaborating with non-profit, government and business community members in an effort to end homelessness, one home at a time.

Led by the Arizona Coalition to End Homelessness, Project H3: Home, Health, Hope is working alongside Common Ground as part of the nationwide 100,000 Homes campaign, aimed at getting the most vulnerable homeless individuals off the streets and into permanent housing.

In Phoenix, the mission began last year as a group of seven individuals quickly grew to 50 organizations and over 160 community volunteers, including Downtown Ambassadors Gaby Arroyo and Chris Spahle.

This past April, Gaby and Chris joined H3 volunteers in scouring Phoenix, Mesa and Glendale over the course of three days to interview 262 individuals who were sleeping on the streets. The volunteers administered Common Ground's Vulnerability Index, a new method of identifying those homeless persons who are the greatest risk for premature death. Because of their hands-on experience as Ambassadors, in-depth knowledge of Downtown Phoenix, extensive crisis intervention training, and relationships with local social services agencies, Chris and Gaby were chosen as experts in the field.

In fact, homeless outreach and transient issues are an increasingly large part of the roles Ambassadors play Downtown.



Myron, a Navy Veteran, was living on the street for over 30 years before H3 placed him in permanent housing.

"Most people think we [the Ambassadors] are more of a security level and can remove people from the streets but that is not our job nor do we have the authority," said Spahle, a 10-year Ambassador veteran. "We do wellness checks and have the ability to identify the situation—are they a Veteran, a single mother, or do they have an addiction or mental illness—and then escalate it to the proper social services agency or Public Safety Department, if need be."

"That's where our crisis intervention training and contacts in various social services become so valuable," added Arroyo, who has been an Ambassador for over seven years. "Every situation is so different and you need to be prepared for anything."

The Ambassadors definitely needed to be prepared for anything in April, as they joined ASU School of Nursing and School of Social work students, current and former social workers, teachers, and others in a mass interview of at-risk homeless. Through interviews, 262 homeless individuals were pared down to the 50 most in need.

But that was just the beginning of the process.

In order to transition the homeless into housing, H3 needed more help from the community. A public briefing was scheduled for April 23 to tell the H3 story and update people on the status of the project. When the call went out for funding, the individuals and companies in attendance responded loudly, and generously, gifting \$50,000 in about 15 minutes.

As a result of Chris Spahle and Gaby Arroyo's tireless work with Project H3, the Downtown Phoenix Partnership has been selected to receive the Arizona Coalition to End Homelessness' Business Partnership Award for 2010, to be presented on Oct. 18.



Through the power of social media, H3's inspiring story has gone viral but there's still work to be done. In addition to funding, donations of furniture, housewares and television sets are still greatly needed. To learn how you can join the 100,000 Homes initiative, visit H3: Home, Health, Hope on Facebook, Twitter or at www.azceh.org/PH3.html or email Arizona Coalition to End Homelessness Executive Director Joan Serviss at jserviss@azceh.org



Downtown Ambassadors Chris Spahle and Gaby Arroyo (orange shirts) helped move Donna (middle, yellow sundress) into her new home and were joined by H3 volunteers from left: Mattie Lord, Geoff Davis, Glen Mack, John Wall, Elizabeth DeCosta, Rhonda Meacham, Brad Bridwell, Brian Petersen, Samuel Basson and Ryan Burke.

Using several housing resources set up for specific groups—mentally ill, Veterans, those infected with HIV/AIDS—H3 secured residences. The biggest win came when the City of Phoenix granted H3 25 Section 8 vouchers, valuable designations generally reserved for low-income housing.

So far, H3 has transitioned nine of the 50 individuals into permanent housing.

"Our goal is to permanently house those original 50 individuals but our aim isn't just to save 50 lives, but to change systems," says H3's Michael Shore, President/CEO of HOM Inc., a Phoenix-based company that specializes in the administration and operation of subsidized housing. "We're trying to improve lives while also improving the way business is done."

H3 is a housing-first program, meaning that a person who has been homeless for eight years isn't being asked to meet conditions before receiving housing. According to Shore, after individuals are put into permanent housing their behaviors start to change. Volunteer Navigators are put in place to monitor the individuals, helping make sure bills are paid, food is bought and doctor appointments are met.

"When their basic needs are being taken care of, we can start to address their other issues," said Shore. "This is permanent supportive housing. They're getting health care, identification, social networks, friends, and support."

H3 is changing lives and move-in day can get pretty emotional. An apartment with a phone and electricity and furniture represents a fresh start.



Since moving into permanent housing Jesse has been keeping himself busy lending a helpful hand to his new neighbors and building a social network. Now that he doesn't have to worry about where he's sleeping at night, Jesse is able to concentrate on getting the health care he needs.

Arroyo, Spahle, and a dozen or so other volunteers were on hand to move in Myron, a Navy Veteran and the first person H3 placed into permanent housing. They helped decorate the apartment, put up welcome home signs, and took part in an unplanned group cry.

"It's very emotional and I'm getting teary right now just talking about it," said Arroyo. "It's the most incredible feeling to know that this person is going to have a chance to live a better life."