



JAYSON MEYER: Ensuring homeless aren't hopeless

Sunday

Posted Sep 11, 2016 at 2:00 AM

The New Life Center has been reverse engineered to end chronic homelessness in Volusia County.

Not long ago, I thought that the word "homeless" was synonymous with "hopeless."

About a year ago, I was at a convenience store and was persistently solicited by a man seeking loose change. Frustrated by the panhandling, I asked him, "If you are this persistent, why not apply these skills to getting a real job?" I'll never forget his response: "Brother, I tried but there weren't any jobs for someone like me. So, now I'm here."

That was a powerful moment for me. I decided to research this issue about which I had been ignorant. I learned the most effective initiatives focus on a "housing first" model, which moves the individual from a homeless shelter into their own apartment. The concept is that a homeless individual's primary need is to obtain stable housing. We don't have to look any farther than Jacksonville, where they have a 90% success rate in helping individuals permanently exit homelessness. Last April, state officials in Utah announced they had reduced the chronically homeless by 91% and are now approaching "functional zero."

As I researched the ways that other communities "manage" their homeless, I confirmed the majority of programs are ineffective and expensive. Most, like the Pinellas County Safe Harbor, are predominantly jail diversion programs. All of our local experts agree that programs such as the one outlined on Red John Road will be ineffective. It will only perpetuate homelessness at a never-ending cost. Several were concerned about the possibility of homeless users of the Red John location having to wander up International Speedway Boulevard to reach services

located in Daytona Beach. The conclusion is clear: Safe Harbor and Red John Road will not work.

As an entrepreneur, and compulsive problem solver, I became intrigued by the vision of ending chronic homelessness in our community. It is clear that a housing first model is needed. I started by looking for an expert with a proven track record. I found Mike Cornell, who effectively ended homelessness among veterans in Volusia and Flagler Counties.

Then, I developed a business model that would be effective and financially viable. I have been called naïve to think I could operate a facility for \$5,000 per year per bed. This is the core cost and I stand by it.

To select a location I reviewed the memorandum by the Rev. L. Ronald Durham on July 28, "Homeless Presentation of Possible Temporary Shelter Sites." In this memo, Durham, the City of Daytona Beach's community relations manager, identified 660 Mason Ave. as the "recommended" location for a homeless center. While I agree with Durham, my operating proposal is viable in virtually any location within the core area of Daytona Beach.

The culmination of my research and planning is something I call the New Life Center, a "Housing First" model that would provide 100 beds, 24-hour security, a pleasing exterior that will enhance the neighborhood, and a transformational, inspiring environment in which people can begin to rebuild their lives. It will be operated using protocols, policies and procedures that respect both those who use the center and those who live and work nearby. It will be managed by the Synergy Foundation.

I formed the Synergy Foundation to ensure that all individuals have access to health care. Homelessness and health issues go hand in hand. Yes, housing the homeless actually reduces health care costs for our entire community.

Anyone who knows me knows I don't do things halfway. The New Life Center has been reverse engineered to end chronic homelessness in Volusia County. I think it can be done in five years. Yes, this is a bold statement, but I am an entrepreneur and businessman with one mission: make Volusia County the best, period. Making sure that all of our citizens have the opportunity to rise up is one step towards fulfilling that mission.

— Meyer is the founder and CEO of Synergy Billing in Daytona Beach.