

County Beat: Can we solve substance abuse and homelessness at the same time?

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Posted Aug. 26, 2016 at 9:09 AM

Last week I attended a graduation ceremony at Healing Transitions in Raleigh, North Carolina. Healing Transitions attempts to tackle two problems at once, homelessness and addiction.

This not-for-profit organization manages the homeless shelter for Wake County, which includes Raleigh. The homeless shelter includes a peer-run recovery center. Homeless men and women can choose to enter the recovery program, which runs 18 months to two years, after which, if they complete it, they graduate.

This particular ceremony I witnessed was for men. Some 150 men (and a few women) from all walks of life--rich, poor, white, black, Hispanic, blue collar, white collar--filled the meeting room and applauded heartily as 11 received their silver chips, the symbol of their graduation from the program.

Each graduate stood before his peers and talked about his battle to overcome addiction. On the screen behind them flashed their induction photograph, taken when they first came to the program, broke, homeless and addicted to drugs or alcohol.

At the end of the ceremony, the emcee called out graduate years (the first graduate was in 2001) and from the audience men and women rose and walked to the front of the room to stand behind the podium. By the time the last year was called, 2016, most of the chairs in the audience were empty and the front was packed.

Healing Transitions has graduated more than 700 over its 15-year history in Raleigh. Seven hundred men and women who entered homeless have completed the program with the tools they need to overcome the cause of that homelessness, addiction.

Contrast this with the challenges faced in Barnstable County, as outlined in an excellent report from the operators of Barnstable County's homeless shelter, the Housing Assistance Corporation of Cape Cod, "Closer to Home: Substance Abuse Treatment Options for the Homeless on the Cape and Islands." This concise, 41-page white paper demonstrates that there are relatively few treatment and recovery options available.

The report found that many of Cape's homeless currently have substance abuse problems and that a vast majority have had those issues in the past. The Cape's NOAH homeless

shelter in Hyannis screens for substance abuse and provides direction to those seeking help. But direction is not the same as hands-on assistance.

Because the NOAH shelter is dry, you cannot stay there under the influence of drugs and alcohol. By contrast, the Healing Transitions model operates a detox center on the property.

What the report recognizes is that one of the best times to guide people into recovery is when they are at their lowest. This is what prompted the Barnstable County Sheriff's Office to institute its Residential Substance Abuse Treatment Program, or RSAT. The program, run in the Barnstable County House of Correction, combines Alcoholics Anonymous with a military discipline. Prisoners who are seeking recovery can volunteer for the program.

One of the challenges facing the program is that the time spent in it is limited to the length of the prisoner's sentence. The program has found that one must participate a minimum of six months to be fully effective, but many sentences are shorter than that.

Based upon what I witnessed in North Carolina at Healing Transitions, six months isn't even near enough. Most of the men at the graduation ceremony had spent more than two years in the program. Almost every graduate had relapsed or run into a similar obstacles during that period.

Even two years isn't enough, as recovery is a lifelong commitment. What became evident at the graduation ceremony was the sense of community among all the graduates of the program, stretching back to 2001. The graduates of the program return to help those in the beginnings of their recovery. Almost the entire professional staff at Healing Transitions is composed of graduates.

This speaks to an extended community, the breadth of which extends not only within the homeless, but also stretches back decades. Here on Cape Cod, that community is frequently disrupted if not broken because addicts seeking help many times have to go off-Cape to complete their recovery.

Healing Transitions, for example, is part of a network of halfway houses and sober homes, something sorely lacking on Cape Cod, according to the Housing Assistance Corporation report. There are limited treatment options in Barnstable County as well, so many addicts must seek help off-Cape or, in many cases, out of the commonwealth.

I was attending the graduation at Healing Transitions because I have a family member who could not get the help he needed in Massachusetts. That he had to travel all the way

to North Carolina is obscene. In some respects, he was lucky in that other recovering addicts have had to go to Florida or California to get help.

There may be some who cheer that addicts have to leave the Cape so they won't be a burden to taxpayers or property owners. But the stark truth is that those in recovery are one of the most effective tools to help those beginning to seek help. We need that community, in whole and intact, here on the Cape.

The Housing Assistance Corporation report shows that those involved with homelessness on the Cape understand its relationship to substance abuse. The not-for-profit corporation is closing the NOAH shelter and relocating it using a new model similar to Healing Transitions in that the cooking and cleaning is done by those who receive services. Would it be too much of a stretch to just adopt the Healing Transitions model or, even better, not reinvent the wheel and bring in Healing Transitions to run the shelter?