



**City of Gainesville
Clerk of the Commission
Office of the City Commission**

PO Box 490, Station 19
Gainesville, FL 32627-0490
200 E. University Avenue
P: (352) 334-5015
F: (352) 334-2036

City of Gainesville Policy Program Preliminary Research & Analysis

200858

TOPIC: Community Based Approach for Panhandling

PREPARED BY: Samantha Steiner, Policy Research Fellow and

Zeriah K. Folston, Policy Oversight Administrator

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OBJECTIVE

Explore ways to reduce panhandling through a community resource programs that are similar to Gainesville Fire Rescue's Community Resource Paramedic Program.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Panhandling is often born out of a lack of resources and can be reduced by connecting those individuals to needed social services and employment opportunities. An example of this approach oriented to address medical problems is the Community Resource Paramedic program. The program is conducted through the Gainesville Fire Rescue Department and is designed to reduce recurrent 911 calls from individuals by helping residents better manage their health conditions and, as a result, improve their quality of life. While many cities and counties across the country, including Alachua County, have sought to criminalize panhandling to reduce its presence in the community, this approach has been found unconstitutional in many instances and is frequently criticized as ineffective.

The City of Gainesville already has programs that treat individuals and address the root of their problems, including Gainesville Police Department's Mental Health Co-Responder Team. Additionally, cities such as Albuquerque, New Mexico and Fontana, California are models for innovative programs that directly address panhandling, which can be utilized to help individuals at risk while also improve the atmosphere of the city for all residents.

HISTORY/BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Panhandling in Gainesville, Florida

Panhandling is an issue in Gainesville because those who engage in panhandling may deter shoppers from entering businesses, represent a larger social issue within the community, and may be unpleasant to passersby. It also poses a safety risk to panhandlers themselves, as a panhandler was killed by a car in April 2019 while standing in a median.¹

The Supreme Court ruling *Reed v. Gilbert* in 2015 illustrated how city ordinances restricting panhandling may violate First Amendment rights, presenting a challenge for cities trying to regulate the activity.² Alachua County previously enforced an ordinance restricting begging, panhandling or soliciting, but halted enforcement in 2017 following this ruling.³ After updating this ordinance in 2018⁴ to make unlawful any person occupying a public street or interacting with an occupant of any vehicle, this regulation was still criticized as unconstitutional by the ACLU, which has hindered the enforcement and efficacy of this approach.⁵ For example, from the updating of the ordinance in February of 2018 to the end of 2019, there was only one citation issued for a violation of the ordinance. Aside from the legality, similar ordinances throughout the country have been criticized for not addressing the cause of panhandling or helping those individuals gain employment, but rather displace them out of sight of the community.

As of 2018, there were 641 homeless people in Alachua County.⁶ According to the 2020 Point in Time Survey, there were 880 homeless individuals across Alachua, Bradford, Gilchrist, Levy, and Putnam counties, which was a 9.45% increase from 2019. However, in Alachua County, homelessness decreased by 18.4%.⁷

Gainesville Fire Rescue Community Resource Paramedic program

The Community Resource Paramedic (CRP) program was established in 2014 to use Gainesville Fire Rescue's resources in a creative way to reduce utilization and better solve residents' health issues at the root. A primary aspect of the program's structure is case management; patients are identified through referrals from firefighters, and UF Health clinics and UF Health discharge nurses treat recurrent patients or those who need connection to additional resources. The program helps residents with mobility issues, mental health, transportation issues, substance abuse, women's health, pediatric care, and chronic diseases including respiratory conditions and uncontrolled diabetes. Case management for individual

¹<https://www.wcjb.com/content/news/City-of-Gainesville-continues-efforts-to-regulate-panhandling--512090841.html>

²https://www.aclufl.org/sites/default/files/letter_to_alachua_county_panhandling_8.30.18.pdf

³https://www.aclufl.org/sites/default/files/letter_to_alachua_county_panhandling_8.30.18.pdf

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https://library.municode.com/fl/alachua_county/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=PTIADCO_TIT11OF_CH118BEPASOPECA_S118.03BEPAPESOCARERE

⁵https://www.aclufl.org/sites/default/files/letter_to_alachua_county_panhandling_8.30.18.pdf

⁶<https://mycbs4.com/news/local/officials-respond-to-panhandling-concerns-in-gainesville>

⁷<https://www.wuft.org/news/2021/01/27/alachua-county-conducts-2021-point-in-time-count-amid-pandemic/>

patients is then conducted by a team of a paramedic and the CRP coordinator, who visit the patient's home to identify the patient's needs, evaluate their medical and social circumstances, and develop a plan to manage the patient's health. The patient is then connected to any resources they may need and the CRP team conducts follow-up visits until the patient is fully equipped with the knowledge and tools to manage their health independently.⁸

Thus, the purpose of the program is to ensure patients receive a continuum of care which addresses their health conditions at the root of repeated hospitalizations or emergency calls, saving taxpayer dollars by preventing future utilization of emergency services and improving citizens' long-term health.

The capacity of the program was reliant on a one-year \$50,000 grant from the University of Florida to establish the program and provide funding for the CRP coordinator position, until some funding was then allocated to the City of Gainesville and additional grants were given by the University.⁹

There are typically 15 patients under CRP case management who receive weekly visits. Additionally, the program is run by City of Gainesville employees, UF Health faculty, and UF student interns. Since its founding, the program saw decreased rates of ER use, decreased rates of hospital admission, and increased use of primary care services.¹⁰ Some of the program's community partners include UF Health, The Salvation Army, Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, Hospice, Reichert House Youth Academy, Home Depot and Bread of the Mighty Food Bank.

While this program is designed to address medical issues, it requires specially-trained emergency responders to enter the home and investigate social factors which could be contributing to the patient's use of emergency services. A similar approach may be useful to address panhandlers and other individuals who commit low-level crimes. This would include the creation of a specially-trained team in the police department that can reach out to panhandlers, assess their home life and social situation, and consequently connect them to needed resources. In doing this, the City of Gainesville may see a reduction in unwanted activity and an increase in the quality of life of all residents similar to the results seen from the Community Resource Paramedic program.

Gainesville Police Department Mental Health Co-Responder Team

In April 2019, the Gainesville Police Department (GPD) partnered with Meridian Behavioral Healthcare Inc. to establish a mental health co-responder team, which jointly responds to calls involving mental illness, substance abuse, and emotionally charged situations. The team consists of a GPD officer who has received crisis intervention training and a master's level

⁸ <https://www.gainesville.com/news/20190116/community-resource-paramedic-program-helps-with-health-issues>

⁹ <https://www.gainesville.com/news/20190116/community-resource-paramedic-program-helps-with-health-issues>

¹⁰ <https://www.firerescue1.com/paramedicine/articles/fla-program-aims-to-reduce-911-calls-er-visits-qpLK59BCSJcOEjdS/>

mental health clinician, who are both full time employees.¹¹ The clinician is funded by Meridian's Department of Children and Families managing entity, Lutheran Services, while the officer is provided and funded by the GPD.¹² The program's goals are to prevent unnecessary incarceration and hospitalization of mentally ill individuals while providing community support, follow-up, and care coordination for individuals in crisis.¹³ The team responds to calls from dispatch and from other officers who decide the team is best suited to handle the call, and patrols Monday through Thursday from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. After arriving at a scene, the team will assess the individuals in the situation and try to refer them to outpatient mental health treatment or connect them to community resources.¹⁴

The program has been considered highly effective; in 2018, the team diverted 72% of individuals contacted who would have been Baker Acted and were instead referred to mental health outpatient treatment or were admitted on a voluntary basis for inpatient treatment.¹⁰

In 2018, the team also diverted 93% of individuals contacted that could have been arrested on scene, saving taxpayers approximately \$229,680.¹⁵

Both of these programs implemented by the City of Gainesville have been successful in using a preventative approach to address the problems of residents who utilize emergency services at high rates. When receiving emergency care, the focus is often on treating the most immediate, severe problem. Programs like these can improve the quality of life of residents by ensuring patients have access to continuous care that solves the root of their issues and that they can receive necessary long-term treatment and resources. However, administrators of both programs have stated that there is a high demonstrated need for their services in the community and additional funding is necessary to expand their services and help more residents. Thus, one strategy to address social issues that contribute to crime rates is to expand effective programs that are already in existence to increase their scope and capacity.

One downside to both programs is that they primarily aim to help residents suffering from health concerns, whether physical or mental. However, when examining panhandlers or those who frequently commit low-level crimes, the individuals may not be explicitly suffering from any mental or physical health conditions; rather, they may be suffering from difficult social circumstances or a lack of resources. Thus, it may be advantageous to expand the scope of the programs to address all residents in need of social services to connect them to resources and proactively reduce illegal behavior in the city of Gainesville.

Grace Marketplace

GRACE is a one-stop homeless resource center serving Gainesville and Alachua County, which provides resources and services for anyone experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Services

¹¹ <https://www.mbhci.org/treatment-and-service/outreach-prevention-services/co-responder-team/>

¹² https://www.lsfnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Meridian-2019_Co-Responder-Program.pdf

¹³ <https://www.gainesville.com/news/20190102/mental-health-team-diverts-those-in-distress-from-jail>

¹⁴ <https://www.gainesville.com/news/20190102/mental-health-team-diverts-those-in-distress-from-jail>

¹⁵ ¹⁰Mental Health Team 2018 Annual Data Report

provided by GRACE include emergency shelter, permanent housing, showers, hot meals, storage, case management, job training, and providing space for health care and other services by partner providers.¹⁶ Partner providers include Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, Three Rivers Legal Services, Alachua County Social Services, Peaceful Paths, University of Florida Mobile Medical Unit, Florida Department of Children and Families, and Bread of the Mighty Food Bank, among others. Additionally, GRACE and its partners provide individuals with domestic abuse, veteran, mental health, and financial services, along with access to household goods, grocery vouchers, and follow-up services.¹⁷

Many programs around the country which emphasize a preventative approach to reduce panhandling center around connecting those individuals with programs such as GRACE, as those programs can then leverage their existing services and resources to assist individuals in getting help where it is needed. Thus, the tools of GRACE Marketplace could be utilized or expanded upon to help connect panhandlers with the employment opportunities and social services they need to reduce the likelihood that they return to panhandling.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

Fontana, California

Fontana, California is a city located 50 miles east of Los Angeles and has approximately 215,000 residents.¹⁸ This city acts as a model for their approach to addressing panhandlers by providing adequate social services and substance abuse treatment to reduce panhandlers' need to panhandle. The city had been experiencing significant problems involving large homeless and transient populations, and businesses were upset that the panhandlers were discouraging customers from frequenting their establishments. The police department assembled a group of community, business, and church leaders who developed a plan to open an office where homeless individuals could be given counseling and processed for entry into various public and private programs called the TEN-4 facility, similar to Gainesville's GRACE Marketplace.¹⁹

In Fontana, when a police patrol officer contacts a homeless person, they offer to voluntarily transport that person to the TEN-4 facility.²⁰ Thus, it may be useful for police officers or other city employees to create a dialogue with panhandlers and investigate why they are panhandling. If most individuals panhandle due to a lack of resources such as stable housing, unemployment, food insecurity, domestic abuse or health conditions, providing transportation and referrals to GRACE Marketplace may reduce the need for panhandling.

Lansing, Michigan

¹⁶ <https://www.gracemarketplace.org/>

¹⁷ <https://www.gracemarketplace.org/services>

¹⁸ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fontanacitycalifornia/PST045219>

¹⁹ [https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/library/awards/goldstein/1998/98-20\(F\).pdf](https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/library/awards/goldstein/1998/98-20(F).pdf)

²⁰ [https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/library/awards/goldstein/1998/98-20\(F\).pdf](https://popcenter.asu.edu/sites/default/files/library/awards/goldstein/1998/98-20(F).pdf)

Lansing, Michigan has a population of approximately 118,000.²¹ The Lansing Police Department (LPD) hired a social worker as a way to reduce repeat 911 calls. This strategy was implemented to address the diverse needs of individuals who use police services, and acknowledge that some of these issues would be better handled by individuals with a different skillset. Additionally, by hiring a social worker to respond to calls focused on homeless and mentally ill individuals who may need social services, it allows police officers to focus on public safety issues.²² The need for this program was found in a study by Wayne State University, which found that 54% of individuals booked into Michigan jails reported a substance abuse problem, 45% said they were housing insecure and 34% had some indication of mental illness. Additionally, the study found that counties which provided more mental health treatment saw a reduction in recidivism rates. The social worker is a clinical social worker and psychotherapist prior to working with the LPD, and has the knowledge and connections to refer individuals to community services that officers may not. The social worker also sets up treatment referrals and helps make appointments for individuals, while following up to ensure they get the help they need.²³ This program is similar to GPD's Mental Health Co-Responder Team, yet has a wider scope because it focuses on other social issues outside of mental health.

Albuquerque, New Mexico

The City of Albuquerque has a total population of around 560,000 people²⁴, and around 1,400 homeless individuals. Albuquerque has implemented an innovative model for addressing panhandling by offering individuals on the street jobs. The Albuquerque government partnered with St. Martin's Hospitality Center, a local nonprofit organization that provides services to homeless, to launch the "There's a Better Way" program.²⁵

At 7 a.m., a city-owned van drives around the city and stops to ask panhandlers if they want to work; those that do are driven to a site to work a maintenance or beautification job for the city, such as trash pickup or weed clearing. The program received an initial \$50,000 delegation from the city to fund the van, the driver's salary, and the workers' wages, which was later increased after the program was found to be effective. There's a Better Way aims to hire six panhandlers per day and pays them \$9 per hour for an average of five hours.¹The workers are also provided lunch and informed of the housing, health, and employment resources available through the nonprofit organization who runs the program, as well as other local agencies.²⁶

²¹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/lansingcitymichigan>

²² <https://www.lansingmi.gov/464/Community-Services#:~:text=The%20Lansing%20Police%20Department%20is,mentally%20ill%2C%20and%20addicted%20citizens.>

²³ <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/2020/01/29/lansing-police-social-worker-homeless-mental-illness-drugs-substance-abuse/4562925002/>

²⁴ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/albuquerquecitynewmexico>

²⁵ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-08-15/albuquerque-s-there-s-a-better-way-van-program-connects-homeless-panhandlers-with-jobs>

²⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-08-15/albuquerque-s-there-s-a-better-way-van-program-connects-homeless-panhandlers-with-jobs>

In the first year of the program's existence, 302 homeless individuals worked shifts and 116 people have returned to the nonprofit to seek work through their job-development office. The van initially used a first come, first serve model for those who wanted to work, but now administrators ensure at least five of the six people they pick up each day are first-time workers, since the aim is to reach as many people as possible and connect them with more permanent employment.²⁷ Following Albuquerque's success, cities such as Lexington, Kentucky and Syracuse, New York have implemented similar programs.

This program is innovative and has become popular, but would also require somewhat extensive funding and creative utilization of city resources. It would require identification of work tasks for panhandlers to complete, and initial research to determine if panhandlers in Gainesville would be willing to work those tasks. Additionally, the original program in Albuquerque is facing backlash and threats of defunding under suspicion that employees operating the van were picking up less workers than required and pocketing the money themselves.²⁸ Thus, the city would need to address potential room for fraud in the model and allow for more oversight in the program administration. However, this program is generally considered well-designed to address the needs of panhandlers and homeless individuals.

Lexington, Kentucky

Modeled after the Albuquerque program, Lexington, Kentucky created their "End Panhandling Now" program in 2017 to offer a ride and temporary job to panhandlers who want an opportunity to work. The program is operated by the New Life Day Center, which is a day-time homeless shelter and connection point, and with the program a van drives around the city twice a week to offer panhandlers jobs cleaning up the community for \$9/hour. The City of Lexington is primarily responsible for providing jobs and paying wages, however private businesses needing day laborers are also encouraged to participate, although they must privately fund the hourly pay.²⁹ The program received \$100,000 in city funds, and an online donation program, LexGive.com, was also created in an effort to have public donations ultimately fund the program. Within the first year, the program received nearly \$10,000 in donations, however the funding levels only allow for the van to run twice a week.³⁰

In the first nine months of operation, the program had 156 individual participants, and of those roughly 60% had used the van three or more times. Four of the individuals who participated in the program found permanent housing within the first nine months of participation, and five were enrolled in an employment program to lead to permanent employment through services operated by the New Life Day Center. According to the New Life Center, prior to the program individuals reported between 125 and 150 panhandlers a day on Lexington streets, which dropped to about 20 a day within a year of the program's operation.

²⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-08-15/albuquerque-s-there-s-a-better-way-van-program-connects-homeless-panhandlers-with-jobs>

²⁸ <https://www.krqe.com/news/albuquerque-metro/inspector-general-better-way-program-not-reaching-full-potential/>

²⁹ <https://www.lexingtonky.gov/news/04-25-2017/end-panhandling-now-van-offer-ride-and-job-those-asking-help>

³⁰ <https://www.kentucky.com/news/local/counties/fayette-county/article199355229.html>

The Panhandler Jobs program was suspended by the New Life Day Center in March of 2020 due to the inability to run the program while maintaining social distancing.³¹

PRELIMINARY COST/BENEFIT ANALYSIS

Costs

- Panhandlers may not be interested in resources offered to them
- Panhandlers may show distrust in police officers or city employees
- It may be difficult to locate individuals in need of services
- It may be difficult to secure funding for expanding existing programs or creating new programs

Benefits

- Address social issues at the root
- Providing social services is potentially more effective at reducing panhandling than displacing homeless individuals and panhandlers through ordinances that simply regulate their activity
- Improve the quality of life of homeless individuals and panhandlers
- Improve the aesthetic of the community
- Prevent panhandling that may discourage customers from frequenting businesses

PRELIMINARY AND ILLUSTRATIVE LIST OF POTENTIAL STAKEHOLDERS

- Gainesville Police Department
- Gainesville Fire Rescue
- GRACE Marketplace
- University of Florida Police Department
- University of Florida College of Medicine
- UF Health
- Meridian Behavioral Health, Inc.
- Alachua County Board of County Commissioners

RECOMMENDED POINTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH/DISCUSSION

- Program funding may be a significant barrier, given that existing programs are searching for additional funds to expand
- Entirely new programs may not be necessary, as existing programs may be able to expand or adapt to address the needs of a wider target population

³¹ <https://www.lex18.com/news/coronavirus/lexington-access-restricted-to-walk-in-visitors-in-city-buildings>

- Research may be needed to better understand the homeless and panhandler population of Gainesville to gauge their needs and interest in various programs before pursuing an option