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# Planning to Make a Difference: A Retrospective Account on Learning How to Organize

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**Student Organization Based on Homelessness and Poverty Impacting the Local Homeless  
Community**

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**Abstract:**

There is a homeless community that surrounds the University of South Florida, where students have the opportunity to play an active role in making a difference in these individuals' lives. However, due to stereotypical thinking and prejudgment on the homeless population, the amount of involvement from the student body is minimal. Therefore, through starting the student organization, Student Coalition Against Homelessness and Poverty, we have an avenue to connect the student population to outside agencies that work with the homeless population. My plan is to build a relationship with other agencies in order to have students more involved with the community they live in and fight against stereotypical judgment on homeless individuals.

## **Introduction:**

What does the term homeless mean? Who do you think of when you hear the term homeless person? These were questions that I answered as a student without conducting any work with the homeless population. My response was very similar to the average American's view on homelessness. A homeless person is someone with no home to sleep in every night, and people panhandling with a sign on the side of streets was my initial image of a homeless individual.

Homeless defined by HUD (US Department of Housing and Urban Development) is an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations, or an institution that provides temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or a public or private place not designed for regular sleeping accommodations for human beings.

This definition covers a wide range of individuals that need help in the community and the definition from state to state fluctuates including even more people under the term homeless. So how do we change the conception of every homeless person is begging for money on the side of the street? By working and helping the community. Homelessness is a major part of the community we live in. According to the Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County's homeless count conducted in 2009, there are 9,566 homeless men, women and children in Hillsborough County alone. When advocating against homeless

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stigmatism, the most effective route is to consider the homeless individual to be just another person living and trying to survive. Because someone does not have a home, does not change the person they are. This is a common misconception when encouraging others to help the homeless population.

The college community is no exception to the stereotypical thinking against homelessness. It is however the first place to fight against homeless stereotyping in the future. College students are the leaders of the future. Some study art and advertisement, while others study law or medicine. In order to make a difference in the future, we have to work with the leaders of tomorrow. The Student Coalition against Homelessness and Poverty is a student organization at the University of South Florida that focuses on homeless and underprivileged individuals in the community. The goal of this organization is to get students involved in the community and educate against stereotypes of homeless individuals.

Using the organization as a means to communicate to the student body, an opportunity presents itself to administer information to the student population and offer involvement opportunities in order to change stereotyping homelessness in the future. Working with non-student organization in the Tampa and St. Petersburg area is a goal for the organization to get involved in the community while focusing on advocating against homelessness.

## **Background on Homelessness in the United States:**

The first reported cases of homelessness in the United States were in the 1640's (Cook 2010). Individuals who were homeless during this era consisted of immigrants and natives that were forced out of their homes. At this time, in order to settle into a town, you had to plead your case before the "town fathers" that you will be a sustainable member of society. Those who were not approved were forced to move to the next town and try their luck there. Many were turned down due to physical/mental illness, religious beliefs, widowed, aged etc.

Another class of homelessness that was begun from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century was during the industrial revolution, where people were migrating to the cities. Although the reason for migrating was to find a better job, many ended up homeless with no job. The plethora of people in the cities created different classes of individuals including a "lower urban class" (Cook, 2010). Also, due to job injuries, the industrial revolution caused a lot of workers to lose limbs which made them unable to work. With no laws to protect these individuals at this time, their families were often left out to the streets.



The Civil War caused an increase in homeless individuals as well. It was during this time that the term “tramp” and “bum” came about as reference to terms used in the military for soldiers collecting food or wood to build a fire for the camp (Cook, 2010). With the use of morphine on soldiers, amputations were more often successfully performed. However, due to the condition of the soldier, after the war it was difficult to find jobs and provide for their family. With the advancement of medicine, veterans are more likely to live from injuries occurring in war. There are veterans from every war that end up homeless due to many situations including physical injuries or mental instability. It is estimated that today there are 107,000 veterans homeless on any given night. There are also estimated to be 1.5 million other veterans that are at risk of being homeless (Veterans, 2010).

With each major disaster including flooding and economical crisis, there is an increase in homeless individuals. One example of this is the flooding of the Mississippi river in 1927. It

was the most destructive flood in the history of the United States, causing many deaths and injuries and even more homeless. It is estimated that 700,000 people were left homeless due to the flood. Relief efforts were put in place to aid those suffering from the flood by president Hoover. However, his promises to the community were left uncompleted and the homeless individuals suffering from the incident were left on the streets with no help (Dollman, 2010).

During the great depression there was a tremendous increase in homeless individuals. During 1929 to 1939, the country was under economical hardship with job loss and environmental disasters, the homeless population increased almost sevenfold (About Homelessness, Great Depression). Aside from

Germany, America was the most affected by the great depression with approximately one third of the population without work. Government aid was slow; President Hoover dealt with the situation with a



lassies-fair approach. This lack of aid to citizens left the country in debt and entire families homeless. The first action by the government against homelessness was the Federal Transient Service from 1933 to 1936. This involved federally funded shelters, job training and work camps to the homeless population. It was effective however it was removed in 1936 due to budget cutting in the Roosevelt administration.

Today, there are many men women and children homeless all over the world. In America, there are over 600,000 homeless in any given night according to the 2008 annual Homeless Assessment report on Sheltered and Unsheltered homeless. This count conducted is

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according to the definition of homeless by HUD (US Department of Housing and Urban Development). This states that the term homeless is an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations, or an institution that provides temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or a public or private place not designed for regular sleeping accommodations for human beings.

In Florida, the definition for homelessness is more defined and does not include individuals doubled up in homes (two or more families living in a single house due to inability to sustain the home financially on their own), staying in hotel rooms or living in tents. Even with this definition of homelessness there are still over 50,000 homeless individuals in Florida according to the Florida Department of Children and Families Homeless 2009 report. Florida has the third largest homeless population in the nation.

In Hillsborough County, the same definition for homelessness applies. There are just fewer than 10,000 homeless individuals in Hillsborough County according to the Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County 2009 Homeless count.

Homeless individuals from the beginning have carried a stigmatism in society. These people are seen as less productive members of society rather than being looked upon as less fortunate members with dreams and goals as any other individual. It is an ongoing struggle to change the views of society with homeless individuals. Organizations and

agencies have been put in place by members of society and the government that see homeless individuals as any other human being, not just homeless.

Some nationwide agencies that work towards ending homelessness in America include the National Coalition for the Homeless, H.U.D. (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), National Alliance to End Homelessness and many homeless shelters across the nation.



The Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County is working to fight homelessness in our own backyard. There are also homeless shelters around the Tampa Bay area that provide temporary housing to homeless individuals and families including Metropolitan Ministries, New Beginnings, The Meridian House and many more.

There is a point in time count conducted to estimate the amount of homeless individuals present at any given time in a certain area. The last count was conducted in 2009; the next count is scheduled for January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011. During the point in time count, the goal of the event is to get as many homeless individuals to fill out some information in order to estimate the total number of homeless individuals in the area. This information is used by the government in funding local agencies that work with the homeless population and therefore the count is a necessity to every county.

**Organization:**

There is a lack of connection between students and the community. At the University of South Florida there are over five hundred student organizations whose focuses range from natural food sources to dance and every other major available to students. There is however a tendency for the organizations to focus on the student population. The Student Coalition against Homelessness and Poverty is a student organization at the University of South Florida that is different from the rest in that it focuses on making a difference in the community by getting involved through volunteering and educating others on the facts of homeless and underprivileged individuals in our community.



Starting the Student Coalition against Homelessness and Poverty began spring semester 2010 through a major works/major issues assignment. Our plan was to differentiate from other student organization by focusing on the community that surrounds us. Working with the homeless and underprivileged population and

Student Coalition  
Against  
Homelessness  
&  
Poverty

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educating others on the reality of the situation was the foundation of our organization. After just one semester there are now thirty two registered members and we hold monthly meetings to keep they members updated and offer more information on events and education on homelessness and poverty in the community. The organization was also successful in conducting two events on campus where all donations went to local agencies working with the homeless population. During these events, a focus was to provide information to students, encourage involvement in our organization and in the community with the homeless and underprivileged individuals. Every week our organization has the opportunity to work with another student organization and on a volunteering event called "Project Downtown". This event involves feeding homeless individuals every Friday in the downtown area of Tampa. It has offered members of the organization to get involved in the community.

#### Published Purpose of the Organization:

Student Coalition for Homelessness and Poverty (SCHP) is a group of students interested in the issues associated with homelessness and poverty. Our organization is dedicated to raising awareness of the difficulties impoverished and homeless individuals and families face, as well as what we as students can do to help. SCHP provides volunteer opportunities for students who are interested in working with homeless individuals and/or families. Through our partnership with community agencies, we participate in efforts to effect social change that positively impact the lives of homeless and impoverished individuals and families.

**Plan:**

The Student Coalition against Homelessness and Poverty at the University of South Florida provided an opportunity to connect the student population with the community and work to fight against homeless stigmatism in the student community. In order to provide volunteer opportunities to members, building a relationship with agencies that work with the homeless population was the first step. Through my position as the vice-president of Student Coalition Against Homelessness and Poverty, developing a relationship with agencies was an initiative I set out to complete.

Through this position, holding different opportunities for the members of the organization to participate in with outside agencies that work with the homeless was also part of the plan along with getting other student organizations to participate in the volunteer opportunities in order to raise awareness on our cause and fight against stigmatism in the student community.

Through time constraints and inadequate planning, the amount of connection attained through the first semester of the organization with outside agencies dealing with the homeless population was minimal. However, volunteering and setting up an on campus event to raise awareness on homelessness and poverty in the community as part of the plan was set in motion. This event consists of hosting a drive for socks and ponchos to be used at the point in time count that will be conducted in January 2011 by the Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County.

Building the member base of the organization was added to the plan due to the necessity to increase awareness on campus. Through conducting the event and advertisement for the event and the organization, students will be exposed to the homeless in our community and have the opportunity to get involved through involvement in our organization with outside agencies.

**Execution:**

Building the foundations for the Student Coalition against Homelessness and Poverty required recruiting members and setting up officer positions for the following semester. Due to the inability to complete the connection of the organization to outside agencies, it was important to provide the tools and information needed for the next officers to complete that task. Once the officers were chosen through an online poll with the members voting, all positions were filled in our organization. Through researching local agencies that work with the homeless and underprivileged individuals of the community, I was successful in organizing a book of information for the next vice-president and volunteer coordinator for the organization. This information was complete with contact information and a basic overview of what the agency provides to the community and who to contact for volunteer opportunities. Providing the future leaders of the organization with information on the point in time count that will be conducted in January of 2011 was also provided in the handbook and also verbally through meeting with the new officers.

Planning for the semester was a major part of the project. Starting with the meeting to gain more information on the Point in Time Count conducted with the Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County. At this meeting I was able to meet with Arthur Garrand who works with Tampa Family Health Centers. He offered to host a joint event with the Student Coalition against Homelessness and Poverty to conduct a drive and collect socks and ponchos to be distributed during the point in time count in January.

Arthur Garrand with Tampa Family Health Centers was able to provide a bus with free cholesterol, diabetes, blood pressure and HIV testing the day of the event. We scheduled the event to take place Friday, November 19<sup>th</sup> 2010, the last day of hunger and homelessness awareness week.

In order to make the event successful a lot of planning and



**Socks  
&  
Ponchos**  
**Drive For the  
Homeless**

**November 19th 8am-4pm**  
**Marshal Center North Entrance**

**FREE**

Blood Pressure,  
Diabetes, Cholesterol and HIV  
Testing

For everyone who brings Socks and/or Poncho  
Provided by Tampa Family Health Centers



advertising was required. Creating a flyer, a facebook page, advertising in all major building on campus and getting other student organizations involved was just the start of planning for this event.

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We handed out flyers and information two weeks before the date every Wednesday at Bull Market (a set-up-shop market in front of the Marshal Center Conducted every week at the University of South Florida), and chalked the sidewalks the entire week of hunger and



homelessness awareness week. Involvement of the students in our organization was crucial to cover the amount of advertisement needed to make this event successful.

We were also able to coordinate with other organization also participating in hunger and homelessness awareness week. CLCE (Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement) and PAMSA (Pre-

American Medical Student Association) were just two of the many other organizations participating in raising awareness on campus during hunger and homelessness



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awareness week. For every organization, I was able to attend their meeting and promote the socks and ponchos event for homelessness in order to generate as much advertisement as possible.



During the event we collected socks/ponchos and donations in exchange for free medical testing provided by Tampa Family Health Centers. We also handed out flyers, played music

and had games to play with students to get as much attention to our event as possible.

We were successful in generating awareness on homelessness in our community, giving information on joining



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Student Coalition against Homelessness and Poverty, as well as collecting almost 50 socks and ponchos to be used during the point in time count in January.

**Conclusion:**

Through my involvement in the Student Coalition against Homelessness and poverty, I was successful in generating an avenue for students to get involved in the community. The successors in the organization now have the tools to provide many volunteer opportunities, events and be involved in the point in time count that will be conducted in January of 2011 with the Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County.

Hosting the event was also a major accomplishment. The collection of socks and ponchos was successful and we were able to collect almost 50 socks and ponchos during the event. The free medical testing provided by Tampa Family Health Centers generated a lot of good feedback and also created a contact with whom the organization can work with again in the future. The drive was also successful in generating awareness against homelessness and poverty in our community and encouraging students to get involved.

In planning for the future of the organization Student Coalition against Homelessness and Poverty, they will be involved in the point in time count conducted in January as well as continue to offer volunteer and event opportunities on and off campus. It is also imperative that the connections with outside organizations be made in order to make an outstanding impact on the homeless community that surrounds our school. During the transition from old officers to new officers, I will make myself available especially during the point in time count and the opportunity with meeting other agencies in order to ease the responsibility of the successors in the organization.

Overall, the impact the organization and my involvement had a positive effect on the student community and leads the way for further advancement to be made in advocating against homelessness and poverty in our community.

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