



The GP REDline Survey on Homelessness in Parks Provides New Insights and Helped to Ground Discussions at 2018 GP RED Think Tank

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The 2018 REDline Survey on Homelessness provided a statistical grounding for discussions that took place at the 2018 Think Tank. The Think Tank session, chaired by Chris Dropinski of GreenPlay and Brian Albright, Director of San Diego County Parks and Recreation, resulted in a broad ranging discussion of some of the challenges faced by professionals and elected officials in dealing with homelessness and the associated impacts on public lands. Supported by findings from the GP REDline survey, the Think Tank conversation drew upon a variety of thoughts and experiences from practitioners. It was documented in a video that is available online at: <https://youtu.be/4B1JkhuXgOs>

Findings from the REDline survey provided quantitative insight on opinions

and experiences of professionals dealing with homelessness in communities throughout the U.S. The survey was based on 150 responses from across the United States and was distributed by email to a GP RED maintained list of professionals. Survey questions were designed to obtain current information on challenges posed by homeless individuals in public spaces, and to identify some of the initiatives that have been undertaken. Selected findings from the survey are summarized below and a more complete reporting of results can be obtained by going to the [REDline Survey section](#) of the GP RED website.

In answer to the following question, “What is the term that is most often used for the segment of your community/population that is without housing on a day to day basis? results show that “homeless” is, by far, the most fre-

quently used term, followed by “transient” and “unauthorized camping.” Although there have been conversations in some communities about using terms other than “homeless,” results show that this term is much more likely to be used in communities throughout the country than any other term.

Survey respondents indicated that both their community and their department (or organization) are generally quite ineffective in dealing with homelessness/unauthorized camping in parks and public spaces. Virtually none of the respondents said their organizations are “extremely effective” and about 40% called their efforts a 1 or 2 on the 5-point scale, where 1 means “not at all effective.” Clearly, results point to a need for more effective efforts at both the community and agency levels.



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When asked about where community efforts on homelessness are focused (using a 5-point scale between “prevention policies” and “enforcement policies,” and with “a balance” in the middle) more respondents call their efforts a “balance” (44%) than any other category. Few communities are emphasizing just prevention, with more leaning toward enforcement.

The survey explored the types of services that are being provided to serve homeless populations. In general, community agencies other than parks and recreation are most likely to provide services to local homeless populations (such as food assistance, shelter, access to computers/telephones, social services, etc.). However, parks and recreation agencies do often provide a number of amenities. Most (70%) were providing some level of restroom facilities, followed by electricity/charging at 30% and showers at 23%.

An area of notable activity by local agencies is in the use of design standards and infrastructure that discourage overnight stays in parks. The GP REDline survey showed that 32% of respondents indicated that their agencies were using these techniques. Similar to a recent NRPA study, research shows between 25% and 35% of respondents said their communities were not using design to mitigate homelessness. However, in both studies there was a strong indication that such standards are being considered (27% of GP REDline respondents). Clearly, design standards is an increasing area of interest among professionals and there is likely to be more attention given to best practices in this area in the future.

The survey provides documentation on who is leading the charge at the local



level. Based on the responses, the following agencies were most likely to be playing a leadership role in dealing with homelessness:

- Schools (59%)
- Non-profits (55%)
- Parks and Recreation (53%)
- Faith-based organizations (48%)

According to the survey, libraries, health and human services agencies and police departments played relatively smaller roles in terms of leadership at the community level.

These results show some differences from those obtained through the NRPA Homelessness Survey of members. Specifically, the REDline survey showed a relatively higher identification of “schools” in a leadership role, and a lower identification of “police” as playing a role. These differences could be explored further in any future research.

The survey finding that parks and recreation agencies are still considered to be relatively ineffective in their efforts (as discussed above), yet in a relative-

ly high leadership role, is significant. Further, the survey provides guidance on other agencies that are viewed to be successful – schools, non-profits and faith-based entities. They represent some of the logical partners for successful cross-agency collaboration and coordination.

NEXT STEPS – A CALL TO ACTION:

Clearly, the nature of homelessness problems requires efforts from a wide range of professionals and organizations. The survey findings suggest some of the logical champions for these efforts and the discussion at the Think Tank and through NRPA has resulted in ideas, suggestions and expressions of interest. There is a need and appetite for more information and a sharing of resources. How should practitioners continue to develop skills and knowledge to promote understanding, influence strategies and obtain a seat at the table as municipal efforts increase? And how do you determine your place in collaborative efforts?



One recent example of action at the local level is reported by Nick Franco, Director of San Luis Obispo County Parks and Recreation. He describes recent efforts in his California county where, inspired by an NRPA session on this topic and the deeper dive discussion at the GP RED Think Tank, a part-

nership formed with the County Social Services Department has spawned a “Mental Health 1ST Aid” program. It is an alternative to enforcement, providing training for rangers and others who are literally the 1st responders on public lands, enabling them to make an evaluation of mental health condition,

and offering options for treatment, just as an EMT offers treatment for a physical condition. A further partnership with libraries and the non-profit community is working on legitimizing use of appropriate camping areas and parking spots and looking for new parcels that could be designated for long-term camping to address the immediate issue. San Luis Obispo County representatives are active participants in a regionally hosted (Lisa Nielsen, Seattle Parks and Recreation) monthly call on the issue of homelessness designed for parks and recreation professionals to share practical responses to current and potential circumstances surrounding this critical issue.

More information on these efforts and others will be forthcoming in the next RED newsletter. In the meantime, let us know what is happening in your part of the country. Share your comments and report on efforts that are showing promise at: <https://survey.rcresearch.com/s3/Comment-on-GP-REDLine>