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Beginning History of Tempe's I-HELP Outreach Ministry

By Lawn Griffiths

Humans have roamed the planet from the start, always needing some place, somewhere, somehow, to pause for night's darkness and to find rest in reasonable safety before sun's fierce return pushes them into a new day of rambling.

In more civilized times, a lack of resources to secure a place for the night especially meant fending for oneself with the risks that accompany it.

"No place to stay the night" echoes through time, most famously to the Joseph and Mary story in Bethlehem.

No one has recorded when the first homeless showed up at doors of homes in Tempe, Arizona.

No doubt from the beginning, there has always been those who found shelter in the generosity of desert brush, under old machinery, under scrap heaps, in a shed or under bridges and trees.

As the community grew, so more people with few resources arrived and lived on the periphery in quest of help from householders, churches or merchants. Every established house of worship in Tempe, through the nearly century and a half of Tempe, has likely given some forms of help to the needy. Many have been routinely turned away – the needy told there are not the resources to help them.

Formalized help came in 1971 with the grass-roots start-up of Tempe Community Action Agency and the Escalante Center in Victory Acres in conjunction with the expansion of the War on Poverty, bringing federal dollars to alleviate need. The Salvation Army had brought its unique brand of social services in the 1950s. Tempe Community Council was founded in 1972 as a quasi-governmental agency, heavy on community volunteers, to provide a big picture coordination to a range of programs and resources that helped people and shaped community consensus and delivery.

By the 1980s, individual Valley cities explored creating overnight shelters for the homeless. The most ambitious and largest was Central Arizona Shelter Services, or CASS, in the near west side of downtown Phoenix. A family shelter, Prehab La Mesita, was established in a crumbling motel in west Mesa. My Sister's Place opened in Chandler for women and children in domestic violence situations. United Methodist Outreach Ministries, or UMOM, launched a major social service operation in Phoenix, with food, clothing and housing. Food kitchens likewise were set up, including Andre House in Phoenix and Paz de Cristo in Mesa, beginning in 1988, with religious congregations taking ownership of one night a week to provide a fully cooked meal to the homeless. In 1972, Soroptomist International of Phoenix launched Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development to provide help to homeless and runaway youth. Independent living services for youth were added in 1986.

Tempe Youth Resource Center (TYRC) was opened in November 2002, following the successes of Tumbleweed's Phoenix Drop-In Center. TYRC provides basic supportive services on site such as food, hygiene and clothing in addition to intensive case management services for homeless youth. In 2005, the Drop-In Center served approximately 3,416 meals to about 264 youth and mobile street outreach connected with an additional 357 youth.

Growing complaints from merchants on Mill Avenue in the 1990s about the homeless, especially youth, hanging out along Mill, were impetus for the Tempe City Council to enact an ordinance prohibiting sitting on the sidewalks in downtown Tempe. In his State of the City address on Feb. 11, 1999, Mayor Neil Giuliano talked about recent media attention about the ordinance, particularly accusations that "this was an attempt to run a certain group of people out of downtown." He emphasized that the Council had responsibility to "all members of our community, including those who are homeless. And while I do not believe that our local government can do everything to solve this social problem, we can be part of the solution," the mayor said.

Giuliano announced he was asking the Tempe City Council to appoint "a community task force to begin brainstorming with Tempe Community Council and other social service providers, to come up with some potential solutions for this homeless problem."

It took six months for the City Council and the Community Council to create a framework for the task force, to recruit members with knowledge and interest and to convene it.

The 20-member task force, co-chaired by Mike DiDomenico and Linda Redman, convened for its first meeting on Sept. 30, 1999, and the mayor attended to give his charge to "respond to the question, "What should the community's response be in regards to the homeless issue? He requested the results of their studies and discussions to recommendations to the City Council. Co-Chairman Mike DiDomenico explained there would be no direct representation on the task force by any agencies serving the homeless and no "outside agendas from the (City) Council, city staff or agencies."

In the year that followed, the task force held 17 meetings. They worked in four phases: 1) education and Input (hearing about and reviewing available information on homelessness in Tempe, using resource people); 2) visions, goals and strategies, including doing a homeless survey and analyzing information gathered to establish program strategies; 3) community input, taking a draft report and tentative recommendations to community and neighborhood groups for input, feedback and reaction; and 4) submitting a final report to the mayor and City Council.

They produced "The Homeless Task Force" in Volume I (28 pages) and Volume II (61 pages) and dated it Sept. 21, 2000. The recommendations carried seven short-term priorities and six longer-term and ongoing priorities. The seven primary recommendations, with implications for the next two-year budget, were: 1) establish a homeless coordination post in Tempe; 2) establish a day resource center in Tempe for the homeless; 3) increase outreach to Tempe's homeless and provide longer-term case management; 4) enhance community safety for everyone; 5) expand Tempe's Crisis Assistance Response Effort (CARE-7) program; 6) enhance affordable, transitional and emergency shelter housing for Tempe; and 7) expand the community efforts to prevent homelessness.

The longer-term priorities included more regional planning for the homeless; advocating for more mental health and substance abuse funding and more related services in Tempe; greater community education about homelessness; establishing affordable and transitional housing as a permanent part of the city's General Plan; developing more education and employment opportunities for the homeless; and establishing continual evaluation and monitoring of the Task Force's recommendations.

The report contained a picture of then-current homelessness and the levels of service that agencies were providing.

The task force produced a recommended Mission Statement for the city regarding homelessness: "The mission of the City of Tempe to the homeless population is to coordinate a collaborative process that reduces the number of homeless locally and regionally." An accompanying vision statement offered, "The homeless people of the City of Tempe should have access to housing, health and social services that are necessary to meet basic human needs. The design and implementation of programs for the homeless will be efficient and coordinated to reduce and prevent homelessness."

The report spoke to key values, including safety for both the homeless and those with housing, that homeless be responsible at accepting help and moving to self-sufficiency, and that ending homelessness in Tempe would be a collaborative effort by units of government, the private sector and individual citizens.

The report's release came 5 1/2 years before the launch of the Interfaith Housing Emergency Lodging Program (I-HELP), a grassroots response by Tempe's faith community to provide fundamental food and shelter for those on the street.

Task Force member Zita Johnson, previous chair of both Tempe Community Action Agency and Tempe Community Council, said it took her work on that task force to truly become aware of the extent of homelessness in the city. More than two decades before, she was a Tempe Leadership participant and chose to shadow Mary Orton, then director of the state's largest homeless program, Central Arizona Shelter Services in Phoenix. "That really triggered an interest in me about this," she said.

With the Task Force's second recommendation for a day resource center, Johnson was part of a committee to look for a location. "Nothing came of it," she noted.

The first substantive action to come out of the Task Force's recommendations was to complete Recommendation 1: Hire a City of Tempe Homeless Coordinator.

Teresa James took that post in December 2002. She was pleased to find "a small number of homeless service providers here in Tempe who work very well with each other. There were lots of ideas for things to happen, but not really a mechanism to make them happen at that point, and there was still a misconception that most of the homeless people in Tempe are youth," she said. Providers particularly serving the homeless at the time, she said, were the Tempe Salvation Army, Tempe Community Action Agency and Tempe First United Methodist Church.

Kate Hanley, longtime executive director of Tempe Community Council, was surprised the task force did not recommend a overnight homeless shelter for Tempe. "I was thinking that was what would be coming out of it," she said. The council had made that recommendation. Interviews of people on the street were showing more young people in need of shelter help, than adults, she said.

"Because the recommendation didn't come up to establish a shelter, we looked forward to implementing the various recommendations that did come up," she said. "I think the most glaring omission was one that we had nothing for the kids, the young adults." The community responded by inviting Tumbleweed to open a center and meet their needs, with one purpose of diminishing the many young people panhandling on the streets. Tumbleweed opened up in late 2002 at First Congregational Church of Tempe with a modest start, and its success helped pave the way for I-HELP later.

Since the early 1980s, pastors and representatives of a segment of the Tempe faith community, along with the Tempe Community Council, had been coming together periodically as the Tempe Emergency Assistance Ministry, or TEAM. Besides sharing common work, they primarily have coordinated a faith community response to the homeless, helping people down on their luck and even putting up a united front to those who make their rounds to as many congregations as they can to exploit the system. The Tempe mayor annually meets with TEAM to discuss issues like homelessness. Together they organize an ecumenical Thanksgiving Eve service with a collection of food and cash for one of the pantries.

First United Methodist Church of Tempe had long been a key player in community's outreach to the poor. Its location right downtown and essentially on the northwest edge of the ASU campus made it accessible to the downtown homeless. Among the church's outreach services was hot shower program. One or two days per week, the homeless could take turns getting showers at the church and have a breakfast before going on their way.

When the Rev. David Summers of Santa Cruz, Calif., was appointed by the United Methodist Church in 2003 to First United Methodist Church of Tempe as senior pastor, he came seasoned in successful collaborative church projects working with the poor. He came bearing a model for temporary housing and feeding of the homeless that had worked well in the Monterrey Peninsula.

"I had been involved in California versions of I-HELP, starting back to 1988," he said. "When I was in Santa Cruz, they had an I-HELP model already working. It was an idea that seemed to be already spreading around northern California."

In 1993, Summers was assigned to a church in Salinas, Calif., where he found "the county was interested in starting a similar program." A group of clergy met to discuss the potential problem. "A number of us said, 'We will commit our churches right away to be involved in doing weekly housing.'" They named it I-HELP. They served an area where many farm workers traveled Highway 101. It was a constant stream of immigrants needing places to stay. "From my earlier experiences, I was amazed at what a great concept it was to be using church facilities. Most churches were sitting empty all week, especially at night. I think if it as being a great asset that any community has," Summers said. It took "the right partners coming together and enough sense of a real will just to make it happen -- and a willingness to trust that your facility will be OK with having total strangers sleeping in it."

Summers recalled the patterns of the guests, along with their social styles -- "not unlike the variety of people in a church congregation. There were people who were sociable and who would love to visit and

play games together after a meal. You would have people who would want nothing to do with anybody. They would sleep in a corner by themselves, at the far end of the building. They were isolated people. You would get everybody there."

Impact on the churches was minimal "compared to the benefits enjoyed by the guests," he said. The Salinas program accommodated up to 20 per night, while fewer could be taken in the Santa Cruz program, but it could take men, women and children. Screenings were done nightly to ensure guests were sober and not on drugs.

Summers served each congregation as pastor about five years, and, in both communities, they were able to engage enough churches in the program to have full coverage of shelter nights across a month.

"I learned from this experience that this is one of the best things that a faith community can do to work together ecumenically," Summers said. He framed it in terms of "roll up your sleeves, let's cooperate together on behalf of the community and do God's work together. It is more action than talk. There are enough things that divide us, but this is one thing that unites us."

Summers remembers the devastating 1989 Bay Area earthquake. He was serving the Santa Cruz church at the time, and he says it was the collaboration for the overnight shelter program that allowed those same churches to rally quickly to help in earthquake relief. "We got going on our disaster response much quicker than any other community did," he said.

When Summers arrived in Tempe in 2003, he said, "The first thing I noticed were the people knocking on our church door wanting a place to stay. 'Hey, pastor, can you give me a motel room?'" When they were instructed to go to the Tempe Salvation Army office nearby, the visitors would say, "We've already been there." Each of the churches on the north end of Tempe was experiencing the same thing, and TEAM helped to reduce the "double-dipping" where people went from church to church getting their same request filled multiple times.

"The city had struggled with the Homelessness Task Force plan," Summers said. "They had done community forums, but the progress had been slow. So after I had been there a couple years, we started talking in TEAM meetings, and I said, 'Could we get a group together to consider starting a rotating shelter plan?'"

Concurrently, also, especially concerned about Tempe's inability to come up with a solution for food and housing for the homeless was Jenny Norton, longtime Tempe advocate for the poor, a former TCAA board member, a former Arizona state legislator, ordained minister and generous benefactor in the community with her husband Bob Ramsey.

At the time, the City of Tempe, in lieu of its own homeless shelter, was among cities making payments to Phoenix to subsidize the Central Arizona Shelter Services with the understanding that it would provide overnight care for people from Tempe.

"In that way, even the homeless around the fringes of Tempe could go down to CASS and receive a meal and a bunk or even get a pallet on the floor," Norton said. "The Phoenix services were getting better and better. What was happening was the homeless population was getting bigger and bigger in 2004 and 2005. In Tempe, we had more camping out under the bridge, in the parks and in the alley. The police were gently rounding them up and getting them to the bus station and down to CASS for an overnight stay, with a meal at night and a meal in the morning. So then they would find their way back to Tempe because they were street people with a homeless lifestyle."

Norton recalls Aug. 19, 2005.

"Some of the campers had come over to Tempe Community Action Agency, as they did often, to get a bag of food, and we gave it to them. It was hot. On the morning of Aug. 20, we learned that a lady named Sandy had not made it down to CASS. She died of heat exposure, camping out in a Tempe park. And I burst into tears. I talked to (then-Tempe Community Action Agency executive director) Beth Fiorenza, and I said, 'We have to do something.'

"We put together a marvelous study committee on homelessness and found Mark Holleran, Central Arizona Shelter Services director, as a key resource."

With Dave Summers, Beth Fiorenza, Sue Ringler, Zita Johnson, Ben and Sarah Sanders, Robin Manelis and others, Norton said the I-HELP plan took shape.

"We wanted to be all-volunteer, all-congregation, rotating the shelters," she said. The committee included Dave Summers, Beth Fiorenza, Ben and Sarah Sanders, Dave Merkel, Zita Johnson, Teresa James, Mark Holleran, Sue Ringler, Jenny Norton, Robin Manelis and Darlene Pany.

Summers credits Sue Ringler, a founder of the Paz de Cristo homeless kitchen in Mesa in 1988, for helping launch I-HELP. At the time, Ringler, a registered nurse and a Catholic, was director of operations at Tempe Community Action Agency. TCAA would prove to have the organizational resources to help start the program in alliance with a small group of congregations.

"For this to happen," Summers said, "you need to have a strong coordinating agency that has skill and experience in working with the homeless and that can do the kinds of tasks that a church is not able to do, one that has the relationship across the whole community that TCAA has." Needed was an agency that could handle insurance, screening potential guests, and other logistics "and do it in a professional manner," Summers said.

Ringler recalls those TEAM meetings. About that time, then Tempe City Councilman Ben Arredondo got a meeting together to explore a day resource center. "They were very excited because they said, 'Oh, the city is interested in doing this,'" Ringer remembers, but the meeting turned into a fruitless meeting of debating where such a center should be built. "As you can probably guess, the meeting went nowhere. I was disgusted because I had come off of years and years of working with homelessness and hunger stuff, and I know a lot of rules about what you do and don't do at meetings," she said.

"Dave Summers and I got together and said this is ridiculous, and we needed to do something," she said. "It was right about this time that he had talked to me about a program he was involved in in California, and that it was called I-HELP." She was heartened to learn that the California programs thrived because of a social service component, allowing the congregations, instead, to focus on food and housing.

The TEAM congregations huddled to do the planning. Ringler recalls their working discretely to lay the groundwork. At the time, no city representatives were attending TEAM meetings. "I was on a homeless advisory council at the time for the city, and we chose not to include (Homeless Coordinator) Teresa James so she could basically say she knew nothing about it and be honest about it."

Jenny Norton and Bob Ramsey provided funding to get it launched.

Ben Sanders, veteran member of TEAM and a longtime Arizona State University campus Christian pastor affiliated with the Church on Mill, a Southern Baptist congregation, remembers an email in July 2005, proposing a night food and sheltering program using Tempe churches. "When I saw it, I thought that was exactly what we needed," said Sanders, now executive director of the Campus Christian Center. "We had been working to get a day resource center sited in Tempe. It had pretty much been that spring, so that was our low point of trying to do things on homeless stuff."

When he learned more of the church-based plan, Sanders saw it as "a perfect opportunity to bring the faith community together around a project that I thought a lot of us were really concerned about," he said.

"TCAA's Sue Ringler and TEAM's Dave Summers were the real persons spearheading it," he said. Organizers held an hour-long meeting at TCAA, and things jelled, Sanders said. "I was sold from the beginning."

"My goal was to really engage the evangelical community and churches," he said. "I didn't know how well we would be able to work together. I have been really pleased to see some of these evangelical churches step up."

Was optimism wise, given the disappointment with a resource center?

"I remember how long and how hard that TEAM had tried to create a day resource center, working for five years on their proposal," said Sarah Sanders, Ben's wife. "They presented it to the city and they thought how everything was so doable, and then it just got shot down by neighborhood NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard opponents). I can remember the feelings of the committee that there was no way to do anything in this city. Then it became, 'Hey, maybe we can do it ourselves with the faith community. We don't have to have permission from the city. We can do it ourselves.'"

Ben Sanders said the organizers decided to "start small with three nights per week" of meals and overnight lodging. The rotation was University Presbyterian Church on Friday night, Church on Mill on Saturday night and First United Methodist Church on Sunday night.

That first night, he said, there were seven or eight homeless guests -- no more than 15. "I wished I had been more attentive. We said we were going to start with 15 people. Pretty soon it ran up from there as word got out. Word of mouth is just amazing. It is not like there was a whole lot of publicity."

"You started to see the same people, and there was a sense of community," he said. "I saw people who, before, were nameless people in the street. We didn't have names, and then you began to really know people and their stories. You realize you can't categorize anyone. People are homeless, but each has a unique story -- and it breaks your heart."

"The most wonderful thing about I-HELP is the meal -- a home-cooked meal by people who want to do something and want to help and serve family-style, not institutionally," Ben Sanders said.

Organizers compared the meals to traditional potluck, thus exempting them from any kind of health department licensing. "I have always seen it akin to a church potluck," Sanders said. "We have never had to get waivers for potluck. Every time we have some kind of fellowship, it usually involves food. It is the best food you can get. It is usually coming from someone's kitchen at home."

"We were not very vocal about it because we know that if we wanted something with a city ordinance that it might take years," he said. "We didn't want to have any more deaths."

Hugh Hallman was less than a year into his eight years as Tempe mayor when I-HELP was launched. "At the initial launch, there were some real hard political edges to it," he said. "We had neighbors upset and concerned." Opposition was directed to the few churches hosting the homeless at the outset.

"The people who were upset were the neighborhood around the Tempe Friends (Quakers)," 318 E. 15th Street, Tempe, and some neighbors around University Presbyterian Church, 139 E. Alameda Drive, he said.

At about the same time, Mayor Hallman worked with the Tempe faith community in collaborative programs such as disaster preparedness in what was named "For the City." Hallman said it has strengthened relationships in the faith community.

Saying that he has "always been a fan" of Tempe Community Action Agency and the Salvation Army, Hallman said I-HELP benefitted from their established procedures in supporting the multi-church project as it unfolded. He had previously worked closely with TCAA in providing voluntary legal support. Given the city's providing financial support to CASS through the Agency Review Process, Hallman said, "the last thing we should do is open our own building because it would pull resources from the regional efforts that we had partnered in that are so successful now."

As mayor, he said he often found himself explaining "to lots of folks the reason we end up with a lot of young people who are thought to be homeless on Mill Avenue: It is one of the safest places in the Valley, contrary to popular belief. We have police officers there and young people who would otherwise be subject to some potential harm. They have a safer place in Tempe than they do elsewhere."

Hallman said the business community has recognized the Downtown Tempe has drawn the homeless is simply because people who live on the streets know there is a greater density of people apt to help them in some way. "It's the same reason that car dealerships congregate so that a person looking for an automobile has 15 dealerships to look at. Homeless people congregate where there are people," he said.

The mayor said what Captain Mark Sparks of the Tempe Salvation Army was doing in the late 1990s with the homeless through its Emmaus Project triggered momentum toward creating the task force. Emmaus was set up by Sparks to provide case management, food bags and personal supplies to homeless individuals and families. It further brought homeless to the downtown for help. Some saw it as Salvation Army setting the agenda for outreach to the homeless in Tempe, the mayor said. "I think folks wanted to hang on to the cash-strings associated with homelessness," he explained. "And the power and authority that came with that decided to quickly form a task force to get back in front of the parade." He said Sparks was doing the best work. "He launched the Emmaus Project, and that scared

the heck out of officialdom. That is what generated the homeless task force -- to try to keep him from getting any traction and move those initiative forward."

Hallman said the task force ultimately produced a report "that sat on the shelf." He acknowledged that "the report had a lot of things in it but it didn't cause anything to happen. What caused it to happen were the boots on the ground, the volunteers trying to serve." He said food was being distributed in Daley Park and Moeur Park. "That was causing congregations of homeless to gather in neighborhoods -- and that was causing the neighborhoods some concerns." Out of that, he said was Theresa James being hired as homeless coordinator.

Hallman didn't feel the Task Force report was productive. "I viewed it as a means by which nothing got done, and it stopped the progress that I thought was coming out of well-meaning and actually well-motivated and serious people."

At the time I-HELP was launched, Darlene Pany was a TCAA Board member and chairman of the Service and Program Committee where she worked with Jenny Norton. "We were officially the group that was supporting the development of I-HELP and the involvement of TCAA in it," she said. "...It was our goal that we would provide homeless housing seven days a week, which we finally achieved.

"We had an unserved need in the community, and we were doing a lot of education of ourselves," Pany remembered meetings in Phoenix exploring shelters and housing. "It was pretty daunting it seemed, then TCAA's Sue (Ringler) met up with TEAM's Dave Summers and he explained the program that he had developed in California, and it seemed like it was very plausible and that we could manage that."

She recalls how organizers were working low-key to pilot the nascent I-HELP program, which the TCAA board endorsed. But when the Quakers took their turn at serving meals at their church on 14th Street, neighbors objected and it became more public. "It was like, 'Let's sort of keep this low-keyed so that we don't run into any resistance on it.

"One thing that blossomed from it, which I don't think was there, was the shower program," Pany said. It was available at the time at only First United Methodist Church, where Summers was senior pastor. She said as I-HELP unfolded, it would provide a number of jobs for the homeless themselves in leadership and operational roles, including being in charge of overnight supervision."

Organizers found resources to provide other help to the homeless amid their night stays in houses of worship. With their ownership of PMT, a large Valley ambulance service, Bob Ramsey and Jenny Norton recognized the benefit of offering monthly wellness checks to the homeless. Manager Tom Mann said, "Bob and Jenny always have been very, very, very committed to the homeless in Tempe, along with all their other charitable works for the homeless, as well as the under-represented and the frail. I-HELP was born out of those good works."

"One of our crew would show up at one of the dinners, and we would have a paramedic and an EMT addressing some of the concerns in a private setting for the guests," Mann said. Since then, the services have increased to more frequent health checks and provide preventative health support for early intervention. "Trust has been established," he said. Sometimes, the guests were found ill and in needed of greater medical care, so PMT workers have taken them to hospitals."

Mann said the homeless that his crews see on their visits to I-HELP suffer from respiratory issues, including asthma, neo-natal care, diabetes, hypertension, sunburn and exposure to the elements. "We make sure everybody gets flu shots, and we are monitoring to make sure the whole group stays safe -- and individually stay safe with any flu or influenza outbreaks," he said. "There a different need for different seasons." On a typical visit, 10 to 20 guests are directly served by the PMT crew.

Mann explained why PMT has been committed to provide the care. "They are the most vulnerable, and the health of those on the street are the most fragile," he said. "Whether it is the exposure to the elements, trying to manage chronic health conditions and any type of chronic condition is exacerbated by being homeless. People's lives are in danger just by being homeless and trying to manage not only chronic health conditions, but also crises that come up, whether it be cancer, liver failure, renal failure, a heart attack or stroke. Recovery is usually in climate-controlled environments, and it poses a different kind of challenge on the street."

When Corey Woods began his first term on the Tempe City Council in 2008, I-HELP was able to only ensure nightly housing for about four nights each week. Before that, he was also serving on the board of Tempe Community Action Agency. "I was very happy when they were able to expand to seven days weekly. It was wonderful," said Woods, who has occasionally served I-HELP meals. He praised the TCAA staff for keeping the board apprised of the unfolding work of I-HELP.

"I think Tempe is a very progressive community that always looks to serve those who need assistance, especially when a lot of people are very much down on their luck," Woods said.

"We have never had a permanent homeless shelter (in Tempe), and I think one of the reasons has been because the faith community and other entities, especially, TCAA have stepped up in a very, very big way to provide food and shelter for our homeless population. If they weren't as engaged, as they currently are and as they have always been, there clearly would be a lot more pressure on the city directly to provide more services."

Woods said I-HELP's success has led to solid support for it from TCAA, Tempe Community Council and the city itself. "I believe the overwhelming majority of Tempe residents support the I-HELP program and other faith-based initiatives to serve our homeless community," Woods said. "The kind of people that we elect, like myself, who have made no bones about how important human services, affordable housing and transitional housing are, find it has not hurt us a bit," he explained. "In voting for me, people knew they are supporting the agenda that I am pushing... I think sometimes elect officials are simply a vehicle for people's hopes and dreams when it comes to certain issues."

He said it was fortunately when the Tempe Town Lake dam burst in 2010, no homeless perished by the rush of water that swept downstream in the dry riverbed. He said he hopes substantial progress can be made for transitional housing in Tempe to release the pressure on I-HELP and for fewer homeless to be sleeping outside in parks, cars and in alleys.

Woods said I-HELP could not have succeeded without the "Bob Ramseys and Jenny Nortons of the world, nor the individual citizens who may or may not have been associated with TCAA or the city who have been very supportive of the program."

As I-HELP found more congregations to "take a night," the City in the Desert Metro Church came on board through the commitment of senior Pastors Mike and Darci Niva. That church took Thursday nights, said the Rev. Sanghoon Yoo, who started the church. The Fellowship Hall and prayer room were the spaces used for sleeping for up to 35 guests. "This program changed our church," he said. "...Ironically, having homeless people in our church brought lots of changes in our congregation and our church. First of all, we needed to change our mindset. We had to train people to be friendly and to be real friends -- away from prejudice for these people ... We needed to be organized and to have a real commitment, as well as a change of attitude and the heart," Yoo said. That process took about six months.

"From the beginning, several people got enthusiastic, but many others said, 'Oh, what is this?'" he said. Four teams of about 10 people each were organized to cover the four nights per month. The project has fostered his church to engage in other kinds of community outreach. "We are pretty much ready to practice in other kinds of community service," he said. "I see the changes of the people who participate in this program being changed in a positive way." There is no fear of "strangers coming to our church, and we will always have hospitality here."

Yoo said he witnessed changes in the people of his church because of the program. "We will always have hospitality here, and so we are very grateful to have this program with us."

There is a wonderful feeling of joy "that we have helped in the restoration of their lives. ... They are not just a guest for Thursday night."

Two-term Tempe City Councilman Shana Ellis, who served as assistant director for Tempe Community Council, was in the middle of city policy-making to address homelessness, hunger, transportation and case management for the poor.

When she was first elected in 2006, I-HELP was hosting the homeless just two nights per week. "We were getting emails and phone calls from neighbors around University Lutheran Church and the Quakers (Friends Meeting House)" which are side by side on East 14th Street. Neighbors complained

"about people on bicycles coming to spend the night," she said. "It was violating the code for people to be lodging. So we were trying to work through a lot of those issues, keeping the neighbors happy and yet still allowing the churches to fulfill their mission," Ellis said.

She said she understands why the I-HELP organizers launched it without formally broaching it with city officials. "First of all, they were not asking the city for funding for that program, and they believed it was within the churches' purview to do something like this," she said. "I think there were some stipulations as far as how long you can have someone -- I think it is under 23 hours. There was a whole set of laws that goes with it. It was the overnight stays that really bothered the neighbors."

Tempe Community Council, along with Tempe Salvation Army and Tempe Community Action Agency, tried to figure out a solution, she said. "Instead of having people show up at that site, we will have a central place where people will congregate and get checked in and then be transported over there and be transported back. That helped pacify the neighbors, so that there weren't people coming and going."

Given that Tempe had no traditional homeless shelter, but the community had stepped up with more kinds of supportive housing options, Ellis said the I-HELP model seems to fit into that matrix.

She lauded the partnerships among churches that can provide meals, but not housing, or vice versa. "They have really figured out how to make it all work. I think TCAA and volunteers have done a great job of pulling that off."

The advent of the Orbit neighborhood busses and Light Rail have significantly changed the dynamics. Even to the point that the homeless not only rely on them to get around but as places to hang out and chill out.

In time, I-HELP reached its goal of having a faith community's campus for meals and housing every night of the month. It meant 356 men and women would have a safe place to stay the night. "Seven nights are covered, 365 days of the year," said Stephen Sparks, director of operations for TCAA. Regardless of the size of the community hall or meeting room at the facility, the 35-mark is not to be exceeded. "It is based on general safety. Thirty-five is a manageable number for the monitors we have," he said.

I-HELP has developed a procedure to determine which homeless people who show up for a shelter will be selected for one of the 35 beds. "If you are engaged in case management services, you have an automatic shelter bed reserved," Sparks said. "If you choose not to engage in case management, then you go on a lottery for all the remaining beds each night." The mix of the case-managed homeless and lottery-bed group "hovers as high as 50 to 75 percent. We were as high as 85 percent of all shelter beds reserved for case management at one point," he said. The goal is for case management to successfully enable the homeless to move into sustainability, perhaps with a job and their own housing, thereby opening the way for others to get shelter beds for the lottery.

The number showing up at night for a bed varies with the season. "When you look at homelessness, it fluctuates by the month," Sparks said. "If someone gets a disability check at the first of the month, we typically see lower numbers then." In the tax season, some file and get a little bit of a tax check, so the number of homeless showing up dips. But it picks up when they have spent that money in April, May and June, he said. "In the summer, we have upwards of 60 people coming, so we are turning away 30 to 35 people sometimes. On average, we turn away 20 to 30 people a night."

By the summer of 2014, there were 10 "host shelter sites" that are opened for overnight. "We have about 25 additional faith congregations that provide meals, general support, laundry, hygiene, water drives and things like that," Sparks said. Host congregations often provide the meals, as well. Some churches host a certain night each week or, for example, will take first, third and fifth Friday of the month, so that seven days each week are covered by the matrix.

During 2013, there were 647 "unduplicated" homeless persons served by I-HELP. The 2014-15 I-HELP operating budget was set at \$204,000, Sparks said. Built into the budget is a case manager simply to work with the homeless. About half of funding comes through grants.

Sparks declined to single out any one congregation for "doing the most."

"They are all doing a lot," he said. To cite one would diminish every congregation, he said. "There may be a large church doing a lot, but then a small church, per capita, is doing even more."

"As churches, we double up on our capacity in extreme weather," Sparks said. "We call it an 'Extreme Weather Night' because we know in Arizona, there is extreme cold in the winter, besides summer heat. We had a total of 45 Extreme Weather days, and we doubled up and took in about 65 homeless individuals in shelter."

Sparks said there are 2.5 employees of TCAA dedicated to I-HELP, along with four trained peer monitors to stay overnight. They use a TCAA van to transport mattresses and supplies.

He said the opposition to I-HELP that was manifested by some neighborhoods early on appears to be gone -- "no not-in-my-backyard issues lately. We are respectful of the neighborhoods."

"Shower Power has been our newest resource, so we can provide showers at locations" that don't have campus showers. Making it possible for the homeless to get showers is vital, he said. "It is providing the dignity and hope in helping homeless individuals obtain and maintain employment." Some are trained to be shower monitors," and then we rent the showers out to the community, and that provides those shower monitors employment opportunities where they can get workforce development skills and, at the same time, employment through the shower rental."

Sparks noted some of the sites. "Every Wednesday, we go to Paz de Cristo (homeless feeding site) in Mesa, set it up and provide showers," he said. "We work with Valley of the Sun United Way and provide showers for the Homeless Connect events each month. We are working to create a marketing and advertising plan to promote more corporate rentals of the shower trailer to boost this as a social enterprise to support the shelter program," Sparks said.

As second shower unit was purchased "for the sole purpose of creating the social enterprise, knowing that we have an existing one dedicated to the shelter." They are called "Shower Power I" and "Shower Power II."

"After eight years, things and priorities change," Sparks wistfully noted. "People get burned out a little bit. We always worry about capacity. Our relationships with our faith community are central." If one congregation determines it needs to pull back and reduce its availability, "we want to make sure we can bring someone else in. We never want to drop down below seven nights a week. We never want to lose the capacity we have gained, and that is our goal -- to maintain the existing capacity."

Sparks said I-HELP staff has discussed "doubling our capacity, but, at that point, you'll probably need 20 congregations and not 10," Sparks said. "Trying to squeeze that in and burning people out is always a capacity issue."

I-HELP is now being extended beyond the borders of Tempe. The East Valley I-HELP Coalition was formed as a partnership between Tempe Community Action Agency, Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest, based in Mesa, and Chandler Christian Community Center in Chandler. "I-HELP is now being replicated in those two communities, and we are working collaboratively to provide standardized policies and procedures, to coordinate case management services, best practices, data collection and outcome measurement reportings so that we all measure outcomes the same way," he continued. "We all use the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), which is the best practice data service. We all use that." The three agencies further share a common code of conduct so that should a homeless person violates rules in one program, that person does not go to another agency's shelter. "Violating the code in one is violating the rules of all of us."

"We are also sharing resources and collaboratively seeking grant and funding together," Sparks said.

Former Tempe City Councilman Ben Arredondo salutes the faith community for making I-HELP work. "It is accomplishing what was intended, and there needs to be a lot more done in those areas," he said, suggesting that a non-profit organization lend its resources.

"People might say there are a lot of people with problems," he said. "Yeah, there are, but the severity of the problem is a very serious concern, and that is why it should be an effort from the whole region, not an effort for one city or one group of people." He suggested an entity like United Way has the resources to address homelessness on a regional basis and have impact.

"I think the faith community has taken a concern and made the best out of it," but he would prefer a central location to deal with the homeless, something he did not favor during his 16 years on the council," Arredondo said. He praised TCAA and Tempe Salvation Army for giving validity to Tempe's efforts to help the homeless. Despite the existing efforts, the homeless are still to be found in pockets each night. "It is a big problem in Tempe," he said. "You can go up to some of parks and go into the oleanders and find people every night."

Rabbi Andrew Straus, former spiritual leader for Temple Emanuel, a Reform Jewish synagogue in Tempe, served on the TCAA and TEAM boards and lauded the efforts of the Rev. Dave Summers and Sue Ringler to effectively develop I-HELP. "The program took advantage of the skills and the abilities that we in the faith communities had," Straus said. "We had rooms, and we had volunteers ... for a program, that with no exceptions really required limited engagement volunteerism." For volunteers, he said, the beauty is that workers know their tasks, don't have to go to meetings and know how long it typically will take.

Straus praised how receptive his congregation was and the organizing done by Robin Manelis from the Temple and with the I-HELP Volunteer Alliance. "She did it beautifully, not only from a temple perspective in terms of getting a lot of people engaged and involved, plus putting it in front of people on a regular basis. She took a very keen, vital role from the community's perspective."

Those from the temple who have got involved repeatedly take part as volunteers. "They are not just one-shotters," Straus said. "People come back and say, 'I felt I have made a difference,'" he said. "Many of our families do it with their kids, and they find it to be such an eye-opener for their kids -- so that it is really valuable for that reason." The rabbi said supportive housing is the long-range solution. "That says, 'Let's end this cycle, let's get people off the streets and into jobs and get them the support they need so they won't be homeless the next night.'"

Straus applauded the development of the Homeless Connect to expand the social services component. "Tempe took the leadership role," he said. "...For the faith community, there are a few people who put in massive amounts of times."

He dismissed a common notion that the faith community has the wherewithal to meet the full needs of the homeless. "It doesn't have the volunteers, doesn't have the financial resources and doesn't have the skills to devise all these social services," Straus said. "And the faith community represents a small percentage of the community as a whole."

At Sun Valley Community Church in Tempe (formerly Bethany Community Church), I-HELP is a solid outreach. On its website, it explains I-HELP this way:

"The homeless in our society walk around carrying a huge badge of shame. For many, the homeless might well be the most unloved and unlovable segment of our population.

"In collaboration with Tempe Community Action Agency and Tempe area churches, Sun Valley-Tempe hosts 35-40 of our homeless neighbors on the 4th Sunday of every month, and on the 1st Monday of every month. Our guests are provided with a secure, weather-protected place to eat a family-style meal, take a shower and get a good night's sleep. Many people at Sun Valley volunteer on a regular basis. Come join us either individually, as a family, or with your small group. Don't miss out on this opportunity to represent Jesus to those in our community."

Tempe's Interfaith Hospitality Emergency Lodging Program has stood the test. An untold number of men and women have benefitted from the meals, sound nights of sleep and knowledge that people cared enough to lighten their burdens.

Scriptures address much of the spirit of I-HELP:

"If you want to be happy, be kind to the poor. It is a sin to despise anyone." Proverbs 14:21

"There will always be some Israelites who are poor and in need, and so I command you to be generous to them." Deuteronomy 15:11.

Jesus echoed that: "You will always have poor people with you, but you will not have me," Matthew 26:11

I-HELP appears to be established and there is no indication it will be ended, given community support and the interest in replicating it elsewhere.

From city hall to the offices of Tempe Community Action Agency and the Salvation Army to the fellowship halls of houses of worship in Tempe, I-HELP can be considered one of the city's finest efforts to meet a need and demonstrate caring for others. And those who stepped up to make it happen can also sleep comfortably at night knowing at least some of the needy have a place to stay in Tempe where it is safe.

