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Something Better Than a Tent for the Homeless

- By [Maia Szalavitz](#)

The needs of homeowners and businesses and those of people who are unsheltered often conflict. Community leaders, faced with increasing crime and disorder, frequently see police sweeps as the only answer, while advocates for homeless people argue that this response is merely a stopgap that does more damage than good.

But what if there was a way to stop shifting people from encampments to jails to shelters to hospitals and back again? In Seattle a unique collaboration among businesses, neighborhood groups, the police, advocates and nonprofits is fighting cynics and misperceptions driven by politics to cut homelessness.



Tiarra Dearbone, Seattle/King County LEAD program director for the Public Defender Association, center, works with representatives of partner organizations to plan an assessment of the Third Avenue area. Credit...Grant Hindsley for The New York Times



Lisa Dugaard, a founder of JustCare. Credit... Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

The coronavirus pandemic presented Seattle with a crisis and an opportunity. In early 2020, authorities closed congregate shelters, emptied jails and stopped new arrests for minor crimes. Lisa Dugaard, a lawyer, saw a rare chance to develop a new approach to addressing homelessness that didn't involve law enforcement.

She'd already had success in getting officials to cooperate across siloed systems: In 2019, she won a [MacArthur](#) "genius" award for helping to create a program originally called Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, which has now been replicated in over 80 jurisdictions across the United States.

Instead of re-incarcerating homeless people who typically already have long histories of minor arrests, police departments that participate in LEAD refer them to case management services. The program has an overall philosophy of harm reduction, which, in addition to securing shelter, focuses on improving health, rather than mandating abstinence from drugs and other risky behaviors. LEAD originated as a collaboration of public defenders, the police and prosecutors, who put aside differences to work on solutions.

Peer-reviewed research published in 2017 by the University of Washington found a 39 percent reduction in [felony charges](#) for participants (a group of over 300 people suspected of low-level drug and sex work activity in downtown Seattle) in LEAD compared with controls and an 89 percent increase in the likelihood of being [permanently housed](#) for participants after they started case management.



Nichole Alexander, who coordinates the JustCare field team for the Public Defender Association, center, and Ms. Moen, right, help a resident of the Dearborn encampment sort out medical transportation and care.Credit...Photographs by Grant Hindsley for The New York Times



Paige Killinger, a case management supervisor, works to build relationships with residents of an encampment under the intersection of I-5 and I-90.Credit...Grant Hindsley for The New York Times



Nhan Dinh Truong hugs Ms. Alexander while loading a van before heading to a hotel room supplied by JustCare, Credit...Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

At the height of the pandemic, when the police were ordered not to make minor arrests or referrals to LEAD, Ms. Daugaard decided to try something new. With federal pandemic funds becoming available and desperate hotel owners newly open to being paid to house nontraditional guests, she said she saw “our chance to show that there is another way.”

Ms. Daugaard and her colleagues created a program now known as JustCare. JustCare staff members, rather than police officers, would respond to urgent calls about encampments. After building trust with local homeless people, the workers would move them into housing without strict abstinence requirements and then help clean up the site. The police would be contacted only as a last resort.

An early success involved an encampment on a major thoroughfare, Third Avenue, where around two dozen tents were erected directly outside the popular local restaurant Wild Ginger, which had closed under pandemic restrictions. A co-owner, Rick Yoder, wanted to reopen the restaurant in the summer of 2021, but he told me, “I couldn’t get the windows repaired because the guy said, ‘I’m not going near those tents.’”



Michelle McClendon, an outreach worker, chats with a repeat resident, Taylor Bohm, and her partner, Michelle, as they fill out paperwork.



Katrina Ness, of Community Passageways, which provides LEAD services, lived in a tent when she was a teenage runaway. Credit... Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

The glazier's fear was not unwarranted. According to Jon Scholes, the president and chief executive of the Downtown Seattle Association, which represents local businesses, there was active drug dealing inside the encampment. A retail theft group was also operating in it. Liquor and other items had been stolen from the shuttered restaurant.

Outreach workers from JustCare managed to house those living in the encampment and clean up the site without police reinforcement. (I interviewed Mr. Yoder at the reopened restaurant, which was buzzing on a Tuesday night, but is not yet back to its prepandemic numbers.)

Many outreach workers previously lived in encampments themselves. Katrina Ness, for example, lived in a tent as a 16-year-old runaway. She says her past allows her to connect with those still unsheltered, even if they often curse her out. "I'm an abrasive person myself," she said, smiling, adding that she sometimes brings her friendly dog as a way of connecting.

The work begins with no-strings offerings of items like food, water and clean needles. These regular visits help demonstrate trustworthiness and defuse fear about coercion. Creativity is also a must: Conflicts arise over everything from open drug use to burning items for heat. Workers neutralize tense situations with humor and compassion and by recognizing that often bizarre behavior is driven by fundamental needs like hunger, thirst and exhaustion.



A shared kitchen at a JustCare facility where residents can eat healthy snacks and make food with the help of a stocked fridge and the staff. Credit...Grant Hindsley for The New York Times



A mural by artist, Gretchen Leggitt, with a quote by the poet Amanda Gorman on the side of a JustCare facility. Credit...Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

Alison McLean owns a condo in the Pioneer Square neighborhood and contacted JustCare for help dealing with tents that started being pitched against her building during the pandemic. One drug dealer set up a giant tent and a grill where he cooked sausages and played loud music. “Homeless people were using our alley as their bathroom,” Ms. McLean said, adding that food and other debris also attracted rats.

JustCare began its outreach. “Maybe two weeks later, they were like, ‘We found housing for everybody,’” Ms. McLean said. After moving day, the area was spotless, but soon another encampment arose. This time, after campers were housed, homeowners set up outdoor dining tables and chairs to “activate” the space, as suggested by JustCare. Now, residents and tourists regularly use the furniture, making it unattractive as a campsite.

Between the fall of 2020 and this past spring, JustCare closed [14 encampments](#) and placed over 400 people in hotels and other lodging. Of the 135 people who had not found permanent homes by March, about two-thirds have now done so and 21 percent are in various stages of getting the documents and the access to housing they need. Preliminary numbers suggest that results are [superior or equivalent](#) to other programs for keeping people with mental illness and addictions housed.

Critics’ main concern is cost. Seattle’s former mayor issued a report in 2021 saying that JustCare cost \$127,376 annually per person housed. JustCare disputes this, claiming that its actual costs per person are approximately half of that or less, and comparable to the yearly cost for [incarceration](#) plus arrest costs. Regardless, JustCare has won over the business and homeowner groups that typically strongly oppose such measures, like the Downtown Seattle Association and the [Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce](#). Consequently, the state recently agreed to fund and expand the program.



Taylor Bohm and her dog Lilly settle into their room at a hotel with the help of JustCare. Credit...Grant Hindsley for The New York Times

The biggest obstacle to scaling such initiatives is politics. Even though violent crime has risen across the United States — and the homicide rate [increased more](#) in red states than blue — Republicans are using dramatic images of homelessness in cities like Seattle and San Francisco to [claim that progressive approaches have failed](#). ([Houston](#), in fact, has already housed more than 25,000 of its homeless people since 2011 using harm-reduction housing like JustCare does.) Democrats, on the defensive, pour more money into policing.

But when business and neighborhood groups and advocates for homeless people collaborate, mutual distrust tends to decline and innovation is sparked. Even corporate and bureaucratic obstacles can disappear when people who know each other can just pick up the phone and work it out. As one former outreach worker told me, if harm reductionists want to argue that homeless people can transform their lives, they must also recognize that the police and businesses can reduce their own harmful behavior, too.

Maia Szalavitz is a contributing Opinion writer and the author, most recently, of "[Undoing Drugs](#): How Harm Reduction Is Changing the Future of Addiction."