



**City of Abilene**  
**Special Called Meeting/Work Session**

Shane Price, Mayor Pro-tem  
Bruce Kreitler, Council  
Member  
Kyle McAlister, Council  
Member  
Robert Hanna, City Manager

Anthony Williams,  
Mayor

Donna Albus, Council Member  
Weldon Hurt, Council Member  
Steve Savage, Council Member  
Stanley Smith, City Attorney  
Rosa Rios, City Secretary

**Notice is hereby given of a meeting of the City Council of City of Abilene to be held on Tuesday, March 20, 2018 at 5:30 PM at 555 Walnut Street, 2nd Floor, Council Chambers, Abilene, Texas [AMENDED NOTICE], for the purpose of considering the following agenda items.**

**1. CALL TO ORDER**  
**2. INVOCATION**  
**3. AGENDA ITEMS**

1. Receive a report, hold a discussion, and provide staff direction/take action on the Homeless Needs Assessment Study (*Stan Standridge*)
2. **Public Comment:** There will be no votes or any formal actions taken on subjects presented during public comment. The public comment period will only allow members of the public to present ideas and information to city officials and staff.

**4. ADJOURNMENT**

*In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the City of Abilene will provide for reasonable accommodations for persons attending City Council meetings. To better serve you, requests should be received 48 hours prior to the meetings. Please contact Tiffni Herrera, Assistant City Secretary, at 325-676-6208.*

**CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify the above AMENDED meeting notice was posted on the bulletin board at the City Hall of the City of Abilene, Texas, on the 16th day of March 2018, at 8:20 p.m.

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*Rosa Rios, TRMC*  
City Secretary



**City Council  
Agenda Memo**

**City Council Meeting Date: 3/20/2018**

**TO: Robert Hanna, City Manager**

**FROM: Stan Standridge, Chief of Police**

**SUBJECT: Receive a report, hold a discussion, and provide staff direction/take action on the Homeless Needs Assessment Study (*Stan Standridge*)**

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**GENERAL INFORMATION**

In early 2016, the Department received complaints from the central business district reference homeless persons and associated crimes. Since then, the Department and City formed a working committee - Hand Up, Not Out - and worked alongside non-profits and faith-based organizations to identify best remedies. One such remedy was a needs assessment, which was completed by two ACU VISTA graduate students.

**SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

**FUNDING/FISCAL IMPACT**

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

The purpose of this presentation is to inform the Mayor and City Council of the committee's findings, in addition to presenting the needs assessment. Staff asks the Council to approve the submitted reports in support of addressing homelessness in Abilene.

**BOARD OR COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION**

**ATTACHMENTS:**

Description	Type
<input type="checkbox"/> Needs Assessment	Exhibit
<input type="checkbox"/> Presentation	Presentation



# Homeless Needs in Abilene, Texas

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**Rob McCabe, BSSW, MSSWc <sup>2,3</sup>**

**Wayne Paris, PhD, LCSW <sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> Area Health Education Center

VISTA Program

# ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

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July 28, 2017

Robert Hanna, City Manager  
City of Abilene  
Abilene, Texas 79601

The Institute for Social and Community Development of Abilene Christian University (ACU), a part of the ACU School of Social Work, hereby submits this Homeless Needs in Abilene, Texas report to the City of Abilene (the City) as specified in the agreement dated August 3, 2016.

The ACU study team acknowledges, and expresses thanks to, the City, particularly the Abilene Police Department and Chief Stan Standridge; the Texas Homeless Network; Abilene Independent School District; the citizens of Abilene who participated in the focus groups and in follow-up interviews; and, the community organizations that provide direct services to and advocacy for Abilene's homeless citizens, for their cooperation throughout the study process. The report contains the findings generated through analysis of data from targeted community focus groups, the Texas Homeless Network, Abilene Independent School District, Abilene Police Department, and triangulation research methodology.

The study projects that there are at least 329 homeless persons in Abilene. While there is a common perception of a plethora of programs in the City that provide services to the homeless, the study suggests unmet needs in at least three areas: Housing for unaccompanied children; housing for adult homeless persons with chronic mental illness, substance abuse, family violence, medical needs and employment issues; and, public safety diversion resources to address homeless issues outside of the judicial system.

Respectfully Submitted on Behalf of the Study Team,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thomas L. Winter', is positioned below the text 'Respectfully Submitted on Behalf of the Study Team,'.

Thomas L. Winter, EdD, LCSW  
Professor and Director  
School of Social Work

# About the Needs Assessment

In response to the request from Robert Hanna, City Manager, Abilene, Texas, the Institute for Social and Community Development (ISCD) of Abilene Christian University's School of Social Work has conducted and submits this report identifying the needs of the homeless in the greater Abilene area. The purpose of this work was to identify issues and needs found by a special ad hoc committee created in response to community concerns raised with the City of Abilene in recent months. These have been articulated in the *Homeless Needs Assessment* document (see Appendix A), which focused on the committee's report of the history of efforts to address homelessness in the region, a tentative identification of sources of data for a needs assessment, perceived unique characteristics of Abilene and the surrounding area, and a preliminary review of local commitments (both financial and in-kind) to the support of a more comprehensive needs assessment.

# Acknowledgments

The authors of this report acknowledge that the completion of this study has required the assistance and collaboration with the City of Abilene, key local agencies and organizations, and numerous individuals. We would like to thank the Highland Church of Christ, Beltway Park Church, First Baptist Church, and the City of Abilene for the financial support to help make this project possible. We extend our deep appreciation to the Area Health Education Center for providing two VISTA workers (Jonathan Fasse and Rob McCabe) who did the majority of the work on this study. We also want to thank the Texas Homeless Network (THN) for providing their data files for analysis and comparison purposes. We acknowledge Cheryl Cunningham, Heather Melchor, and Darrin Cox of the Abilene Independent School District (AISD) for their tireless efforts and advocacy on behalf of the homeless children of Abilene, providing data for analysis, and sharing their insights and expertise. Special thanks are also directed to Chief Stan Standridge of the Abilene Police Department (APD) and his staff for their commitment to the citizens of Abilene, this project, and their guidance during this entire process. To all of those individuals, too numerous to mention, who participated in the focus groups or helped us in numerous ways to conduct this assessment, we give our sincere appreciation.

It is our hope that the findings from this work will facilitate the coordination of efforts to address the issues and needs of the homeless population of Abilene, drawing on the most valid and reliable data available regarding this particular group. This will allow diverse agencies and organizations, with segmented goals and purposes, to deliver better coordinated and evidence-based interventions to address this group of fellow Abilene citizens.

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# Executive Summary

In August 2015, the Abilene Police Department (APD) was asked to consider enforcement actions against aggressive panhandling in the downtown business district. After meeting with the Downtown Business Association and the City Administration, a working committee was formed, comprised of City staff, non-profit agencies, and local churches to identify, coordinate, and develop programs to address the needs of the homeless. It was from this *ad hoc* committee that the current homeless project evolved.

Data for this project were obtained through targeted community focus groups, the Texas Homeless Network (THN), Abilene Independent School District (AISD), APD and triangulation research methodology. To provide for some level of reasonable comparison, the year 2016 was chosen. This allowed the use of a complete calendar year of APD and THN point-in-time survey data that was comparable to the 2015-2016 academic year for AISD.

Each of the databases presented with some form of limitation. THN's information did not reflect the total number of adult homeless nor adequately report the incidence of homeless school-age children. Although AISD files were the most complete, they were not able to provide information about the services that were needed by the students, but unavailable. APD's files were also restricted on the amount of information that could be received and to only those above the age of 18. The triangulation process was equally restricted by ACU's IRB in the amount of homeless profile information that could be obtained. Each of these limitations and how they were dealt with is explained in the following report, and resulted in the accumulation of the following information.

It is believed that there are at least 329 homeless in Abilene (n=217 unaccompanied school-age children; 112 adults). The adults are primarily from Abilene and are sporadically homeless primarily for financial reasons, though a large percentage of those are complicated by mental illness, substance abuse, family violence, or medical problems. The children are unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian and rely on extended-family, friends, or require emergency shelter for housing options.

When considered from a needs perspective, the priorities that were identified fall within three areas that have the greatest potential to influence homelessness: First, the housing and resources required to reduce the risks that the unaccompanied children within the community are facing; second, housing for the adult homeless population, coupled with specific plans to confront their accompanying mental illness, substance abuse, family violence, medical needs, and employment issues; and third, providing the police department with a long term commitment of resources and effort to train mental health marshals necessary to develop and enhance a more formalized and comprehensive jail diversion

program that is needed to address both the identified homeless and broader Abilene community's mental health needs.

The resources required will be entirely dependent on the priorities decided upon by the City of Abilene and the *ad hoc* committee's views and the level of justification provided by this report. Inherent in this document is the underlying suggestion that the perception being held about Abilene's homeless is of marginal relevance to the actual needs that exist. The majority of homeless in our city are 'home grown' and their situation did not occur because of a conscious choice they made. Their homelessness exists, in part, by having marginal job skills in a very cyclical economy that is often complicated by the presence of substance abuse, mental illness, family violence, or medical complications.

# Introduction

In the forward to the book *Working with Homeless and Vulnerable People* (2015), Waegemakers-Schiff was clear in expressing her thoughts about the challenges that homelessness presents to a civil society. In simple but straightforward language she reminded readers that from the United Nations first declaration in 1948, there has been an international expectation that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for food, clothing, housing, medical care, and security, or lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond an individual's control (United Nations, 1948: as cited in, Waegemakers-Schiff, 2015).

Acknowledging the innumerable situations where those ideals have failed to be achieved does not lessen the inherent moral and ethical responsibility of governments to ensure the welfare of their citizens. She summarized her thoughts by suggesting that homelessness, where it occurs, should only exist in cases of individual choice, and should not be the result from a lack of resources.

To some her comments are automatically rejected because they are considered to be too politically provocative. Others simply disagree that access to housing, food, water, medical care, and a safe environment are basic human rights. The current report makes no political or philosophical argument as to rights and responsibilities or ethical and moral obligations of anyone. This work simply seeks to gather the most comprehensive data possible, evaluate its reliability and validity, and to make recommendations to help guide the City of Abilene, local non-profit agencies, and churches to develop and deliver better coordinated services to Abilene's homeless.

As with any research, especially a group as challenging as the homeless are to categorize and define, there are occasions where assumptions were made about the data analysis that not all may agree with. Also, please be prepared that not all the questions that individuals wanted answers to will be provided in this report. However, we have attempted to address those remaining uncertainties with what are believed to be appropriate and seriously considered evidence-based recommendations. In some cases where more information is warranted, further research is recommended.

The authors do not anticipate that the following information and recommendations will be received with unanimous agreement. All we ask of the reader is this; what level of responsibility and to whom are we responsible, for those who lack housing, for any reason other than choice? Just as the study group are segmented and dissimilar, so too are the homeless an equally diverse assortment of individuals for whom "one approach or

explanation does not fit all.” It is our hope that the following information will help provide the opportunity to make informed community decisions and move this process forward.

## Homelessness Defined

Data for this report were collected from different sources: Texas Homeless Network (THN); Abilene Independent School District (AISD); Abilene Police Department (APD); focus groups; and, triangulated information from local homeless and agency visits. Each of these groups used a different definition of homeless.

The THN uses the Housing and Urban Development definition homelessness through the use of full-page flow charts, and multiple-page descriptions. A general definition of homelessness is based on the amount of time that they have been out of, or frequency with which they are absent a meaningful residence. For current purposes, we categorized three separate levels of homeless out of the THN data: (i) first time in the past 3 years; (ii) multiple episodes in past 3 years; and (iii) continuously homeless for at least a year (see Table 3) (Canfield, 2015).

AISD uses the McKinney-Vento definition which specifically defines homeless children and youth as individuals who lack a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” Within the policy, the term for homeless children and youth includes:

children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement (para 5, Homeless Students in Texas Public Schools, 2017).

Homelessness, for the purpose of school-based services, includes “children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings,” such as “cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus/train stations, or similar settings” (para 5, Homeless Students in Texas Public Schools, 2017). Homeless children and youth are further classified by being either accompanied or unaccompanied. Accompanied means they are with a parent or legal guardian. If unaccompanied, they are not with a parent or legal guardian. This may include a wide range of options from staying with a family member, sibling, friends, or in foster care to couch-surfing, staying in a shelter, or remaining on the streets.

The APD data has categorized an individual as homeless based on the absence of meaningful or reliable housing on a nightly basis, or an inability to provide a valid address.

As complicating as the differing definitions may be, they do not prevent the assessment of the homeless needs in Abilene, nor the recommendations to help alleviate the problems they encounter.

Generally, unless otherwise noted, this report uses the broader definition of homelessness as articulated in the major federal legislation driving the preponderance of federal programs: persons who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (Mckinney-Vento; Homeless Students in Texas Public Schools, 2017).

# Methodology

The needs assessment utilized a mixed-methods approach that included: (i) stakeholder focus groups; (ii) identification and review of existing databases, including federal, state and local sources (e.g., state homeless organizations, local school district, and APD); and, (iii) collection of individual data, as appropriate, from homeless individuals utilizing outdoor encampments and homeless shelters. Data from individual and agency sources were used and “triangulated” (i.e., compared and contrasted) to verify and/or disconfirm observations of diverse participants.

## Human Subject Protections

The proposed study was complex and required significant consultation from the Human Subject committee at Abilene Christian University (ACU). Incremental approvals were provided during the late summer and early fall of 2016 via email, with final overall study approval obtained on December 15, 2016 (see Appendix B).

## Data Entry and Analysis

All qualitative and quantitative data were entered into password protected data files for analysis, using relevant software (e.g., *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* [SPSS] for quantitative data). All data were analyzed using appropriate statistical procedures under the direction of qualified PhD level faculty within the ACU School of Social Work.

## Data Sources

The research team gathered quantitative and qualitative data in an effort to provide a comprehensive analysis of the needs assessment. Data were collected primarily from The Texas Homeless Network, Abilene Independent School District, the Abilene Police Department, and focus groups that represented homeless individuals as well as a variety of Abilene residents that have some level of exposure to the homeless population in the community.

### **The Texas Homeless Network (THN)**

THN is a non-profit membership-based state-wide organization charged with a mission of helping Texas communities prevent and end homelessness. They are a 501(c)3 organization that is partially funded through Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs and Texas Department of State Health Services. THN provides training and technical

assistance around the state of Texas helping service providers and communities better serve the homeless population with the end goal of preventing and ending homelessness (THN, 2017). The data provided by the state office was for the point-in-time survey that occurred within Abilene during 2016.

### **Abilene Independent School District (AISD)**

AISD is a public school district based in Abilene, Texas. The district serves the city of Abilene in northeastern Taylor County as well as the portion of Abilene that lies in southeastern Jones County (AISD, 2017), and serves approximately 17,000 students. The data provided for this survey was from the 2015-2016 AY.

### **Abilene Police Department (APD)**

APD is a full service municipal police agency serving the City of Abilene, Taylor County, Texas. The data provided for this community assessment was for the year 2016 and included only those interactions APD had with those identified as homeless adults.

### **Focus groups**

Additionally, the research team identified 3 distinct stakeholder groups that were invited to participate in one or more focus groups that were directed towards identifying the homeless services available, their perception of homeless needs, and how best to move forward as a community to address those needs. The focus groups focused on 12 primary questions that were determined by the research team (see Appendix C).

### **Triangulation**

Data were collected from various agency visits, interviews, discussions with homeless individuals and were used (i.e., compared and contrasted) to verify and/or disconfirm quantitative data collected from diverse sources.

# Results

## Focus Groups

Three focus groups involving stakeholders were conducted as part of the qualitative portion of this study; a downtown business owners group, service providers for homeless adults, and school-based service providers for homeless children and youth. The Business Owners Group utilized participants from the Abilene downtown area, where most of the interaction between the police and homeless individuals “panhandlers” had taken place. Participants in this focus group described varying periods of time they had lived in Abilene and the number of interactions with the homeless. The data collected from this focus group helped the researchers gain a better understanding of the panhandling and solicitation ordinance and its perceived relationship to homelessness. The second focus group consisted of service providers that consistently work with the homeless population. Participants for this second focus group were selected based on their direct interaction with the homeless population and their experiences providing resources. The quantitative data that most correlated with this group was the adult THN point-in-time data collected at some of the agencies that participated in the focus group. The third focus group was a dropout prevention school program that partnered with AISD from which the researchers had quantitative data.

All groups were facilitated with the same questions (see Appendix C). There were at least two facilitators for each group, one to ask the questions and lead discussion, and one to take notes for the group which were displayed electronically. Each group was instructed to interrupt the note taking process if notes were incorrectly transcribed, missing something mentioned during discussion, or in need of clarification. This insured the accuracy of the notes and representation of each group’s answers.

Each focus group contained individuals who interacted with varying demographics of the homeless and these interactions took place under very different circumstances. The Business Owners Group has interacted exclusively with the adult homeless population and mentioned younger homeless individuals very seldom in their responses. The Service Providers Group interacted with all demographics of Abilene’s homeless, adults and children. The School Program Focus Group worked mostly with children and youth, but they recognized that by assisting children, they may also be impacting the families.

Four themes appeared in all focus groups as follows: (i) there is a lack of available housing resources in Abilene; (ii) Abilene copes with a high prevalence of substance abuse and mental illness; (iii) homeless individuals demonstrate a need for interpersonal

communication and other basic skills training; and, (iv) there is a serious need for more transportation resources. Regardless of the difference in opinions or perceptions presented in these groups, all reported a need to address these issues in Abilene.

### **The Business Owners Focus Group**

As noted above, participants reported interacting mostly with those who were identified as panhandling or walking the streets downtown. This group asserted Abilene may have too many resources, leading Abilene to attract a transient homeless population. However, this group also recognized a definite need for housing for the homeless and skills training such as social and interpersonal communication skills. These participants perceived the population to exhibit mental illness more frequently than noted by the other two focus groups. However, this group also indicated a desire for the homeless population to feel a part of the Abilene community, and understood the need to belong, socialize, and participate in community activities.

### **The Service Providers Focus Group**

Participants insisted on a need for housing and skills training as well; but unlike the Business Group, they argued a need for more resources that would target homeless youth, and a need for better educated and experienced service professionals to work with this population. Regarding gaps in services, this group reported a gap in mental and physical health needs and ongoing treatment. Interestingly, this group also had an awareness of a subgroup of the homeless that are employed or actively seeking employment. The participants asserted that this subgroup of the homeless population often takes advantage of any opportunity available to improve their financial situation through positive and productive means.

### **The School Program Focus Group**

With their emphasis on youth and family, the participants recognized needs for services that the other groups did not. For instance, the issue of a lack of transportation was mentioned several times. They clarified that when families do not have transportation, it becomes very difficult to take advantage of additional resources including medical care. This group also mentioned a need to help students with basic necessities such as hygiene needs. Overall, the participants in this focus group proposed the implementation of programs that target the specific needs of the family as a client system to provide financial, educational, and other skills training.

## Texas Homeless Network

The THN data used for analysis and comparison were from the 2016 survey of Abilene, Texas. The original data file was acquired from the state office and used as the basis for initial review, and was triangulated through other appropriate mechanisms (discussed later for reliability and validity purposes). The data were originally obtained from seven different Abilene locations (see Table 1). Those surveyed could best be described as predominantly female, white, heterosexual, and without children (see Table 2).

Table 1: 2016 THN Abilene Survey Locations

	Frequency n=	Percent
Abilene Hope Haven	11	15
Christian Service Center	1	1
Love and Care Ministries	22	29
Betty Hardwick Center (MH of Abilene)	1	1
Noah Project	19	25
Salvation Army	20	27
West Central Texas Council of Governments	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
Total	75	100.0

Table 2: 2016 Texas Homeless Network Abilene Demographic Profile

	Frequency n=	Percent
Gender		
Male	35	47
Female	40	53
Ethnicity*		
White	58	83
Other	12	17
Sexual Orientation**		
Straight	69	96
Other	3	4
Family Status***		
Individuals without children	66	88
Individuals with children (at least 1 adult & 1 child)	9	12

\*n= 5 missing; \*\* n= 3 missing; \*\*\* Total children 18

Overall, participants reported an average age of 40, with most being homeless for a year (mean 365 days) out of the past 3 years (see Table 3). The mean age of their first episode of homelessness was 33 years, but the range of time was quite large at a standard deviation (SD) of 14 years. The youngest first became homeless at the age of 12, and the oldest at 61 (data not shown). Their homeless situation reflected three separate groups; occasional, sporadic, and chronic. The occasionally homeless (1<sup>st</sup> time in past 3 years) was the largest group (n=37) and those in this group identified they had been without a steady residence for a mean average of 159 days (SD 197). The sporadically homeless (multiple episodes in the past 3 years) was the second largest group (n=22) and had experienced a mean average of 381 days (SD 374) without a residence. The smallest group was the continuously homeless a year or longer (n=5), and who identified a mean average of 1,605 days (SD 617) without steady housing.

Table 3: 2016 THN Age, Days Homeless, Age First Became Homeless, and Mean Total Days

	Mean (SD)	n=
Mean age (years)	40 (15)	69
Mean days homeless	365 (729)	67
Mean age first became homeless (years)	33 (14)	72
Homeless situation by mean total days*		
1 <sup>st</sup> time in the past 3 years	159 (197)	37 (58%)
Multiple episodes in past 3 years	381(374)	22(34%)
Continuously homeless for at least a year	1,605 (617)	5(8%)

\*n=11 missing

When asked where they would be sleeping tonight, the most frequent response was having emergency shelter (n=33), while a nearly equal number indicated that they would be staying in a “place not meant for habitation” (n=29) (see Table 4). Thirteen others (only about 1 in 6) reported having found transitional housing.

Table 4: 2016 THN Where will you be sleeping tonight?

Location	Frequency n=	Percent
Emergency Shelter	33	44
Place not meant for habitation	29	39
Transitional Housing	13	17
Total	75	100.0

Three-fourths (75%) of those surveyed indicated they had become homeless this time in Abilene itself (see Table 5). While the remaining 25% had become homeless elsewhere, almost all (82%, 14/17) had become homeless in Texas. Only 3 of the homeless individuals became homeless somewhere other than Texas.

Table 5: 2016 THN Where did you become homeless this time?

	Frequency n=	Percent
Where Became Homeless		
Abilene, TX	52	75
Other location	17*	25
Total	69**	100

\*82% or 14/17 from other locations in Texas; \*\*n= 6 missing

Table 6 reviews the “Homeless Triggers” or reported cause(s) related to the first time they became homeless, by age range. Please note that the way the survey was configured allowed the individuals to select multiple reasons for their homelessness; thus, the total number of occurrences is greater than the number of survey participants. The question format did not allow a cross-tabulation between the different variables and their level of association with one another. Nor does this information suggest that respondents have been homeless continuously since the age they reported. In other words, we can only report the frequency with which the triggers were reported and not their statistical relationship(s).

Table 6 indicates that financial reasons were the primary cause for homelessness in all age groups. Domestic violence was the second leading cause of homelessness overall, and was most frequently reported in the 25-50 age group. The younger 12-24 age group reported the greatest variability in the reasons for their situation, as well as the second highest rate at which they became homeless. Legal issues were fairly consistently reported for all age groups, while older individuals (51 +) reported, after financial, changes in family status and legal issues as the major reasons for their homelessness.

Table 6: 2016 THN Homeless triggers by age range they “first” became homeless\*; \*\*

	(Age 12-24) n=28	(Age 25-50) n=30	(Age 51+) n=14
Financial reasons	20	23	10
Domestic violence	10	15	4
Life choice or kicked out	14	9	2
Mental illness and/or alcoholism	10	4	2
Legal Issues	5	4	4
Physical disabilities and changes in family status	2	1	5

\*Participants could choose multiple reasons; \*\* n=3 missing

Table 7 presents the type of disability that each individual reported by their current disability/work status. The challenge in reporting and interpreting this information is that the original survey allowed for multiple responses. Although there were 75 participants surveyed, there were a total of 80 disabilities and work statuses reported. This means that an individual could potentially be reporting being unemployed and working at the same time. For example, n=36 indicated being unemployed-looking, n=16 unemployed-not looking, and n=28 reported some form of employment (total =80). This means that there were five individuals who stated both being unemployed and employed at the same time. The simple explanation may be found on numerous street corners in Abilene where individuals lacking full-time employment will gather and local farmers and small companies use as locations to hire them as “day laborers”. But, it also means that the numbers cannot be used as a conclusive measure, but rather are an indication of work status, potential, or intent.

What then do the numbers suggest in Table 7? Using the total n=75 as the basis of comparison, 35% (n=26/75) reported no type of disability, of this group; all but one were seeking employment or had some form of temporary work. The remaining 65% (49/75) of the

homeless indicated some form of disability (e.g., includes mental illness or substance abuse) that impacted their employment status. Of the 49 indicating some form of disability, 27 indicated looking for work, while 15 responded as unemployed and not looking. A complicating factor here may be whether or not they have some form of disability income that was not specifically identified through the original survey. One of the report’s authors has done extensive research in the area of medical disability and employment; the important point to be made from that prior research is that there is a segment of the medically disabled that will continue to draw disability payments and work “under the table” to earn additional income (Paris, 2006). However, an equally important consideration is that this is most likely to occur in individuals >50 years of age. Reemployment programs are much less likely to be successful as age increases. The earlier the employment intervention, the more success it is likely to achieve.

Table 7: 2016 THN Types of Disability by work status\*

	Frequency/ n=	Unemployed/ Looking	Unemployed/ Not looking	Works/ FT	Works/ PT	Works/ Temporary
No disability	26	9	1	7	7	2
Physical disability	11	6	3	1	0	1
Mental Illness	14	7	5	1	0	1
Alcoholism	11	4	2	3	1	1
PTSD	8	3	3	0	0	2
Developmental	5	3	1	1	0	0
Traumatic Brain Injury	3	3	0	0	0	0
HIV/AIDS	2	1	1	0	0	0
Total		36	16	13	8	7

\*may have multiple disabilities or reported more than 1 work status

## Abilene Independent School District

According to AISD during the 2015-2016 AY there were a total of 947 homeless children and youth within the AISD system (see Table 8). There were nearly equal number of males and females. It should be noted that almost half were Hispanic/Latino, followed by Caucasian, African American, and multi-racial (proportionally this reflects the ethnic makeup of the district). Three-fourths (77%) were “accompanied” by a parent or legal guardian. The remainder were “unaccompanied” by a parent or legal guardian and had to independently make alternative living arrangements.

Table # 8 2016 AISD Homeless Demographic data

	n=	%
Gender		
Male	479	51
Female	<u>468</u>	49
Total	947	
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	443	46.8
White/Caucasian	309	32.6
Black or African American	154	16.3
Two or More/Other	41	4.3
Homeless Status		
Accompanied	730	77
Unaccompanied	217	23

Regardless of their academic level (i.e., elementary, middle school, high school) the vast majority were living “doubled up” with extended family or staying with friends; this was followed by those in some form of shelter environment (see Table 9).

Table #9 2016 AISD Homeless Living Status by Academic Level

Academic Ranking	Homeless Living Status				Total
	Shelter *	Doubled Up **	Unsheltered ***	Motel/Hotel	
Elementary School	58	472	1	26	559
Middle School	9	148	0	15	173
High School	<u>17</u>	<u>196</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>215</u>
Total	84	816	2	45	947

\*emergency, youth, DV, transitional; \*\* living with relatives or friends; \*\*\* car, tent, sub-standard housing

To further differentiate those at potential risk, homeless students were compared on the basis of academic level and accompanied/unaccompanied status (see Table 10). Except for high school, the majority of the homeless students were accompanied by parent or a guardian. Fifty-eight percent of high school students were unaccompanied and depended on alternative forms of housing.

Table #10 2016 AISD Academic Level by Homeless category

Grade Level	Accompanied (n=730)	Unaccompanied (n=217)
Elementary School	484 (87%)	75 (13%)
Middle School	155 (90%)	18 (10%)
High School	91 (42%)	124 (58%)

When compared on the basis of homeless category and ethnicity there was no specific group that exhibited a greater risk of being homeless compared to others (see Table 11). As noted above, the total number of unaccompanied homeless reflect the ethnic makeup of the district (e.g., primarily Hispanic/Latino, followed by Caucasian, African American, and multi-racial), and does not suggest any particular group were at greater risk of its occurrence.

Table #11 2016 AISD Homeless Categories by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Accompanied n=	Unaccompanied n=
Hispanic/Latino	351	92
Caucasian	243	66
African American	106	48
Two or More/Other	<u>30</u>	<u>11</u>
Total	730	217

Homeless students were further compared by category, gender, and academic level (see Table 12). As a proportion, accompanied males and females were equally at risk for homelessness across all academic rankings. The same was true for unaccompanied students in elementary and middle schools, except that females had a much higher frequency among high school age students (n=80 vs 46).

Table #12 2016 AISD Homeless Categories by Gender and Educational Level

Homeless Categories	Elementary School	Middle School	High School
Accompanied			
Female	230	73	49
Male	254	81	43
Unaccompanied			
Female	38	8	80
Male	35	10	46
Total			
Female	268	84	127
Male	291	89	88

Educational outcomes (i.e. graduation rates, transfers, drop outs, etc...) were also explored for the AISD unaccompanied students (see Table 13). The numbers indicate that 25% (n=52) of the unaccompanied students met the requirements for graduation, and 52% (n=113) remained enrolled. Twelve percent (n=27) had completed the proper paperwork and had transferred to another school district. Of the remaining 25 students (11%) either formally dropped out or had moved into an alternative program such as being home schooled or court ordered GED and their exact educational outcome could not be determined.

Table #13 2016 AISD Unaccompanied Students by Educational Outcomes ( n=217)

	Unaccompanied n=
Graduation Status	
Enrolled	113 (52%)
Graduated	52 (25%)
Alternative *	18 (8%)
Dropped Out	7 (3%)
Transferred	<u>27 (12%)</u>
Total	217

\*Alternative means homeschooled and/or court ordered GED and cannot confirm successful outcomes

The final comparison of the AISD data considered the unaccompanied group in relation to specific living status and gender (see Table 14). Based on this comparison females had the most unstable environments with regards to living with a significant other, and moved 3 plus times during the year. There was a nearly equal rate of being homeless and staying in a shelter by gender.

Table # 14: 2016 AISD Unaccompanied Students (n=217) by Living Status and Gender

	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
Living Situation			
Family	67	57	124
Friends	14	20	34
"Significant Other"	24	5	29
Moved 3 times +	15	3	18
Homeless	3	4	7
Shelter	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>5</u>
Total	127	90	217

## Abilene Police Department

A review of the APD data for the calendar year 2016 found that those categorized as homeless and who had some form of interaction with police that led to formal citations or arrests were primarily Caucasian adult males over the age of 25 (see Table 15).

Table # 15: 2016 APD Homeless Interaction Demographic Profile \*

	Adult $\leq$ 25 n=	Adult $\geq$ 26 n=	Total
Gender			
Male	137	712	849
Female	53	136	189
Ethnicity			
White/Caucasian	101	542	643
Hispanic/Latino	30	179	209
African American	59	127	186

Table # 15: 2016 APD Homeless Interaction Demographic Profile \*

\*(n=1,038)

Of the 1,038 homeless individuals APD were in contact with in 2016, a total of 161 citations were issued (see Table 16). Males were more frequently cited for “aggressive panhandling”, and virtually all of those cited for “soliciting in the road” were males. Females were more likely to be cited for “disorderly conduct”. When considered from the basis of what has been commonly referred to as “frequent fliers,” three individuals account for 25% (40/161) of the citations; six individuals comprise 36% (58/161) of the total number of citations issued, and 70% (58/83) of those for aggressive panhandling and solicitation (data not shown).

Table #16: 2016 APD Homeless Citations by Gender

	Male n=	Female n=	Total
Citations			
Aggressive panhandling	16	0	16
Disorderly conduct	56	22	78
Soliciting in the road	65	2	<u>67</u>
			161 *

\*7 were not given a citation

Of the 870 homeless arrests over the same time-frame, over a third (305, 35.1%) were primarily for alcohol and/or drug related crimes (see Table 17). The second most frequent

basis for arrest was presence of an outstanding warrant (n=271, 31.1%). Most (n=160, 18.4%) were local warrants; however, 111 (12.8%) of those arrested were on warrants from outside of Abilene. For those arrested for assault, n= 45 (80%) of them were associated with family violence, leaving only 20% (n=11) whose assaultive behavior was directed to others outside the family. As with the citations, a small number of individuals (n=15; 2%) accounted for a total of 16% of all the arrests (data not shown).

Table #17: 2016 APD Homeless Arrests by Charge \*

Criminal Charges	Total n=	Percent
Assault	56	6.4%
<i>Domestic</i>	<i>(45)</i>	
<i>Non-domestic</i>	<i>(11)</i>	
Drug/Alcohol	305	35.1%
Parole/Probation Violation	62	7.1%
Theft/Burglary/Shoplifting	82	9.4%
Outstanding Arrest Warrants	271	31.1%
<i>Local</i>	<i>(160)</i>	
<i>Outside of Abilene</i>	<i>(111)</i>	
Other	210	24.1%

\*(n=870)

## Triangulation Information

Triangulation is a research technique used to improve reliability and validity in primarily qualitative studies. It is an approach the researcher takes to look at other information to help establish just how well the observations that have been made are consistent (i.e., reliable), and actually indicate what the researcher thinks it does (i.e., valid). The approach used in this study was from Rubin and Babbie (2013) that defined triangulation as, “the use of more than one imperfect data collection alternative in which each option is vulnerable to different potential sources of error” (p. 109).

The numbers in the 2016 THN data were known to be incorrect about the number of school-age children in Abilene. In other words, the accompanied school-age children were never identified, and homeless families were not adequately represented. This may have been due, in part, to the limited locations in which the THN data was collected (See Table 1). For this, and other more technical reasons, the study group “triangulated” the THN data by

visiting homeless agencies, talking with the homeless themselves, as well as interviewing those who work directly with them to try to determine how to better estimate both the numbers and profile of Abilene's adult homeless population.

The makeup of the homeless population according to the direct contact with the homeless and those that work directly with them found that the profile developed by THN was, in general consistent with: (i) the gender, ethnicity, and age became homeless; (ii) chronicity of the incidence of homelessness; (iii) percentage of those that were regularly or sporadically homeless; (iv) the location in which they became homeless (i.e. in Abilene or another location); and, (v), homeless triggers. The triangulation information strongly suggested that THN data was inconsistent with regards to the: (i) overall number of homeless which was reported to be n=75 (2016 PIT survey), versus projected total numbers of n=150 (Spring, 2017).

Due to issues raised by the IRB regarding confidentiality and competency of the individuals in the homeless encampments, we did not ask any questions related to the specific type of disability or incidence of substance abuse or mental illness that may have been present in this population. The IRB's rationale for these restrictions was their concern about the possibility of collecting identifiable information from a group considered to be vulnerable, and/or due to an inability to determine competence level. Given that the vast majority of the homeless self-report being from Abilene, a small urban geographic location according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, they were also concerned that those questions could possibly expose them to identification or unwanted attention. As a result, for purposes of the current comparison, we had to assume that the THN data was "probably" accurate regarding the incidence of substance abuse and/or mental illness and other forms of disability within the overall homeless population in Abilene. Support for this decision was from the professional literature that found similar numbers were within what would be considered normal for this population.

# Discussion

This study was initiated with a list of “special circumstances” that the authors were asked to address by the homeless *ad hoc* committee. This discussion focuses on answering four of those questions (see Table 17 below; see Page 33, Special Circumstances in Abilene section for a complete list of circumstances). The rationale for the choices of the issues to be specifically addressed were ultimately determined by the findings and our analysis of what was the primary information that needed to be considered that would be of the most help in moving this process forward.

Table # 18: Circumstances Addressed in this Report

- (i). Distinguishing between transient and chronically homeless individuals
- (ii). City of origin for the homeless
- (iii). Demographic of the homeless: limited education; substance abuse; PTSD; mental illness issues or concerns; adequate access to affordable health care
- (iv). Crimes committed by adult homeless persons

This does not suggest that the other issues from the original list were ignored, but rather were of secondary or tertiary concern given the significant homeless needs identified as a result of the other questions that were considered within this report. As will hopefully be evident, many of the remaining items relate to housing needs associated with AISD unaccompanied students, and the inherent problems associated with the risks associated with their homelessness, and the wider problems presented by homeless adults.

There was an inherent problem of accurately reporting the services that are provided to the homeless, due to the existing fragmented service delivery system within Abilene. In addition, attempting to identify the services currently delivered may not be as beneficial as addressing the absence of information regarding services and resources that are not currently available in the community. The focus of this discussion is based on profiling two distinct homeless groups, the adult and school-age populations, and the need to better equip APD to address mental illness and substance abuse issues inherent within both the homeless and general populations.

Furthermore, the analysis of the data revealed two distinct perceptions or representations of the homeless population. The first sees the homeless as a group of people who choose to live a frugal lifestyle that inevitably requires the exploitation of city resources.

The second identifies the homeless as a group who most definitely do not choose to live a homeless lifestyle. This second group, according to our data, represents most of the homeless population; a group of people who are working and trying to improve their financial situation. These two perceptions will be further described by the quantitative and triangulation data within the context of the two primary data groups of adults and school aged children.

## Adult Homelessness

To determine the profile of adult homeless, a conservative approach was used and it was assumed they were at mid-point between the THN formally identified n= 75 and triangulated projected n= 150, and rounded to n=112. Given that assumed number, and accepting that the profile from the THN 2016 survey was valid, would yield the following projected profile of the current Abilene adult homeless population (see Table 19).

Table #19: Projected Profile of Current Abilene Adult Homeless Population (n=112)

Primarily female (52%; n=58)
Caucasian (81%; n=91)
Homeless situation:
Occasionally homeless (1st time in 3 years) (49%; n=54)
Sporadically homeless (multiple times in 3 years) (24%; n=26)
Consistently homeless (continuously for at least a year) (5%; n=6)
Became homeless in Abilene (75%; n=83)
Primary reason for homelessness (multiple options):
Financial (71%; n=78)
Domestic violence (39%; n=43)
Life choice/kicked out (30%; n=33)
Mental illness/substance abuse (22%; n=24)
Legal issues (17%; n=19)
Disability/change in family status (11%; n=12)
Employment status (multiple options):
Unemployed-looking (48%; n=53)
Unemployed-not looking (21%; n=23)
Had some form of documented disability (35%; n=38)

Please note: Not all categories will add up to 100% because of missing data from some of the profile used for projection numbers.

What then are the adult homeless needs in Abilene? Of the 112 that are estimated to exist, the majority (appx 90) would be local individuals (includes those originally from Abilene and other parts of Texas) who live a very marginal existence that is dependent on steady income which is compromised by the presence of substance abuse, mental illness,

physical/medical issues, or family violence. As a group, these are not typically highly skilled individuals and are the first to be negatively influenced by the cyclical nature of the West Texas economy. There is a sub-group of approximately 20 transient individuals, as represented by the number cited for panhandling/solicitation, who prey on others' generosity and kindness; however, that is the minority, not the majority, of Abilene's homeless.

Both the THN data and the triangulation suggest 75% of the homeless became homeless in Abilene. The transient homeless do exist, as evidenced by the APD arrest data (see Table 17), but even those numbers would suggest they are not as prevalent as perception might indicate. Moreover, painting all homeless in this manner with such a broad brush stroke is disingenuous to the reality of homelessness and can easily detract from the community's willingness to be a part of helping to reduce its prevalence. People become homeless as a result of numerous factors, many of which are out of the control of the individual, such as with the case of mental illness. The assumption that the homeless come to Abilene for the services does not align with the reality that Abilene lacks adequate emergency housing, mental illness and substance abuse treatment, and public transportation services.

As suggested earlier, the service providers who participated in the focus groups were the most attuned to the needs of the homeless and were reluctant to make judgments about their behavior. Their perceptions appear to be more consistent with the needs and resources that would be required to provide services. It is ironic, that the initial purpose behind this entire process grew out of the requests of the business community to do something about the homeless, yet their perception was the least insightful about what was really needed. This does not mean that those whose behavior is inappropriate, should not be held accountable for their actions, nor does it minimize the realities experienced by the business owners. Rather, it begs the question, are there other approaches that may better serve the needs of Abilene's homeless?

The other perception of the adult homeless population was much less prevalent among the focus groups, and that is a sub-category of the homeless who are actively attempting to improve their situation; those who do not choose to be homeless. Sadly, although this more positive perception is validated by the data, it was rarely presented by focus group participants. The Service Providers Focus Group indicated many clients who come to them seeking their help, not to accommodate a homeless lifestyle, but to overcome it. Evidence for this is found in the THN data with a total of 84% of those surveyed who believed they were physically able to work (see comments about Table 7) with more than half of them actively seeking employment. Additionally, the triangulation interviews supported this conclusion. The potential value of this homeless assessment is in recognition of this second sub-category.

## School-Age Homelessness

The best source of information about school-age homelessness was AISD. For many years the ACU School of Social Work has partnered with AISD for numerous projects and program assessments. Even the most cursory review of the 2016 THN data, given this prior experience with AISD, it was obvious that the number of homeless students indicated in the THN report was incomplete. Our prior experience working with the school district indicated that student homeless numbers ran consistently in the 600+ range per year. The 2015-2016 AY data highlighted a total of 947 homeless in the school district. For the purposes of planning it was recommended by AISD staff that we concentrate on the “unaccompanied” portion or a total n=217. This group was comprised of those students who were not accompanied by a parent or legal guardian, and were reliant on friends or extended family for housing. This does not suggest that the accompanied students (those with a parent or guardian) do not have significant needs, but rather when ranked in terms of “risk” the unaccompanied are in a much more vulnerable position.

The gender of the unaccompanied children is reported in Table 20. As the numbers suggest, in all three academic levels females outnumber the males. Although 53% (67/127) of the unaccompanied females are living with family (see Table #14) that still leaves n=59 (46%; 59/127) of them were staying in locations that are less reliable (i.e., friends, “significant other,” moved 3+ times, no place to stay, or in a shelter). The fact that 45 of the 59 (76%) were staying with a “significant other”, had moved 3+ times, were truly homeless or living in a shelter should cause all of us concern for their safety and well-being.

Table #20: Gender of Unaccompanied Children in AISD (n=217)

Gender	Elementary	Middle School	High School
Male	35	8	46
Female	38	10	80

This does not suggest that males are less vulnerable than females. It is not necessary to report or reinforce the risks that either may face as a result of being absent identified primary care givers and supervision. It is common knowledge that boys are at increased risk of legal and substance abuse issues, and, yes, potentially being sexual exploited. Just recently one of the authors worked with a case at a local clinic of a 17 year old boy living in a hotel that was highly likely being sexually exploited and manipulated through drug use by older partners.

When one compares the THN and AISD data, one of, if not the most troubling aspects of the findings is the date at which they first became homeless (see Table 6). Clearly, the younger individuals are the most vulnerable when looking at the reasons for their homelessness, and at the greatest risk for experiencing or developing future problems. The absence of a structured environment that the unaccompanied children must cope with, places them at the greatest risk of being the next generation of Abilene's homeless. The earlier the age at which this occurs the more difficult it will be for them to escape that cycle in the future. From a public health perspective, we believe the unaccompanied group of homeless students need to be the priority to help reduce future homeless or sexually exploited individuals.

The focus group responses were probably more revealing about the community's attitude towards children and families, by what they did not say, rather than what they did. As indicated, the questions asked in the focus groups, none were directed towards a particular group of homeless. Nor did the facilitators direct the conversations about a particular segment of that population. Two of the groups focused almost completely on adults, with the business group exclusively discussing adults. The adults are what they primarily observe, so that is somewhat understandable. The services group mentioned families and children, but did not spend much time focusing on the children themselves. However, they did at least recognize that there are families and children in need.

Regarding the two main perceptions, it's harder to label children in the group of those who choose a homeless lifestyle, as they don't have much agency in the first place. This is further illustrated by the fact that the School Program Group indicated that many students are not served as a result of their not seeking help in order to avoid being stereotyped by the first perception. According to the literature, this is sometimes propagated by a lack of awareness or basic social skills to know how to request them. Rather, as in the case of adult homeless, the evidence indicates that school children are better represented by the second perception of those who are actively working to improve their situation. This is indicated by the favorable number of high schoolers who still manage to graduate regardless of their homeless status.

So, we are left to question, are the children and their families invisible? The THN data only recognized 18 children, a far cry from the 217 unaccompanied that were in school and did not have a parent or guardian to support them, but rather had to rely on friends, extended family, or the limited emergency services available. It is unclear to the authors how many shelter beds in Abilene are designated for unaccompanied minors, more specifically

female children and youth. This is especially difficult to assess given the fact that some unaccompanied minors may or may not be involved in the child welfare system. Given the significant attention in Abilene to the risk of sex trafficking, it is difficult to determine the level of risk unaccompanied female minors within AISD may experience in relation to sexual exploitation. Within a broader context, it seems reasonable for stakeholders to be more concerned with unaccompanied homeless children and youth and less concerned with overt aggressive panhandling.

## **Aggressive Panhandling**

To adequately identify the problems Abilene's homeless presented with in 2016, one must consider two levels of analysis; those who were cited for their actions, or the more serious situations that resulted in their arrest. The majority of homeless citations were for aggressive panhandling and soliciting in the road (52%). Of those charged, 70% (58/83) of the citations were issued to six individuals. There is no way to be certain, but anecdotal descriptions received from the Business Focus Group indicated these individuals are well-known and indeed struggle with what was subjectively described as symptoms of mental illness and possible substance use disorders. More information would be necessary before drawing any valid conclusions about those six individuals, and would require a very specific IRB approval and strict legal oversight to fully address the concerns.

However, the remaining 30% of those individuals cited with aggressive panhandling or solicitation, may be reflective of their true financial circumstances. It has been widely reported in the professional literature that the most prominent link to homelessness is poverty (Waegemakers-Schiff, 2015). Here also, some level of certainty would be required to draw any reliable conclusions about the level of economic need. The numbers of locals lacking a regular income may suggest that their need is real, but additional review would be necessary to be more certain. But, there is adequate information about whether or not there are other issues at play for the remaining homeless individuals that were charged with disorderly conduct.

Forty-eight percent of the homeless were cited for disorderly conduct. In other words, almost half of the citations were consistent with problems that mental illness or substance abuse would typically be associated with. When one looks at the reported THN numbers (see Table 7) the percentage of homeless individuals that suffer from substance abuse and mental illness would potentially help to explain these numbers.

The arrest of 870 homeless individuals over the same time-frame paint a somewhat similar picture. Thirty-five percent (n=305) of those arrested were for some form of alcohol

or drug related violation (see Table 17). Although this encompasses a wide range of charges and levels of severity, they do reflect the broader, more systemic problems that drugs and alcohol present within the homeless population. Nor were they immune to other legal problems resulting in their having outstanding warrants for their arrest, from both local and other jurisdictions. However, unlike those who had been issued only citations, the ones arrested do present with more pronounced problems. The homeless do commit crimes against individuals and property, as reflected in the assault and theft arrests reported in Table 17.

The question of assault is somewhat straightforward. That 80% of those arrested for assault occurred within the family unit is a strong indicator of the multi-problem nature of their existence. This does not lessen the concern for either the family or those that are victims of the violence. It simply suggests, that when violence does occur, it is more likely to happen within the family unit, rather than the risk to the broader population.

The data reveal that the homeless do commit property crimes. They steal cars, shoplift, and a whole range of other illegal actions, but at a comparatively lower rate than that of other offenses (Table 17). But, as suggested elsewhere, the question remains whether these are related to merely a criminal intent, or reflective of economic need or substance abuse issues. The APD data does not provide much guidance in that regard, nor should it. The task of the police is to deal with the protection of property and individuals. It is the responsibility of the service providers to work with the APD to identify the needs and provide the resources and programs appropriate to Abilene citizens.

The incidence of “frequent fliers” among the homeless population suggests the need for some mechanism to identify and proactively intervene in those cases. Clearly, the current system is not working. The findings suggest that there is a need for specially trained mental health marshals and a much more formal and comprehensive jail diversion option for Abilene, rather than addressing them through the current informal voluntary mechanisms. In other words, the numbers suggest that the specific question of aggressive panhandling is only marginally related to the problem of homelessness, and requires elaboration about the broader issue of the tendency to criminalize mental illness and substance abuse issues. In Texas, it has been documented and widely reported that consistently between 20% to 25% of those arrested suffer from substance abuse or mental illness and that they would benefit from treatment rather than incarceration (Personal Communication, Director, Dallas Department of Public Safety).

One of the report’s authors previously worked with the Director of Dallas Public Safety in the initial planning for an evaluation of their jail diversion program. Although the

assessment was never conducted, the preliminary planning required significant study of the problems that existed in Dallas and other areas of the state associated with untreated mental illness and substance abuse and their impact on local law enforcement and corrections (i.e. jail/prison). Forty-eight percent of the homeless citations (e.g., disorderly conduct) are consistent with the difficulties encountered by other Texas cities and reflective of the need for more comprehensive substance abuse and mental illness assessment and treatment than currently exists in Abilene. We believe that specially trained mental health marshals and development of a jail diversion program would be the most positive response to address the myriad of issues identified in this report that has been misinterpreted as being related solely to the homeless population and the incidence of aggressive panhandling or solicitation.

# Conclusions and Implications

In summary, the authors make the following observations about the information contained in this report:

1. For only one group (school-age children) is there an effective mechanism for identifying the number of homeless; otherwise, the existing estimates are under-reporting the scope of the problem.
2. While Abilene perceives itself as having a seeming plethora of available resources for the homeless, there is a dearth of resources for the most intractable problems faced by this population: (i) emergency housing for those who suffer from mental illness or substance abuse issues; (ii) healthcare, especially mental illness and substance abuse treatment; (iii) adequate public transportation; or, (iv) stable economic opportunities.
3. Perceptions of homelessness are influenced by the nature of the population with whom one interacts;
4. Stereotyping contributes to the misperceptions of homelessness in the community that interferes with adequate funding, limiting agencies' abilities to adequately serve this population.

A review of the findings suggest that there are at least  $n=329$  homeless individuals in Abilene (112 homeless adults, and 217 unaccompanied homeless children). Potentially there could be as many as  $n=350$  if one is more inclusive in the use of projected encampment numbers from the triangulated data.

The adult homeless individuals are primarily from Abilene or other parts of Texas, with a small minority from outside of the state. Consistent with the data and supported by the focus group information of those who work directly with them, most of these individuals are in need of viable employment options and/or their financial situation is complicated by mental illness, substance abuse, family violence, or some form of medically disabling condition. This is a reality that presents innumerable challenges for the community, and will require resources, both human and financial to address them.

The student-age unaccompanied population consists of a majority of females, who were more likely to rely on "significant others," friends, emergency shelters, or were totally homeless. They may not be as high profile as the adults that appear disruptive, as identified by sleeping on sidewalks, soliciting with their signs on the roadways, or behaving inappropriately in public. Ignoring them will not solve the problem, because they will

become very visible, as those most likely to be the next generation of Abilene's homeless.

And finally, what then do the data suggest are the greatest needs to be addressed from the myriad of issues indicated in this report of Abilene's homeless? The authors believe that there are three immediate homeless priorities that need to be addressed:

1.unaccompanied youth housing; 2. adult housing focusing on those with mental illness and substance abuse; and, 3: mental health marshals and a more formalized jail diversion program. These will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

# Priority Suggestions

Given the previous information, the authors recommend, and in this order of priorities:

**1. Housing/Shelter for a minimum of 30 unaccompanied school-age students developed through coordination with Region 14 and AISD staff.**

As the unaccompanied school-age numbers suggest, the most pressing need for unaccompanied homeless students is for safe-secure housing (Henry et al, 2014). Most of homeless minors in Abilene are motivated to complete their education, have been able to secure some form of shelter, and will graduate high school. However, there remains a significant need for a minimum number of shelter beds and services for those that are at risk for several issues (i.e. school dropout, substance abuse, mental illness, sexual exploitation, etc...). The scientific literature is quite clear: the earlier the age at which someone becomes homeless, the greater the likelihood they will develop mental illness, the higher their risk of subsequent substance abuse, and the more likely they are to be sexually exploited (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014; Buckner, 2008; DiBiase & Waddell, 1995; Koblinsky). Unlike the adult population, the younger homeless group are at greatest risk of *developing* the problems, that as an adult they will *suffer from*, and that will continue to complicate their ability to maintain safe and stable housing. The simplest analogy is, “pay me now, or pay me much more later.” A failure to seriously address the needs of the Abilene unaccompanied school-age homeless identified within this report will be the adult homeless of tomorrow.

**2. Coordination and community plan of local programs to provide shelter for a minimum of 100 current adult homeless, with approximately 50 of the beds for females.**

Beds that would need to include approximately 30 of the total number capable of caring for individuals (15 female and 15 male) that are homeless due to substance abuse and/or mental illness. It would be highly recommended that this plan be coordinated with the 3rd priority; the proposed training of mental health marshals and further development of a jail diversion program. The number of beds suggested for the adult population may seem somewhat incongruent with the data collected given the size of the adult homeless population. However, given the “transitional”

nature of this population is often based on economic need, many of those could have their situation resolved through gainful employment, and or improved identification and treatment options for their mental illness or substance abuse disorder. In other words, the adult homeless have the potential to be a more independent population, who would benefit if a more supportive economic, mental health and substance abuse treatment options were in place.

**3. Funding for mental health marshals and the development of a comprehensive formalized jail diversion program that provides for emergency and long-term mental illness and substance abuse treatment *in lieu* of incarceration for those with potential to benefit from those services.**

APD is on the front line in dealing with mental illness emergencies, problems associated with substance abuse, and homelessness. From the authors' perspective, by asking the police to focus on "aggressive panhandling" is misguided. The compartmentalization of effort and misuse of resources that result from doing so, provides minimal potential to address the needs of the homeless, and limits the department's ability to better serve the community. A failure to provide APD with the training and treatment options to deal with the broader issues that they must confront, is at a minimum disingenuous about our commitment to provide them with the tools required to adequately protect and serve the community. In effect, they are being asked to solve a myriad of social problems for which they are ill suited. Treatment for mental illness and or substance abuse costs money, but in the long-run it is less costly than incarceration. Funding for the training necessary to deal with substance abuse and mental illness has potential to help APD to be better prepared to deal with the problems presented and needs identified within this report; but, only if the emergency mental illness and substance abuse resources are made available through a more comprehensive jail diversion and treatment program necessary for those with which they have contact.

## Resources Needed

These recommendations reflect the immediate need for a minimum of 3 VISTA positions to be placed at AISD and APD, and recruitment from Abilene Christian University and Texas Tech Health Sciences Center masters and doctoral level students from various departments to provide technical assistance. This level of expertise will be advisable to help plan for, address, and evaluate the efforts to meet the myriad of needs that will be required to work with Abilene's homeless. City funding and the search for federal and state grant sources also should be a serious consideration as part of this overall process to help fund the different services that will be required to address them.

Obviously, all of the identified needs cannot be confronted overnight and will be determined by the agreed upon priorities from the City of Abilene, local churches, and non-profit agencies, as represented in the Abilene *ad hoc* homeless committee.

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# Appendix A: Homeless Needs Assessment

## PROPOSAL

### HOMELESSNESS NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR THE CITY OF ABILENE, TEXAS

Submitted by  
Institute for Social and Community Development  
Abilene Christian University School of Social Work  
Abilene Christian University  
Abilene, Texas

June 7, 2016

#### ***Purpose***

In response to the materials provided by Stan Standridge, Chief of Police, Abilene, Texas (*Homeless Needs Assessment*, Appendix A), the Institute for Social and Community Development of the Abilene Christian University School of Social Work (ISCD) submits this proposal to conduct a needs assessment addressing homelessness issues in the greater Abilene area. The purpose of the proposal is to address a series of issues and needs identified by a special ad hoc committee created by Chief Standridge in response to community concerns raised with the City of Abilene in recent months. These have been articulated in the *Homeless Needs Assessment* document referenced above, which focuses on the committee's articulation of the history of efforts to address homelessness in the region, a tentative identification of sources of data for a needs assessment, perceived unique characteristics of Abilene and the surrounding area, and a preliminary articulation of local commitments (both financial and in-kind) to the support of a more comprehensive needs assessment.

The ISCD has been invited to partner with the Abilene Police Department (APD), representing the City of Abilene, and key local agencies and organizations to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment that will facilitate the coordination of efforts to address issues and needs of the homeless population of Abilene, drawing on the most valid and reliable data available regarding this elusive group. This will allow diverse agencies and organizations, with segmented goals and purposes, to deliver better coordinated and evidence-based interventions to address this group of Abilene citizens.

More specifically, the ICSD will:

- Identify existing federal, state and local sources of data regarding homelessness in Abilene and the West Central Texas region;
- Aggregate the point-in-time homeless profile developed by the West Texas Homeless Network; Abilene Independent School District's (AISD) Homeless Information (initial AISD request made to share information 6/2/16); BCFS Abilene Transition Center (information request will be made once formal proposal agreed upon), and any other relevant agencies or organizations with local data; and, analyze within the context of the APD's enforcement actions to clarify the community needs; and,

- Collect additional data through accepted social scientific methods to clarify the breadth of issues and needs of the various segments of the homeless population in Abilene.

The information generated by this needs assessment is expected to be of value to the City of Abilene, Abilene Police Department, non-profit agencies, and faith-based programs, as they seek to identify evidence-based programs and facilitate coordination of services necessary to help address homeless needs within the Abilene community.

***Proposed Action***

To achieve the purposes described above, the ISCD will conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment of homelessness in Abilene, with the following goals:

- (1) Clarify the composition of the homeless population in Abilene, Texas, using existing data sources, key informant studies, focus groups, and other relevant strategies that might be identified during the course of the assessment;
- (2) Gain a clearer understanding of the needs of the homeless population in Abilene, using strategic interviews of selected homeless subpopulations, key informant studies, and other relevant strategies;
- (3) Provide an overview of existing community resources for the homeless population in Abilene, primarily using key informant strategies;
- (4) Develop an evidence-informed analysis of existing and potential problem-focused service delivery strategies to target identified needs and issues; and,
- (5) Ultimately mitigate the social costs of homelessness to the Abilene community, including city/county agencies and departments, nonprofit agencies (including churches and other religious organizations), and ultimately the larger community.

To do this, the ICSD will collect data through such meetings, surveys, reviews of documentary evidence on homelessness, and analysis of findings as is needed to demonstrate the current status homelessness and homeless needs in the city of Abilene.

Meetings will be scheduled and conducted in consultation with the ad hoc working committee on the homeless and can include, but may not necessarily be limited to: group meetings for (a) providers of services to the homeless and (b) homeless clients; individual meetings with actual homeless residents and/or transients, including surveys (content to be finalized later); and, surveys of "key informants" (local agencies or individuals whose expertise on homelessness is acknowledged). Data from these strategies will be used to supplement information from public and archival sources. This documentary evidence will include review of published data during the period 2010 through 2016 from identified state and national governmental and nongovernmental housing resources, and data from the APD.

***Methodology***

The proposed needs assessment will utilize a mixed-methods approach that will include:

- Stakeholder focus groups;

- Identification and review of existing databases, including federal, state and local sources (e.g., US Census, state homeless organizations, APD);
- Key Informant studies; and,
- Collection of individual data, as appropriate, from homeless individuals utilizing outdoor encampments and homeless shelters.

Data from these sources will be “triangulated” (i.e., compared and contrasted) to verify and/or disconfirm observations of diverse participants.

**Human Subjects Protections:** Given the extent to which individual information will be secured through the APD, agency, and individual interviews, this study will require Internal Review Board oversight. Prior approval will be sought and secured through the ACU Human Subject Committee prior to review of APD records or the decision to conduct individual interviews. This will also require that all data gathered by the graduate research assistants will need to be codified to remove all individual identifiers prior to initial data analysis by the senior members of the research team. Given the nature of multiple point of contact for the gathering of identifying information will reduce the chance of unwanted redundancy within the data (i.e. error).

**Stakeholder Focus Groups:** The research team will identify the appropriate constituents to be invited to participate in one or more focus groups that will be directed towards identifying the homeless services available, their perception of homeless needs, and how best to move forward as a community to address those needs.

**APD Data:** Team members will review existing information for at least the past 6 months to help profile homeless problems identified through the APD in its interactions with this population, analyzing the resources that were utilized and the approximate cost to taxpayers.

**Tools to Be Used:** Based on a review of the literature on homelessness, the team will develop instruments for group and individual data collection; these will be reviewed and approved by the Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board to provide protection for human subjects, and to assure proper presentation of findings. Special attention will be given to the guidelines as suggested in *Working with Homeless and Vulnerable People*, J W. Schiff (2015), including identification of the housing, employment, mental health, substance abuse issues (or lack thereof) of the homeless individuals identified for this project.

**Data Analysis:** All qualitative and quantitative data will be entered into a password protected data files for analysis, using relevant software (e.g., *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* [SPSS] for quantitative data, *N-Vivo* for qualitative data). All data will be analyzed using appropriate statistical procedures under the direction of a qualified PhD statistician within the ACU School of Social Work.

**Capacity for the Proposed Action**

The Institute for Social and Community Development is designed to assist community-based organizations in projects that will enhance and maintain a strong network of human service programs in

Abilene, the surrounding West Central Texas area, and in other selected project areas. The ISCD provides research and experiential learning opportunities for graduate and undergraduate social work students.

During the past five years the ICSD has responded to invitations from a variety of governmental and nonprofit programs for studies/consultation designed to enhance the impact of the human service delivery system. Additional information on the ICSD and its recent activities can be reviewed on its web site (<http://www.acu.edu/legacy/academics/social-work/urban-studies/index.html>). Vitae on the principal project staff are included as Appendix B.

#### ***Cost Structure and Justification***

The Institute for Social and Community Development will work with the committee to design, conduct, analyze and report on the Homeless Needs Assessment for a cost of \$22,040. A cost structure and justification is attached as Attachment 1, below, showing costs allocated to the ISCD resources engaged in the study.

#### ***Schedule***

The study will be completed and costs structured as established in this document, with anticipated delivery of a report draft to the committee for comment by April 15, 2017 and final report to the committee no later than July 1, 2017. A more detailed timeline follows:

Draft Proposal Presented for Review and Comments:	June 9, 2016
Final Proposal Submitted for Approval:	June 24, 2016
Selection and Hiring of Research Assistants (VISTA):	July 15, 2016
Submission of IRB Proposal:	August 1, 2016
Initiation of Training for Research Assistants:	August 1, 2016
Identification of Focus Groups and Scheduling of Meetings:	August 15, 2016
Identification of Key Informants:	September 1, 2016
IRB Approval:	September 1, 2016
Completion of Focus Groups:	October 1, 2016
Identification of Homeless Subjects for Interviews:	October 1, 2016
Completion of Key Informant Study:	October 15, 2016
Completion of Homeless Subjects Interviews:	December 1, 2016
Initiation of Data Analysis:	January 10, 2017
Preliminary Report:	April 15, 2017
Final Report:	July 1, 2017

**Attachment 1  
Proposed Budget  
Homeless Needs Assessment**

Category	Total	Amount Contributed	Source	Amount Requested
Personnel:				
Salaries (Faculty) <sup>1</sup>	\$18,397	\$18,397	ACU School of Social Work	\$0
Grad. Assistants <sup>2</sup>	\$37,000	\$37,000	Americorps/VISTA	
Fringe Benefits <sup>3</sup>	\$5519	\$5519	ACU School of Social Work	\$0
Contractual:				
Agency Contribution <sup>4</sup>	\$17,000	\$0		\$17,000
Data Analysis <sup>5</sup>	\$3,240	\$0		\$3,240
Supplies	\$1,500	\$0		\$1,500
Postage	\$300	\$0		\$300
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$82,956</b>	<b>\$60,916</b>		<b>\$22,040</b>

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Wayne Paris, Professor Rachel Slaymaker, Dr. Thomas Winter @ approximately 10% of salary

<sup>2</sup> Two, to be selected; cost (each) includes (1) volunteer stipend @ \$12,000, (2) Tuition Reimbursement @ \$6,500, and (3) Agency Contribution @ \$8,500

<sup>3</sup> Faculty Salaries @ 30% (university average)

<sup>4</sup> This is an Americorps-required match to secure eligibility for students to receive their stipends and tuition reimbursement

<sup>5</sup> Purchase-of-services for additional consultation on data analysis, as described on page 3 of the proposal. Includes fringe cost of 8% (university cost).

# Appendices

Appendix A: Homeless Needs Assessment Document (Abilene Police Department)



ABILENE POLICE DEPARTMENT

450 PECAN STREET ● ABILENE TX 79602 ● (325) 676-6600

### Homeless Needs Assessment

In partnership with City of Abilene, Abilene Christian University and local Foundations

Calendar Years 2016 – 2017

In August 2015, the Police Department was asked to consider enforcement actions against aggressive panhandling in the downtown business district. Police employees met with the Downtown Business Association and listened to their concerns, which ranged from homeless persons threatening and cursing patrons, to urinating or defecating on sidewalks, to sleeping on sidewalks in front of businesses. Complicating the matter was the fact that some businesses were supportive of the homeless persons, often giving them food, water and shelter.

The Police Department met with City Administration, and in September 2015, a working committee was formed that was comprised of City staff, non-profits and churches. Meeting monthly, members learned of Highland Church of Christ' desire to establish a Housing First model for the homeless, and Love and Care's desire to open John 3:16 stabilization housing. These goals prompted greater discussions of needs in our community, which led to a partnership with ACU's School of Social Work. Under the direction of Doctors Thomas Winter and Wayne Paris, Assistant Professor Rachel Slaymaker will work with her graduate students to accomplish a comprehensive needs assessment by March 2017. The committee believes that this is best next step in establishing a baseline that will lead to the creation of a comprehensive plan for understanding, addressing, and managing homelessness in Abilene. Below are considerations for such an assessment.

**What has been done in the past and currently to address the Homeless Issue locally and regionally?**

- Local Law Enforcement's desire to curtail aggressive panhandling from both a public and safety perspective. Adopted a Solicitation Ordinance prohibiting aggressive panhandling.
- Highland Church of Christ focused on long-term care
- Housing First Project concepts in collaboration with City Square. Abilene would become only the third community in the nation with City Square involvement.

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- Faith Based Community in Abilene: “Word is Out in the Region” that there are significant resources and a safe haven for the homeless in Abilene
- Disabled American Veterans specific issues
- John 3:16 traditional living as lifestyle stabilization housing advocated by Love and Care
- West Texas Homeless Network Point in Time Survey.

#### **Possible Needs Assessment Focus Groups**

- Downtown business owners and patrons
- Local service providers, schools and churches
- Specific homeless populations, as identified by APD, school districts and Love and Care
- Police records maintained by APD
- Other similar surveys in cities
- Social Security Administration

#### **Special Circumstances in Abilene**

- Distinguishing between transient and chronically homeless individuals
- What caused homeless persons to remain in Abilene, if they come from elsewhere
- Limiting factors on services provided; what obstacles do they perceive to such services
- Did you become homeless while living in Abilene?
- Number of children in your household
- Limitations of case management that should be considered
- Method of transportation to Abilene, and reason for coming to Abilene
- Demographic of the homeless: education level; substance abuse; PTSD; mental health issues or concerns; adequate access to affordable health care; Noah Project.
- Kinship Care Issues; Grandparents raising grandchildren
- Spillover effects of transient population and businesses
- No centralized system in place for tracking homeless persons
- How often the homeless utilize services, and what services they utilize
- Quantity and types of crimes committed by homeless persons
- Recommendations from the homeless on how best to address these issues

#### **Action Items:**

- Abilene Police Department will share data with ACU survey team to gather offender information.
- The City of Abilene, Betty Hardwick, ACU and local Foundations will evaluate shared funding options to support graduate students / researchers to carry out duties of project.
  - Tentative funding allocations thus far:
    - Highland Church of Christ \$10K
    - Beltway \$2500, or more (dependent on Elder approval)

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- First Baptist Church \$1000 - \$2500
- City of Abilene \$5 - \$10K
- Foundations ?
- United Way will serve as the fiscal partner, through the First Responder Emergency and Disaster Assistance program.

**Points of contact:**

- Robert Hanna, City Manager
  - (325) 676-6200
  - [Robert.hanna@abilenetx.com](mailto:Robert.hanna@abilenetx.com)
- Stan Standridge, Police Chief
  - (325) 665-1235, cellular
  - [Stan.standridge@abilenetx.com](mailto:Stan.standridge@abilenetx.com)
- Rick Tomlin, Public Information Coordinator
  - (325) 437-4529
  - [Rick.tomlin@abilenetx.com](mailto:Rick.tomlin@abilenetx.com)

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## Appendix B: ACU IRB Approval

### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885

12/15/2016

Wayne Paris  
Department of Social Work  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Dr. Paris,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled Homelessness Needs Assessment for the City of Abilene, TX

was approved by full board review on 12/15/2016 for a period of one year (IRB #16-063 ). The expiration date for this study is 12/15/2017 . If you intend to continue the study beyond this date, please submit the Continuing Review Form at least 30 days, but no more than 45 days, prior to the expiration date. Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make **any** changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

## **Appendix C: Focus Group Questions**

Question 1: How would you define/categorize homeless in Abilene? Complete this statement: The person who is homeless in Abilene is one who:

Question 2: How would you describe the availability and accessibility of services to the homeless community in Abilene?

Question 3: What are the most common issues you deal with when interacting with the homeless population in Abilene?

Question 4: What kinds of problems are the homeless in Abilene encountering (experiencing) as they seek assistance?

Question 5: What would you tell someone identified as homeless to do if they were seeking services in Abilene?

Question 6: What gaps in services do you see impacting the homeless population?

Question 7: Are there any policies or practices that you believe are negatively impacting the Abilene homeless population's access to services?

Question 8: Is there anything else community decision-makers need to know as they work to provide effective and appropriate services to the homeless population in Abilene?

Future Issues and Implications:

Question 9: What do you see as the most common needs (related to homelessness) that must continue to be met during the next 5 years?

Question 10: What kinds of things need to happen over the next five years to improve the homeless situation in Abilene?

Question 11: What are the biggest strengths Abilene has to offer/serve the homeless community?

Question 12: How can the community establish partnerships to provide the needed services to the homeless population over the next 5 years?

# Homelessness in Abilene

Chief Stan Standridge



# Homelessness in Abilene

- Concerns expressed by CBD in August 2015
- Types of crimes; difficulty in enforcing
- RH: *“How do we treat them with the fundamental dignity they already have?”*
- Ad-hoc committee formed, ultimately called *Hand Up, Not Out*
  - Partners included...
  - Housing First model (City Square: Dallas, Denver and now Abilene)
  - From charity to philanthropy
  - Case management...Basic Needs Network... *“We are airing up flats, but we are not fixing the holes that caused the flats to begin with.”*
- Testimony: *“Abilene is one of the best places in the world to be homeless.”*



# Homelessness in Abilene

- Testimony: *“We keep them from hitting rock bottom so often that we never fully organize to do something big.”*
- *Hand Up, Not Out’s* 5 big rocks:
  1. Touchstone project for downtown with all-inclusive services
  2. Integration and tracking of benefits (Basic Needs Network)
  3. Short-term housing
  4. Long-term housing
  5. Public education
- And finally, a needs assessment...



# Homelessness in Abilene

- Needs Assessment
  - MOU was executed
  - United Way served as our fiscal agent
  - VISTA graduate students served as researchers
  - Process took 6 months to complete
  - And to present their findings, Dr. Tom Winter...

# Questions?

