

ANNOUNCER: You've tuned into another edition of The Break Room, a

weekly conversation about how the City of St Augustine

works from those who do the work everyday. Hosted by the

City of St Augustine's Communications Director, Melissa

Wissel. The Break Room offers a closer look at the different

city departments and provides updates on current and upcoming

projects and events. And now your host, Melissa Wissel.

MELSISA: Welcome to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel, Communications

Director for the City of St Augustine. Thanks for tuning

in. In recent months, visitors and residents alike have been

expressing to city officials a

growing concern over a

noticeable increase in homeless

people in the downtown historic

district and nearby streets and

neighborhoods. And while

homelessness is not a new topic

of conversation in St

Augustine, its impacts on our

visitors and local residents is

undeniable. In mid 2022, City

Manager John Regan assigned

St Augustine Police Officer

Steven Fischer to lead the

city's efforts to address

homelessness, to research

practices in other cities

facing similar challenges, and

to formulate short-term and

long-term strategies to help

those in need and to mitigate
this growing concern. So, for

the first time in studio, I
would like to welcome Officer

Steve Fisher. STEVE: Hi, Melissa. How
are you? MELISSA: Great. I'm very glad

that you're here. This is a
huge topic. Lots of people

concern, lots of people talking
about it, but it's not so simple

of a problem to solve. STEVE: No, very
much so. MELISSA: You've been

working on this. Can you, let's
start with ,how did we find

ourselves kind of where we are
today, if you will? STEVE: Well the,

with the the increase in
homelessness has a lot to do

with COVID and the
moratorium on evictions, just

the loss of jobs, the turn
in the economy, there's there

it, there's a lot more reasons
than that, but those are the

ones that what I see mostly.

MELISSA: Right and we have obviously a

homeless population. We've,
couple of years ago, we

implemented an ordinance where,
can you kind of retrace where

that ordinance came from? There
was a panhandling issue or

something in one of another
Florida Cities? STEVE: Yes, they there

was a issue with panhandling
and police making arrests for

panhandling. And it it wound up
going to to going to court and

it wound up being protected

free speech. What's not

protected is aggressive

panhandling. So, if someone says,

hey you know, can I have a

dollar? And you say no and

that's the end. Well, that

that's where it lies. That's

not a crime. If they start to

follow you, hey no give me a

dollar. I really need a dollar.

That, you know, that becomes

aggressive. And the issue with

law enforcement is that we

either have to hear it or we

have to a victim. And a lot of

times the tourists don't

want to be involved with it

because they're here only a

short amount of time, and

they'll just, they'll let it go.

MELISSA: So. And not there's a confusion

with homelessness and

panhandling, but they often

times go hand in hand. STEVE: Yes,

it's it's a lot of times that's

how the homeless make their

living. How they, maybe not

necessarily for food, but for

other essentials, toothpaste

and shampoo and just, and a

lot of other things. MELISSA: With

our ordinance, what did we see

come out of that in terms of

local ordinance, rules,

regulation, things that we can

enforce? What was the most

important thing? I know there's

has to do with where they can
be. STEVE: Yeah, there there are

certain places on St George
Street that that is legal for

them to sit and to fly a
sign. To Panhandle,

and the homeless know
exactly where they are. And they

cannot be within 21 feet
of an ATM or the working

door of a business in those
areas. And they know where

they can sit and where they
cannot sit. MELISSA: So often times if

you hear people say, oh that,
there's this homeless guy right

outside the entrance. Might
have been right outside the

entrance, but he was right
outside the entrance enough.

STEVE: Yes. Yeah. MELISSA: He wasn't illegally sitting right outside the

entrance. STEVE: Correct. And and unless they're brand new to the

city of St Augustine. And even that, you know that the

homeless have a great communication system, and they

they know where they cannot, can and cannot be. MELISSA: They have their

own network of... STEVE: Absolutely. It's better than AT and T. MELISSA: But

let me ask you this one, and this, I think sometimes comes up,

or it's it's something that we often say is... It's not illegal

to be homeless. STEVE: Correct. The most... MELISSA: We don't like to see it.

STEVE: Yes. It is unsightly, but it

it's there, they have the same

civil rights as as as we do.

They are protected by the

constitution. Just because they

look differently doesn't mean

that there's anything criminal.

And too many years

homelessness was criminalized.

You know, we put people in jail

for vagrancy. Well, you know,

that's really a broad

definition of it. Now, you

know, if they have an open

container of alcohol,

trespassing, those are things

that the police can, that we can

deal with. But just being

homeless is not a crime. MELISSA: It's

their behavior in the act of

being homeless, if they're doing something that's illegal.

STEVE: Correct. Yes. To be cited. MELISSA: One other question about some of

this that I want to ask you...

Times of day, I think that's

another thing people are not aware of. Again, this was in our

ordinance. Tell me about the times of day of where they can

legally be, and when it does become an issue, that they need

to be somewhere else. STEVE: Okay, the the camping ordinance, with the

City, between 10PM and 6 AM, they can't be sleeping in any public

spaces. The way it's, the way it's set up is an officer finds

them sleeping, then they get referred to the St Francis

house, the officer has to take
them there and put them in one

of the city beds. And if they
don't, if they say no, I'm not

going, I don't want to go there,
then it could be citation, it

could be arrest, it just depends
on the officer's discretion.

MELISSA: Because they're violating the
camping, the camping ordinance.

MELISSA: Correct, you have to have
somewhere to send them before

we can enforce that. MELISSA: Okay and
the beds at St Francis House, they

have to be available. STEVE: They do.
The city funds eight beds at

the St Francis House. And in
order for someone to go to the

St Francis House, they have

to be brought by an officer.

Cuz the the the
misconception is that the St

Francis house is a low barrier
to entry shelter, and they're

not. They're a transitional
housing program, with for, well

for individuals and for
families. So, what that means,

is a homeless person can just
walk up and say, hey, you know,

I'm homeless I need a bed, and
then they would take them in.

They have to be accepted into
the program of the St

Francis House in order to stay
there for any length of

time. MELISSA: Okay, if you are just now
tuning in, you're listening to

The Break Room. I'm Melissa
Wissel, Communications Director

for the City of St Augustine.

And this week is part one of a

two-part discussion about
homelessness in the City with

St Augustine Police
Department Community Outreach

Officer Steve Fischer. So we're
talking about St Francis

House, before I want to continue
that conversation. If I'm, if

it's during the day and I can
be on the street, I don't really

necessarily have anywhere to
go. STEVE: Correct. MELISSA: But at night time,

I don't have anywhere to go
either. But you were starting

to talk about the
misconceptions of St Francis

House. It isn't what you were referring to as a low barriered

shelter or a shelter. It's truly a program. STEVE: Yes.

MELISSA: Transitional housing.

STEVE: Transitional housing. MELISSA: Can we

explain talk a little bit more about. I think you and I were

talking about this offline about, folks maybe don't realize

that St Francis House. Yes they did used to be.

So they've changed. STEVE: Yeah. I believe it's like nine or so

years ago. They were a low barrier to entry shelter. Then

they stopped being that shelter, then they moved to the

transitional housing program.

Basically what that means is you had,

you have to have a job, you go
to work every day, and they

support you with housing until
they can place you into a more

permanent apartment or setting,
so. MELISSA: And there's rules for that,

too. It's not just that you
have to be working, but you

can't be drinking. There's a
drug-free environment, and break

those rules... STEVE: No violence. Yes,
and they can, they can exit

you from their program for, if
for any of their rule

violations. MELISSA: And we don't. So,
part of the discussion, which

I'm sure we're going to run out
of time, which is why it's a

two-part discussion. We don't
have anything. STEVE: No, there's...

MELISSA: There is no where to send them.

STEVE: There is no low barrier to

entry shelter in St

Augustine or St Johns

County. MELISSA: Is there any, is there
anything even close? Palm

Coast, Flagler? STEVE: Well, there's
Jacksonville, the Shawsbacher

Center, Trinity Mission

has one, as well. But they're all

outside of our county and
they're all about an hour away

by car. So, it it not like they
could walk there to to to stay.

MELISSA: And unfortunately, because
they're here for the same

reason we are. They like St
Augustine. STEVE: Absolutely. MELISSA: It's a

beautiful place to be. If I
had to be homeless, I think I'd
want to be here too.

STEVE: Absolutely. I tell

people all the time. You know,
if I had nowhere else to go, I

would go to the plaza during
the summertime. It's wonderful.

It's, you know, there's tree
canopy. Gives you shade. You

have the breeze coming off the
water. It's great. It's like

paradise. MELISSA: Right. So without anywhere
to go. One of the things that

we're talking about now is
what can we do. And we've had

some discussions. The City
Manager has done a presentation

and we're working towards

something. But, it's going to

take us a take us a quite a bit
of time, and there's a lot more

to it. Again, it's not just
move them somewhere else, get

them off the streets. STEVE: Correct.

Yeah, we're we're working very

diligently toward a more
permanent solution.

Unfortunately, permanent
solution is probably a good two

to three years away, and the
caveat to it is we're trying to

do something temporary on a
shorter term basis. Something

that, within a year's time, that
we might be able to get off the

ground and have it operating
while we're working on the

permanent solution. MELISSA: And what do
we have, I don't see where

people live, but I've heard and
been told although we did find

quite a bit of camping out at
Fish Island when we first

started. Yes. Cleaning up Fish
Island. Where do people live?

STEVE: They stay anywhere that they're
not bothered. So it

could be a handicap ramp to a
business. It could be in a

dumpster enclosure. It's
almost anywhere. They they know

if they stay out of sight that
they pretty much, they'll get a

night sleep. MELISSA: And do we have
camps around outside of that

downtown core? STEVE: Oh yes, quite a
few. There's quite a

bit, by what CVS and Walgreens

on State Road 16 and North

Ponce, in the between the
railroad tracks and the water, there's

quite a few camps through there.

And again, it's because they're

not traveled, you know, very
seldom does anybody go down

there, so they don't get
bothered and they can set up

all their stuff. MELISSA: So, in the
meantime, we know that the

police are doing what they can.

It's gotta be witnessed or

there has to be a victim to
report. They can be on the

street before 10 o'clock at
night and after 6 o'clock

in the morning. STEVE: Absolutely, and

and they can be on the street

overnight, too. It just, you know
you have to, you know, you have

to have a reason, like you're
walking around or, you know, you

know, you may still get
contacted by law enforcement.

But if you're like, well, I'm
walking to Carmelo's or

something like that. Well,
okay. Great. You know, have

fun. MELISSA: Right and in the meantime,
we are going to continue to do

our best. We're going to
continue this conversation.

STEVE: Absolutely. MELISSA: But I know that you
guys are doing the best you can,

trying to help the businesses,
doing everything possible.

But I think like you were just
saying, one of the most

important things for folks to
remember or realize, say

St. Francis house isn't that
automatic solution, like it once

used to be so. STEVE: Yeah
unfortunately, they're

just not, yeah. They're just not
a low barrier to entry shelter,

anymore. And you know it,
what I see a lot of is it when

you know, when people complain.

And I understand their

frustrations, where we're
frustrated as well. But a lot of

times there's things happening
behind the scenes that they

don't see. You know, the person
that I'm working on trying to

get into transitional housing.

Well, it's not always just

readily available. Sometimes it
takes three months to get them

in there. Sometimes, it takes
six, and people keep seeing the

same faces. Well, you know,
we're doing what we can

with what we have. And just you
know, all I ask is just be

patient. We're doing, you know,
we are working on it. We're

doing the best we can, and we're
trying to learn from any

sources possible. MELISSA: Well, we're
going to talk about that on our

next interview. We'll come back
next week and talk about what

the City is looking at doing,

what other cities are doing, and

we thank you for coming into The
Break Room this week. STEVE: I

appreciate you having me. Thank you. MELISSA:

If you missed part of this

broadcast and want to go back
and listen from the beginning,

you can now find us on your
favorite podcast app. Look for

us on Spotify, Apple Podcast
Spreaker, and more. You can

find a complete listing of our
podcasting platforms at CityStAugRadio.com, as well as
a listing of all of our past

episodes. We want to keep you
informed about what's happening

in and around the city, and most
importantly that you hear it

here from the people doing the
work and making it happen every

day. In order to stay connected, you need to be connected, so be

sure to follow us on our social media platforms. You'll find

the City on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @CityStAug

and you'll also find the St Augustine Police Department @StAugPD. Thanks again for tuning in. Until next time.

ANNOUNCER: You've been listening to The Break Room, a weekly program

addressing projects and programs offered by the City of

St Augustine. Join us each week as the City's

Communications Director, Melissa Wissel has in-depth

conversations with the people who make our town work to meet

the needs of our community. The Break
Room is produced by

Communication Specialist for
the City of St. Augustine Cindy

Walker. See you at this time
next week for another edition

of The Break Room.