

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 every day. 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.

MELISSA: Welcome to The Break Room.
Thanks for tuning in. I'm

Melissa Wissel, Communications
Director for the City of St

Augustine. We are back in
studio this week with St

Augustine Police Officer Steve

Fischer for part two of our

discussion of homelessness in St Augustine. There's been a

growing concern over

noticeable increase in homeless

in downtown historic district.

Visitors and residents alike

have been reaching out to the

City officials, and the Police

Department looking for some

action. Officer Fischer was

already serving as our

Community Outreach Officer when

he was asked to lead the City's

efforts in this very important

initiative. He's traveled to

cities near and far, researching

best practices, looking for

ways to establish short-term

solutions, as well as long-term
strategies. There's no easy

answer, Officer Fischer. Welcome
back. STEVE: Thanks for having me

again. MELISSA: You have been extremely
busy since the City Manager has

asked you to take this on. Tell me a little bit, before we

get started, about how this
evolved, from you being our

Community Outreach Officer.
You were tasked with Officer

Drouin, who's now moved over
to different part of the

department. Kind of our
one, our one guy master of this.

Tell us a little bit about what
we were seeing where the

outreach officers were
initially established. What was

that role? STEVE: Well, we were, we did
a lot of street outreach.

building relationships with the
homeless so they would know us

and we would know them. and they
would, it was forming the trust

between them, so that way they
knew if they had an issue they

could come to us. They knew
if they needed a service,

whether it be being connected
with Care Connected at Flagler

Hospital, Home Again St
Johns, The Salvation Army, any,

anyone of them. That they could
come to us and we were the

clearing house to get them to
the services they need. And we

provided some things, we had
clothes donations and shoes and

things like that. And we were
able to purchase, like if if

they needed a lunch or
something like that, we could

get them a meal. And that that's
kind of how all this started.

You know, we basically started,
we're given, okay, we want you

to be outreach. Let us know
what you need. And Officer Drouin

and took it and ran with it, and
then when I joined her a couple

months later, we started just
talking to all the different

service providers, what they
could do, when they could do

it, you know, the funding
situations, and things like that.

And it's exploded to what

it is today. MELISSA: It's evolved. Yes. And before we

start getting into what we are
doing. Part of that was also, if

someone was needing those
services, actually helping them

get those services. STEVE: Yes. Yeah.

We would be able to, and and

this was when there was two of
us. We would be able to

drive them to the DMV or take
them to a doctor's appointment

if they, if if they didn't have
the ability to get there.

Now I I have Sunshine Bus
tokens that I, that I'll give

out to get them there, since I I
can't drive them anymore, just

because I don't have the time.
So at least they can

still get there. MELISSA: And this is so,
I guess I want to make sure

that folks understand that you
personally, as well as the

Department and the City, have
been addressing this issue.

Doing what we can to try
to help. And it's just, it has

become a bigger problem, so it
just requires bigger help,

bigger at what we would call a
bigger initiative. STEVE: Absolutely.

It'S evolved to the point
where it needs to be a

partnership between the City
having the lead, but also

including St Johns County,
the Sheriff's Office, the Beach

PD, the Flagler Hospital, all of
the business sector. Because we

can't expect the taxpayers to

bear all the burden, it's

expensive, it really is. But

everybody needs to have a share

of this, you know, the

business owners, you know again,

the County. They all, we all need

to work on this together. The

City, it is mostly a City

problem, but the County's

involved, too. They have homeless

people in their jurisdiction, as

well. They need services, they

have people being released from

the jail that want to go

home to family to a support

system, and they rely on us to do

that. So, you know, it

just needs to be a partnership.

So, it's not all the burdens,

not all on the city. MELISSA: But we are happy to take the lead.

STEVE: Absolutely. Someone has to someone has to lead it and

guide it. One of the places that I went to was

Philadelphia. And in Philadelphia, one of the things

that that I learned from them.

Initially, the City had

outsourced their homeless....

MELISSA: Program. STEVE: Thank you, yeah,

their homeless program, they outsourced that. And what they

found happened is the services went down and the cost went up.

Every year, the cost increased, the services went down, nobody

was happy, the homeless weren't
happy with what the, what

services were available. And so
the City of Philadelphia took

it back over and they made all
the social workers and all the

case workers City employees. So
their turnover went down, the

services went back up, the cost
went back down. And they're

better able to to guide the
program to the needs of the

City, and not just, you know, what
the, what the.. MELISSA: Consultant... STEVE: Consultant wants.

You know, it's the actual people
on the ground that are guiding

it. MELISSA: And so you mentioned
Philadelphia, you've you've done

a little bit of a tour. STEVE: I have.
I've done quite a bit of tour.

More than I ever thought I

would as a Police Officer,

that's for sure. Mr

Reagan has sent me to Key West

to study their program. I

went to Miami, to Fort

Lauderdale, to City of

Charleston, as well as

Philadelphia, and now

Philadelphia's way larger than

we are. I mean, they're a

gigantic City, but everything

that they do can be scaled down

to fit us. MELISSA: What do you think

would be? So real quick before

we get too far into this. I do

want to let folks know if

you're just now tuning in.

You're listening to The Break

Room. I have Steve Fischer in

the studio with me this week.

He is our Community Outreach

Officer. He's also the lead on

helping the City to address

homelessness. And you've been

doing some research. You've

been traveling to other cities.

What are we looking at, just in

terms of, what are some of their

pieces and components of what

you've seen in other cities,

that we think might work for

us? We. City Manager Regan, in a

Commission Meeting talked about

low barrier entry wraparound

services day center. What

does all that mean? STEVE: Okay.

Basically what that means and

it's what I found is a common

thread among everywhere that

I've visited and studied from

is that you have, they have to

have somewhere to go. The
homeless needs somewhere to go.

And it's not just to hang out,
put up their feet, and watch

TV. They, there has to be
services involved with it, you

know, case managers and like a
place to wash their clothes, to

take a shower, maybe even have
medical care. And one of the

places that I visited had a
retired doctor and an RN that

would see people twice a week.

So, they they had continual

care and that's what gets their
people off the street.

Assistant Chief Cuthbert was on

vacation in Mount Dora and he

had asked a business owner,

hey, you know, how come I don't

see a lot of homeless people

around, you know, do do you not

have any? And the business owner

replied to him, no, we have

homeless, but they just opened a

shelter, so we don't see them

anymore. They go the day center,

and that's where they'll hang

out and and have services. And

that just, that really

reaffirmed what I had learned

with the other Cities, is that

you you need somewhere to go,

you have to have somewhere to

go. And the low barrier to entry

shelter. Right now, if I put

somebody in one of the City
beds at St Francis House, an

officer has to go with them and
have run them, and get put in to

the St Francis House. MELISSA: Process... STEVE: Yeah,
there's a process to it. They

can't, a homeless person can't
show up and say, oh, you know,

I need a bed for the night.
That's a, that's a huge barrier

because if the Officer's busy
with the bars or with whatever

is going on, it can't be done.
So, we need a low barrier to

entry shelter, where a homeless
person can show up and say, you

know, I I need a place to
sleep. Okay, great. Let me get

your information. Here's a, you
know, here's a set of sheets

and a pillow. Here's a bed. You
know, good night. We'll see you

in the morning. MELISSA: And with with
something like that, it's not

going to happen overnight. STEVE: No,
most definitely not. MELISSA: And the
City and when you talk about
this sort of thing, I'm sure the

first thing that someone thinks
is, oh great my taxpayer dollars

are going to now go to homeless
shelters, building homeless

shelters are.... That's not
necessarily the case. STEVE: No, because

we're working we're working
with HUD, trying to get grants

to rebuild to renovate a
structure, we're in the

process of trying to find a
location, a suitable location.

And the government has dollars
that you can use for renovation

for equipment and things like
that. We're also looking at

the partnerships, trying to, you
know, have everybody have a buy

in. You know, we're all, you know,
let's all be part of the

solution. And let's let's solve
this as best we can. MELISSA: It's truly

an investment. For an
organization. STEVE: It is. Absolutely. MELISSA: And

there's other organizations
that also provide funding that

we can look to, like you said,
the grants. STEVE: Yes and Clarence

dealing with, talking with
Lutheran Health Services. I

did a presentation for them at

one of their staff meetings and

they absolutely love the idea.

And said you know, hey if

whatever we can help you with,

we will do our best to help.

And there that's that's huge.

MELISSA: And when you talk about

wraparound services, like you

mentioned medical counseling.

STEVE: Mental health services. Job

placement. MELISSA: Yes. And then so,

this really gets them, let's

just say, off the street. STEVE: Yes.

MELISSA: Into a place where they can

charge their phone. Now what

about, I'm going to play Devil's

Advocate here. Why would I,

why would I want to not be

homeless if I can go do this

thing for free? STEVE: Well, yeah and
that and that's a big

concern also. You know... MELISSA:
Does it perpetuate it, I guess

is our...? STEVE: Right. We're not
make we're not trying to make a

flop house is what we're trying
not to make. I know it's

a sixties term, but. Right.
We're we're not trying to do

that. What we're trying to do
is get people to services, but

there's also a time limit, too.
You know, if you don't want

any services.. like the old
adage, you can lead a horse to

water, but you can make them
drink. You know, if you don't

want anything and you're just
looking for a bed, then, we'll

have a time limit set whether

it's 30, 60, 90, whatever,

however many days and then,

once you reach that time limit,

then, you can't come back for

another 30, 60, 90 days,

whatever it's set up for. But if

you're wanting services, if

you're going, you know, if

you're looking for the help to

get off the street, then, that

extends the time. Then, you

move from, you know, like the

homeless shelter to

transitional housing. And that's

the goal, is to get people into

transit transitional housing,

permanent support of housing,

just getting people the help

they need. MELISSA: And we're, I mean,

you mentioned the partnership
with the County. The County,

this isn't about homelessness,
but even things like the

affordable housing. That
helps keep people from finding

themselves homeless. STEVE: Correct.

MELISSA: If I can't afford housing, I

may find myself homeless. So,
there are other things that

we're doing in the County.

Those relationships are so

important. I think the other
thing that, just by us having

this conversation, we want our
listeners to know, we are doing

something. We are very well
aware that it's a problem and

we want to help people. It's
not just about moving them

along, but it's also about
helping people. STEVE: It

comes down to helping people at
a at a basic level is... You know,

the food, shelter, clothing,
you know, care. Some

research that I've found...
That when you house somebody,

and that's probably another
topic for another day is the

housing first model that we're following. That if you put

somebody in in housing and then
get them the services, the cost

is about \$12,000 a year. But, if
you leave them out on the

street homeless, then between
fire service, police department,

court system, health care, like
emergency health care, the cost

is \$35,000. So, there's a money
savings too, putting people into

housing. You know, it it cost
all of us. So. MELISSA: Well, we are out

of time again. There's there's
so much to talk about and I

have to say it's, I enjoy
listening to you talk about

what you're learning and where
the City is going. This isn't

going to happen overnight. Like
you mentioned, we're looking

for locations to put this, you
know, then you get into the

whole not in my backyard.

Nobody, nobody wants it, but

nobody wants it in their
backyard, either. So,

we'll save that for another day. And thank you again for

coming down. STEVE: I appreciate it
and thanks for letting me share

my passion to get this going. MELISSA:
Absolutely. We'll have you back

because the conversation is not
over. STEVE: Absolutely. If you missed

part of this broadcast and
want to go back and listen from

the beginning, check out CityStAugRadio.com. You can

now find us on your favorite
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Until next time, thanks again
for tuning in. 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 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.