

# New wrap around services program already seeing results

By Seth Daniel

A few months into the enhanced City Navigator program, a new model of instant services for those in Bellingham Square who are homeless and/or addicted to drugs or alcohol has shown great promise - with the key words being "on demand."

Pastor Ruben Rodriguez, an experienced Navigator, and new Navigator Michael Cain are working in concert with CAPIC, North Suffolk Mental Health, Bay Cove and other City departments to be able to instantly offer services, a place to go and a program for getting out of the spin cycle that is the life of an addict.

"The mentality of an addict is they're always ready to change, but they wonder if they can just make it there," said Rodriguez. "The Catch-22 is there are no beds or services available when they're ready. Beds are available now and the thing with an addict is they don't have a phone. When you call the these places for help, they don't answer or you get a message saying to call back. The addict will lose hope and go back to the life. With us, they just have to get in a car and go to ASAP (Bay Cove)

with us. They just have to sit and wait and someone find a place for them. We're not going to clean up Bellingham Square and we're not there to make sure no one is in the Square. We want to make sure they can get to a place where they need to be. We want to hold their hand and make sure they know we care about them and want them to get better."

To that end, Bob Repucci of CAPIC said they have purchased three guaranteed beds working with a sober home in the area - sort of a guarantee reservation that Rodriguez or Cain can activate at any time.

First, a client will be placed in a detox facility for five to seven days. Then they will be transferred to a rehabilitation program for 30 days or until they are ready to come out and face the world sober - with most of those services being paid for by the state (Medicaid) or health insurance. When they are ready to come out, Repucci said, instead of going back to an environment that could cause them to relapse, they are guaranteed three months in a sober house on the City's dime.

Through that time, they have an entire program that they participate in, including job readiness, a payee pro-

Another piece of the new program has recently emerged through the purchase of a bus at a discount from Cataldo Ambulance - a bus that will provide a mobile place in the Square for those to seek shelter and hear about how they can change.

"Some need to take a step before treatment and the program," said Repucci. "This would be a place to seek shelter, get a cup of coffee and find out information."

All of those getting on the bus would have to have an ID issued by the providers, known as the Mobile Outreach Team.

"Our eventual goal is to have a resource center where a person could take this step and get a shower and a meal," said Repucci. "We tried that and it was controversial, but it's still our goal. With this, though, we may not need our bigger goal. This could suffice. We don't know yet."

Eventually, Repucci and Rodriguez said they would like to bring health care to those in the Square and under the Tobin Bridge - particularly the homeless. They are working preliminarily with Mass General, and East Boston Neighborhood Health Center is also interested in getting involved in some fashion.

gram where their earnings are managed by a provider, regular drug testing, an internship at CAPIC and hopefully full employment soon after.

All the while, Rodriguez, Cain and other support networks are helping those that consent to maintain their new lives.

"Right now we have 15 people involved in the program and 77 percent of them are folks you would normally find in Bellingham Square," said Repucci. "We guarantee them three months of sober

living. They get an internship at CAPIC and they get help working on their resume and finding a job. One of the 15 has relapsed so far and gone back, but one person is now in permanent employment with a painting company. This is the solution, we believe, to the problem. It addresses the needs of one person at a time and develops programs for them one at a time. There is opportunity and hope here."

Rodriguez said the target was to enroll at least 23 people within the first year of the

program, and since January they are well on their way with 15 people. The sense was that the response wasn't going to be that great, but the Navigators have found that the lure of "right now" has an appeal.

"We are three months into the program and we already have 15 persons participating in the program," he said. "We are almost to the end of the first quarter of the year and I think we'll probably go over budget. I believe that's a good thing. This is making a difference."

Making a difference doesn't come easy.

With the victories voiced by Rodriguez and Cain, there are far more defeats.

People dying in their arms, people ready to go and then changing their minds.

There are people in the Square who want to change, really want to change, he said, but never can get over that hump. Working amongst it takes its toll, but both Rodriguez and Cain are people in recovery and understand the other side of the coin.

"I've dealt with this for seven years now," said Rodriguez. "It's very heart breaking work. The way I handle it is if they really want help, they'll come back. It wasn't until

I was 45 that I changed my life. It is my faith in Jesus that keeps me going in this work. God didn't give up on me and I don't give up on these folks. It gets frustrating, but I want them to know we care about them and we'll put them up and we are there when they're ready. We can get them a place to stay and a shower and food instantly."

Repucci said for years people in Chelsea, including himself, didn't even notice those in the Square and had a wish that they would just go away. He said that all changed a few years ago after former City Manager Jay Ash introduced the Navigator program and Repucci saw how it could work.

"Part of the problem is Chelsea has been geared towards not embracing them," he said. "It has been more that people wanted to see them go away... You have to know their stories. You have to hear them tell you what happened to them. You realize then that there isn't much difference between you and them. It's just the way fate has unfolded. When you know the story, you get the compassion and you want to help. That's what we're doing her now and dedicating our lives to."