



JFS Frontline Staff Listening Sessions: Synthesis of Findings

November – December 2020

Between November 9th and December 7th, 2020, our UC San Diego research team (Leslie Lewis, Mirle Rabinowitz-Bussell, Todd Levinson) conducted listening sessions with staff at each of the four JFS Safe Parking Program lots with the aim of tapping the wisdom and insights of frontline staff. We queried them about staff rewards, needs and concerns, barriers clients face in becoming permanently rehoused, changes they've seen over the past year of the COVID pandemic, and their perceptions of program effectiveness. Fifteen staff members participated in the conversations, sharing their observations, suggestions, and rich body of knowledge about clients, what helps, and what hinders people in becoming stably rehoused. This is a brief summary and synthesis of what we heard; full notes on responses to the (12) questions are below, along with themes we discerned.

What we learned

From the perspective of the fifteen staff members who participated, the JFS Safe Parking Program is an important and worthwhile intervention for people experiencing a housing crisis who also still have the use of a functioning vehicle. Because of the safety of the space (both the physical safety and the reprieve it offers from the stigmatizing gaze of the public), being in the lot helps both in the immediate moment (relieving and lessening suffering by addressing urgent basic needs), and in the longer run (helping halt the descent into even deeper houselessness and despair). This “longer run” support is likely linked to the fact that the JFS SPPs offer both physical, and through that, mental space for clients to begin to tackle personal and structural challenges. Staff members offer real (practical, emotional, financial) support to help people regain their footing and move towards becoming stably rehoused. Whatever the percentage of successful exits our analysis of HMIS data is able to reveal, it is clear that this is a critical harm reduction strategy that supports people, providing them tools, resources, infrastructure, and social and emotional bolstering to move forward.

What makes it effective

A number of factors appear to shape the experience of clients, and the success of the JFS Safe Parking Program:

- 1) Physical space and infrastructure which provide for people's basic needs (safe space, bathrooms, showers where/when available, meals, security, stability)
- 2) Resources
 - a) Literal financial support: gas cards, support with move-in costs when the time comes; cash support for specific issues;
 - b) JFS services: case management, housing navigation, financial literacy/budgeting support;
 - c) Connections and referrals to outside community resources and agencies: applying for SSDI/Medicaid/other benefits, Section 8, VASH, etc. + community health centers, mental health and substance abuse supports, etc.
- 3) Staff (source of emotional and practical support, guidance in strategizing, accountability, troubleshooting, etc.)

- 4) Community that forms at the lot (clients form relationships of mutual aid, providing emotional and practical support for one another)

The superb, heart-centered staff across all four JFS Safe Parking Program lots are the lifeblood of the program. Human beings are nourished, fortified and scaffolded when they (we) feel received, heard, cared *for*, and cared *about*. This happens when conversations are honest, compassionate and non-judgmental. This is what the Site Managers, Case Managers, and Housing Navigators do: they embody a caring human support infrastructure that clients can rely upon. Staff offer a listening ear, practical steps, and accountability. They act as a lifeboat for many of their clients. The SPPs are not perfect (no human endeavor is), but there is honesty, compassion, and consistency in the working relationship between staff and clients. To the extent that there is mutual engagement (i.e., as much commitment and effort on the part of clients as staff, itself not a guarantee because of the wide range of experience, burdens, strengths, and barriers each individual brings to the lot), this relationship, coupled with other resources and community supports, can be a powerful catalyst toward people getting rehoused.

How the SPPs can be strengthened and clients supported even more effectively

The staff had many excellent suggestions that fall into four general categories which align with the four factors identified above; we summarize their suggestions and add a few of our own:

1. **Broaden and enhance infrastructure:** staff noted that it was difficult to provide the level of engagement (authentic listening, problem-solving) they wanted in the time they had each evening and that it would help to have an additional hour or two to be with clients. They suggested expanding hours, perhaps opening the gates at 4 or 5pm. Expanding the number of staff or volunteers was another suggestion, as it would lessen the load on the current Case Managers. Finally, the issue of maintenance came up at the Balboa lot as staff were often called to plunge clogged toilets (and manage the understandable frustration of already-stressed out clients), which took away from their case management tasks.
2. **Increase resources available:** beyond gas cards and other direct financial resources, which are always welcome, staff wanted to be able to both connect clients to outside services more directly (i.e., with a ‘warm hand-off’ rather than a vague referral), and bring critical supports onto the lot (this could be anything from a fleet of car mechanics, to employment supports, to a mobile health clinic). Staff believed that bringing supports onto the lot would increase follow through on referrals by helping some clients to overcome some of the fears and obstacles that they experience when it comes to seeking external services. Presentations from external service providers could also help to build an even stronger sense of community and could increase the collective resources (i.e., knowledge, social networks, etc.) among clients within the community that they can use to further help one another.
3. **Provide additional training, information, and support to staff so that they can, in turn, support clients better:** it was clear across the board that one of the greatest rewards of working at the

JFS SPPs was that it felt personally meaningful and gratifying. A lot of the stress that the staff experience is linked to not being able to support clients as well and as completely as they would like because of gaps in resources or gaps in their own knowledge. To that point, some staff asked for more training so they could do their jobs better (training in how to do motivational interviewing, for example, or perhaps a series of workshops on what services are available across San Diego coupled with a manual that organizes the names and numbers/email addresses of staff people they could connect clients with directly for a various referral services that are commonly needed). A suggestion we have is that JFS build in up to 2 hours of paid time each month that staff can use (with simple documentation) for trainings, mutual support, conversation, and/or collaborative problem-solving (it was clear that just carving out time to answer the questions from the listening session together, and hearing each other's responses, was helpful and rewarding to the staff. Building in just a small amount of time for this every month might make a positive difference in their wellbeing and effectiveness.)

4. **Foster sense of community at lots in new and creative ways:** a sense of support and community are clearly helpful for both clients and staff - staff serve as emotional and practical supports for both clients and one another; clients also support and look out for each other. Everyone needs renewal and play, so, to the extent that either could be integrated, even if only occasionally, it would offer a benefit to all. Perhaps once a month there could be a movie night, informational lecture + Q&A, or some arts and crafts activity. Even coming together to plan a series of monthly activities would likely be uplifting.

NOTES, THEME SUMMARY

Listening Sessions

November 9, 2020: Balboa (4 staff members)

November 18, 2020: Mission Valley (5 staff members)

December 2, 2020: Aero (3 staff members)

December 7, 2020: North County (3 staff members)

Total staff interlocutors: 15

1. What are the most gratifying aspects of your work in the Safe Parking Program?

- Providing hands-on help to people feels meaningful
- Talking with clients - many are so grateful
- One-on-one relationships
- Very real (genuine), person-to-person
- Provides the opportunity to give, engage, serve (for one staff who lived in his car for a stretch of time, this job has helped him to "give back")
- Getting to know the clients, engaging with the clients, hearing their stories - it is rewarding to listen, hear their life wisdom
- A lot of mutual support among staff (especially Aero)
- In grand scheme of things, this population is doing better than many others, so working at SPP feels peaceful by comparison

- Gratifying to make a difference
- Helping clients reach their goals
- Seeing how services benefit clients
- Safe place
- Meeting the clients where they are at
- Building trust with the clients “part of our family”
- Community support (for ex., donors bring hot meals)
- Hearing clients speak passionately about new goals

Themes: *relationships (among staff and with clients) and sense of meaning/purpose make job worthwhile*

2. What are the greatest sources of stress and/or frustration in your work?

- Lack of resources for mental health, job/employment and placement supports, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic
- People not being able to access services (especially veterans and seniors)
- Not knowing where to send people for services that they need, and so only being able to refer them to 2-1-1 without knowing whether they will actually get connected to the services they need
- Being present for people in the face of daily crises, difficult stories and hopelessness - this takes an emotional toll (which is exacerbated when don't have much to offer and can't provide needed resources (hopelessness appears to be greater among seniors)
- “Just a lot of clients in crisis, ” working with clients at the rock bottom
- “Having few options or resources for clients is a stress” (examples of clients’ cars breaking down and needing resources for repairs, gas money, or needing a security deposit) [note: some staff mentioned that some of their clients did receive security deposit assistance from JFS whereas other staff said this was not the case]
- Inability to fund minor needs which then leads to a domino effect
- “COVID adds a new layer of stress - it exacerbates mental health issues and I can't refer out”
- Clients dropping out of program and not knowing where they went or how they are (=worry and no resolution)
- Clients telling us contradictory things (hard to move forward with aid/support without knowing what is true)
- Misconceptions about available resources
- JFS can help navigate to resources rather than provide the resources directly
- Different clients need different resources
- Long wait time for Section 8
- Emotional impact on staff

Themes: *inability to provide adequate support, services, resources, referrals in the face of great need - takes a large toll on staff*

3. What would help you support SPP clients better?

- Having more resources to offer, e.g.:
 - Housing options, e.g., transitional - especially for older clients, and permanent
 - SROs can be too expensive and not ADA-accessible
 - Funds for small crises like repairing a car
 - Funds for big things like paying off debt and getting into a home
- Having more knowledge or information about what resources are already available, but “we are walking resources” [note: some staff have many more years under their belts and others are new to social services generally and/or homelessness support services specifically, so there is a wide range in levels of knowledge about what is “out there”]
- Having relationships and MOUs with other agencies to be able to refer out with a warm hand-off (not just telling a client to show up somewhere; connecting them directly to a person)
- 211 is used a lot, but direct relationships with other nonprofits is needed
- Having an in-house employment navigator
- Infrastructure and protocol for keeping people motivated and accountable, e.g., need a timeline, encouragement, and staff time dedicated to this because people sometimes get complacent
- Having services and supports come to the lot, e.g., reps from other agencies, employment supports - opportunities to practice interviewing and role play difficult situations; assistance with resumes; information on housing, health resources, car mechanics
- Having cohesive follow-through re: who leaves the lot
- Having more regular follow-ups, especially early in their transition to housing when they need more support (including on-site visits) to help clients adjust to day-to-day life with housing
- Better connections with other departments at JFS
- Additional time (4 hours is not enough to attend to everyone)
- Additional staff (paid or volunteer) to help lighten the load and provide better attention to everyone
- Open lots earlier (4 or 5pm) or leave later
- Manage client expectations
- Clients need to become self-sufficient
- Balance fighting fires and case management
- Some clients have huge obstacles

Themes: increasing staff knowledge, increasing the amount of resources staff has to work with to support people, and improving array of supports (both through relationships with staff at other agencies and by bringing new services and supports directly to the lots)

4. What would help reduce job-related stress?

- Having a better toilet (Balboa), i.e., so I don’t have to go in and plunge it repeatedly
- A better diet for clients (and warm meals) because they have stomach issues all the time
- More training (e.g., on motivational interviewing; one staff said that diversion training really helped)
- An orientation would be useful

- Knowledge of resources in the area (want to be able to answer questions), more knowledge of North County specific resources (Encinitas SPP)
- Mutual support and learning (e.g., conferences, gatherings; maybe getting an overview of what the city is working on, where the shelters are, etc.)
- (like in Q#3) More staff at each lot; more volunteers; connections with other agencies
- Good self-care
- Having a supportive work environment “which we do” (Aero staff)
- More play!
- Something that helps people feel more “normal” and builds community, connects us all, e.g., a movie night, arts and crafts, other relaxing activities or mind-stimulating activities (like a presentation followed by Q & A)
- Many clients are seniors but the process of finding housing is difficult, especially for seniors who can’t use technology.
- Need working relationships with government agencies.
- Referrals to shelters are not well received
- Clients are not comfortable with video conferencing

Themes: support for increasing staff knowledge and skills, additional staff or volunteer support at each lot, facilitating connections with staff at other agencies; building in community-building events and activities

(thought: what about paying staff up to 2 hrs./month for training, mutual support, conversation, and/or collaborative problem-solving?)

5. From your experience working in this SPP, does this intervention seem like it helps stop individuals and families from falling deeper into homelessness?

- It’s like a safety net - having a place where you feel safe and not judged
- Enables clients to pay off bills, to stop falling further into debt, save (although this can sometimes be difficult because expenses are high: gas for car, storage units, support for family members, etc.)
- It offers stability and routine
- It’s like a bridge to being re-housed
- The security deposit and resources help
- Having a community helps people not feel so alone and isolated
- “It definitely helps people from falling further; they would be worse off without SPP”
- “Double-edged sword” - helps, but having it only available at night makes it hard for people to get organized:
 - By day: constant search for a place that’s ok to park
 - By night: worrying about the next day and recovering from the “trauma of the day” (Ricky), including stigma because other people can see from their car that they are living in it
- Offers a non-traumatizing option (not a scary, chaotic shelter, not the streets, not sleeping in car parked on street where vulnerable)

- Relieves stress of harassment and shame
- A place to go that is stress-free, drug-free, and drama-free (to the greatest extent possible)
- Safe (physical) space creates mental space to think about how to address own challenges
- SPP provides safe places to park and empower clients
- “I wish we had more safe parking programs”
- It depends on the clients. For ex., people in RVs don’t consider themselves homeless.
- The name is exactly what it is
- SPP is like a pyramid, like Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: we take care of the basics (safety, bathroom, food) and some at the next tier so they can eventually get re-housed and integrate back into the world
- Clients can trust staff; it isn’t just getting into housing but staying in housing. We are their “navigator.”

Consensus: *absolutely helps people; is not perfect (doesn’t solve all problems) but is a critical safe space for people where they can take an in-breath, at least at night; this enables them to start to rebuild their lives*

6. What do you think are the most helpful aspects of the program for clients?

- The resources and funds available: first, last and security when someone is ready is a massive help (JFS will step up and give resources for “solid cases,” that must be able to self-sustain)
- The caseworkers and other staff:
- “Comfort and community:”
 - Space and opportunity for clients to chat and support one another (= normalcy and sense of shared humanity);
 - Showers
- Safety (physical and psychosocial)
- Program facilitates access to information and resources
- Stability (when everything else feels uncertain)
- Having a hot meal
- Place to consider “home”
- Place where people aren’t judged
- Help navigate CES

Themes: *Resources, staff, safety, comfort, stability, community*

7. Do you notice clients providing support to one another, and if so, do you think this plays a significant role in their experience in the program, as well as their ability to get and remain housed?

- Yes, clients share skills (e.g., one knows how to fix a car and helps others out)
- They rush each other to the hospital
- They take care of each other’s dogs
- They bring food to one another

- They look out for each other/advocate for one another (e.g., the health of others, housing opportunities for others)
- “Some clients have exited the lot but come back to see people and want to help others.”
- They share knowledge and information, e.g., how to get SNAP
- They help others get into a program they know about
- The Balboa community room is wonderful - people share food, photos, insider info
- The clients are psychological and emotional supports to one another
- They do things together - provide companionship, friendship (e.g., go to a senior movie together for \$5)
- They do things for each other, e.g., bring an electric kettle and make tea for a friend on the lot
- They share tips and strategies, e.g., to keep warm, put hot water in plastic bottles at night
- Occasionally, may help with housing, e.g., one woman getting transitional housing and having the option to bring a roommate, invites another woman from the lot (although “sometimes people just want to move on and not have anything to do with the lot anymore”)
- They share gas money
- They help each other with their resumes
- They build friendships, become a community, and are protective of one another
- Some clients have multiple cars

Themes: *clients share knowledge, skills, resources, access and lives; they provide practical, emotional, and financial support to one another*

(human beings’ default to community; we are social beings)

Side note: Jan @ Mission Valley had a great idea for a side project: “Storage Unit Stories” - what are they holding onto? What meaning does it hold for them (that they are willing to pay \$300-400/month to hold onto)?

8. From the stories you’ve heard and conversations you’ve had, what is your sense of the biggest contributors to people ending up in a crisis of homelessness?

- Expensive, unaffordable housing
- Not enough income (low income jobs or fixed income for seniors or people with disabilities)
- Mental health problems (some contribute to becoming homelessness; some arise for the trauma of homelessness, which exacerbates problems)
- Domestic violence
- Economic shock (lost job, increase in rent, sometimes both)
- “All of the above plus circumstances beyond their control” (e.g., rental property sold; someone moves out - could be a partner after a break-up or a falling out with a friend; health crisis)
- Deteriorating health; disability
- “Depends on the subpopulation: for some, drugs, alcohol and/or mental health problems play a (partially) causal role: for others it is economic but also some people refuse to accept and adapt to the reality of their situation and are persnickety about what jobs they apply for - won’t just take any job to stay afloat. They need realistic views about housing.

- Some people relocated to San Diego and found out that didn't have enough money to afford an apartment
- Divorce or death - in addition to grief, lose income of one partner
- Evicted or asked to leave (e.g., landlord doesn't accept pets, one parent receives a court order to leave premises; break-up; rent increase)
- Criminal history, can't get apartment, can't get job, pretty much impossible to get set up
- Trying to support kids as non-custodial parent - want to give them everything they need but can't really afford to do that, so they give up rent
- Past traumas contribute
- Not having access to mental health resources
- Doing/dealing drugs
- Not taking medications on a regular basis and/or seeing their health providers
- Living situation changed (e.g. name not on the lease)
- Broken relationships
- Undocumented
- "System is broken"

Summary: *baseline of economic precarity for all + landscape of housing crisis (simply not enough housing that is within people's means); add to this: hits of various kinds, e.g., economic shocks - job losses, rent increases, or family shocks - divorce, break-ups, evicted, other crisis, and/or personal shocks/challenges - mental or physical health crisis; released from prison without supports; victim of domestic violence, victim of past trauma (e.g., sexual or physical abuse), often leads to substance use for coping, which can lead to addiction*

9. What do you think are the greatest barriers SPP clients face in becoming stably re-housed?

General (societal) issues:

- Lack of affordable housing and/or income-based housing (10-year waitlist in SD)
- For too many people, income not high enough to get out of debt and economic insecurity (even with a full-time job; this is true especially for people with fixed incomes)
- High and increasing rent
- Some landlords require that tenants show an income 2-3 times the cost of rent (this is often used as a way to discriminate against certain potential tenants)
- San Diego is expensive

Individual (psychological, economic, life history, skill-based) issues:

- At first, not knowing how things work is a barrier (who gets housed first and why, priorities, homelessness ecosystem, i.e., that people without mental health or addiction or disability don't qualify because not vulnerable enough)
(side lament: with our current system, people end up having to stay unhoused until they deteriorate enough to go up the priority list)
- "Bad" history, e.g., evictions bankruptcy makes it nearly impossible to find good housing
- Not knowing how to manage money (basic financial literacy, budgeting)
- Not having a sense of the type of housing that is available
- Attitude: negative perceptions/doubt - don't believe they can do it/stay motivated (to look for a job, to look for housing)
- Challenge with staying motivated and energized alongside case manager, i.e., so they can work together to get the client re-housed (need to be more proactive, commit to completing tasks, be on time, show up for appointments)
- Pickiness/pride - not willing to settle for a place they could afford because it "isn't good enough" or not what they envision for themselves (too high expectations)
- Bad past experiences sour them going into new ones
- Need for coaching on how to interact with landlord (and others; good communication generally)
- Inability to increase income (barriers to job hunting, e.g., libraries closed, don't know how to apply - don't know how job market works today; very few good paying jobs available)
- Mental challenges, e.g., anger issues can make it difficult to live in an apartment (get pissed off at other people; scare people with anger displays)
- Basic needs challenges: don't look well, smell well, feel well; don't have an address to be able to get a phone and other services; don't have gas to get to places, have bald tires = it is demoralizing
- Some people could move - they have saved enough money - but they seem content to stay in their car. Perhaps they are afraid (of not making it? Of falling back into homelessness?), so they stay in the lot (it feels safe and stable, there is community, and they can save more funds to feel more secure)
- Seems especially hard for older clients because they are less resilient and more afraid (story of 65-year-old couple who sit in the Costco parking lot all day, every day)
- Need stability and moving can be traumatic
- Stressful to look for services

Themes: the barriers are A) structural and B) individual (and they interact);

Using a "layers" metaphor, they are economic, psychological, practical, cognitive (people hit overwhelm)

10. What are the key factors that contribute to success?

- Getting employed, increasing income (and having a stable income)
- Getting reconnected to family, friends, place of worship, etc.
 - Having good connections and a good social support system is crucial
 - Need a circle of people you can rely on

- Expenses going down (e.g., dropping storage unit rent)
- Knowing how to manage income/outflow (budgeting/financial literacy)
- Having a savings (this is a buffer against “hits”)
- Someone caring about them, checking in on them, helping them succeed, being a cheerleader
- Checklists on skill sets (support with maintaining an apartment: cleaning, shopping, cooking, paying rent monthly)
- Startup rental assistance (first, last, security)
- Regular follow-up, help them to address issues that crop up (some just need a quick check-in at 6 month; other need earlier and more frequent check-ins)
- Wrap-around services for some (those who are most at-risk, e.g., who have mental health and substance use disorder issues)
- At least 6 months to a year of consistent contact with the same staff person (high staff turn-over is a problem)
(Relationships are powerful; people need stability - someone who knows them and keeps them accountable - also, having the same staff means they don't have to keep telling their story which can be exhausting, overwhelming and retraumatizing)
- Having a sense of realism about what is possible but also hope and aspiration
- Having kids because people are highly motivated, will work any job, many hours to get re-housed so their kids can come visit (people without kids or with older/adult kids are not as motivated and move more slowly)

Themes: relationships, care, concern, economic supports, skills, accountability, a source of sustained motivation

11. If you were hired by the City of San Diego to come up with strategies to address homelessness, what would you focus on first? What else would you do?

- Increase the amount of low-income/affordable housing stock available
 - Turn vacated areas into safe housing
 - Innovate and repurpose - turn empty warehouse into housing
- Rental and utility assistance
- Increase funding for mental health and substance abuse services
 - Could reallocate funding going to police and shift it to housing, SUD and MH services
- Employ separate strategies for different populations (e.g., permanent supportive housing for some, e.g., Talmadge Gateway model)
 - Have dedicated process for low-income older adults
 - More awareness of transitional youth/aging out of foster care
- Combine housing and healthcare case management
- Follow people for 18 months (same staff)
- Provide job training skills
- Educate the public/destigmatize homelessness
- Take care of people's basic needs (showers, place to sleep in the daytime)
- Create and make available a Life Skills Program (help people to reintegrate)
- Provide for people's needs before they are housed

- Prevent recidivism
- Move away from a one-size fits all model. Every client is different.
- Stop criminalizing homelessness
- VI-SPDAT needs restructuring/reworking

Themes: address that “baseline” problem (more affordable housing), attend to people’s immediate needs; respond to diversity of population and needs with diversity of approaches; shift public attitudes

12. What have been your observations pre-COVID vs now w.r.t. the number, demographics, characteristics and challenges of SPP clients?

Changes in demographics, landscape, and activities:

- See more younger clients now from the economic fall-out - people who have lost jobs (used to see more elderly on fixed income)
- People have lost many of their prior resources and pastimes:
 - Can’t workout or shower at gym (affects health, wellbeing, self-esteem, job search motivation, stigma level)
 - Lost (stabilizing) daily routine
 - No libraries (loss of a critical resource)
 - No sitting at Starbucks
 - For months, couldn’t even go to parks
 - No bar and grill nights with friends - ordinary things they used to be able to do to feel normal and stay connected
- People seem more desperate
- Even fewer jobs available than previously
- Job insecurity
- More fear: people know they are vulnerable; they are afraid of COVID
- Seeing many more first-time homeless people in N. County (Encinitas SPP gave the example of an Encinitas resident who worked as a bartender but lost his job during the pandemic and now lives out of his car)

Regarding JFS services/supports:

- Shifted to phone check-ins, less face-to-face (this is harder because people are lonely and could really use the closer contact)
- No community room - a real loss for people (can’t chat, charge phone, use the kettle, be around other people)

Themes: people struggling more but have fewer outlets and ways to connect with other human beings