

Tent city operator sticks to April end

Many are pushing for the homeless camp to stay open year-round.

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ST. PETERSBURG - With a permanent solution to the city's growing homeless population nowhere in sight, community leaders have begun rallying to keep Pinellas Hope, a temporary outdoor shelter, open year-round.

It will be a tough, if not impossible, sell.

Catholic Charities, which owns and operates the shelter, has no plans to extend the tent city beyond its original closing date of April 30.

"One of the things we want to do is have the people in Pinellas Hope think, 'What's my next step?'" said Frank Murphy, president of Catholic Charities. "We are not trying to create a tent city that people can live in permanently."

It isn't even clear if Pinellas Hope will reopen next winter, Murphy said.

"We have to determine if it really is successful first," he said. "If we can place 150 people in permanent housing, then we will consider it successful. But we also have to follow up with people and see whether they are maintaining their independence."

Since it opened in December, Pinellas Hope has provided temporary housing to more than 240 people and helped at least 25 find permanent shelter.

The shelter, near 126th Avenue and 49th Street N, has also helped to relocate dozens of homeless men and women from tourist- dense areas like downtown St. Petersburg.

Pinellas Hope provides one hot meal a day, access to a case manager, Internet access and a tent.

Downtown business owners have welcomed the idea of the tent city. They see the shelter as providing much-needed relief after a year of loitering near their properties.

"This is our best chance, our best hope in solving the toughest problem the city faces," said Michael Johnson, chairman of the St. Petersburg Homeless Task Force and owner of the Curves gym on Second Avenue S.

Johnson said he would seek donations from business owners to help cover expenses the shelter would have if it were open year-round.

"We are going to make that our No. 1 priority," he said.

Government officials have also begun discussing the pros and cons of extending the shelter.

"We could build two more of these things and have them full," said Jamie Bennett, St. Petersburg City Council member.

The city's homeless problem entered the national spotlight last year after police seized and slashed tents used by the homeless for shelter.

After a national outcry, Baker and police Chief Chuck Harmon called the raids a mistake, and the fallout eventually led to the creation of Pinellas Hope.

The county's homeless population has climbed in recent years.

In 2007, about 5,195 homeless adults and children were counted in Pinellas. In 2006, there were 4,950. In 2005, the count was 4,540.

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[By the numbers](#)

A sizable challenge

5,195 homeless in Pinellas County

240 beds at Pinellas Hope

25 Pinellas Hope residents placed in permanent housing so far

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