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Smaller Shelters and Persuasion Coax Homeless Off Bronx Streets

By MOSI SECRET

Not far from the Major Deegan Expressway in the South Bronx is an abandoned subway platform where someone placed a plastic chair, a flimsy mattress and a nightstand. Nearby, in an old construction site, a truck trailer is lined with enough discarded furniture that it looks like a makeshift bedroom.

But the homeless people who lived in these hovels are gone.

Infusions of government money have revitalized many poorer neighborhoods in the Bronx, but the problem of people living on the streets has persisted. Now, though, a new strategy is showing surprising results: the number of single, homeless people in the borough has dropped roughly 80 percent since 2005, according to a recent estimate by the city.

The Bloomberg administration said it had been able to lure them off the streets by opening smaller and more welcoming shelters it calls Safe Havens, which typically have about 40 beds each. The Department of Homeless Services has also contracted with one nonprofit group in each borough to scour the streets around the clock, seven days a week, and persuade homeless people to move inside.

At the Safe Havens, which began operating in 2007, the nonprofit groups help homeless adults find permanent homes with social services close by.

"The city recognized it was time to readdress the way street homelessness was dealt with," said Douglas Becht, the director

Continued on Page A24

Smaller Shelters and Persuasion Are Coaxing Homeless People Off Bronx Streets

From Page A1

of the homeless outreach team for BronxWorks, the nonprofit group in the Bronx. "The widespread success shows that the system that they set up is a really good system."

This model is also showing success in other boroughs, though not as marked. Citywide, street homelessness is down 40 percent since 2005, according to official surveys.

For decades, city officials grappled with how to reduce the population of people living on the streets, who are often mentally ill or addicted to drugs or alcohol. In the past, these efforts were scattershot, if they existed at all. Outreach workers did not have much to offer other than a trip to a traditional city shelter, which was often in a different borough and had the feel of a military barrack, filled with up to 200 people from all over New York City.

The shelters had curfews and regimented schedules, and people there often felt unsafe. It was an option that many people living on the streets had often already tried and rejected.

"For a long time, we just kept offering shelter and hoped the reaction would be different, but people were consistent in their refusal to go," said Seth Diamond, the commissioner of the Department of Homeless Services. "So we took a different approach."

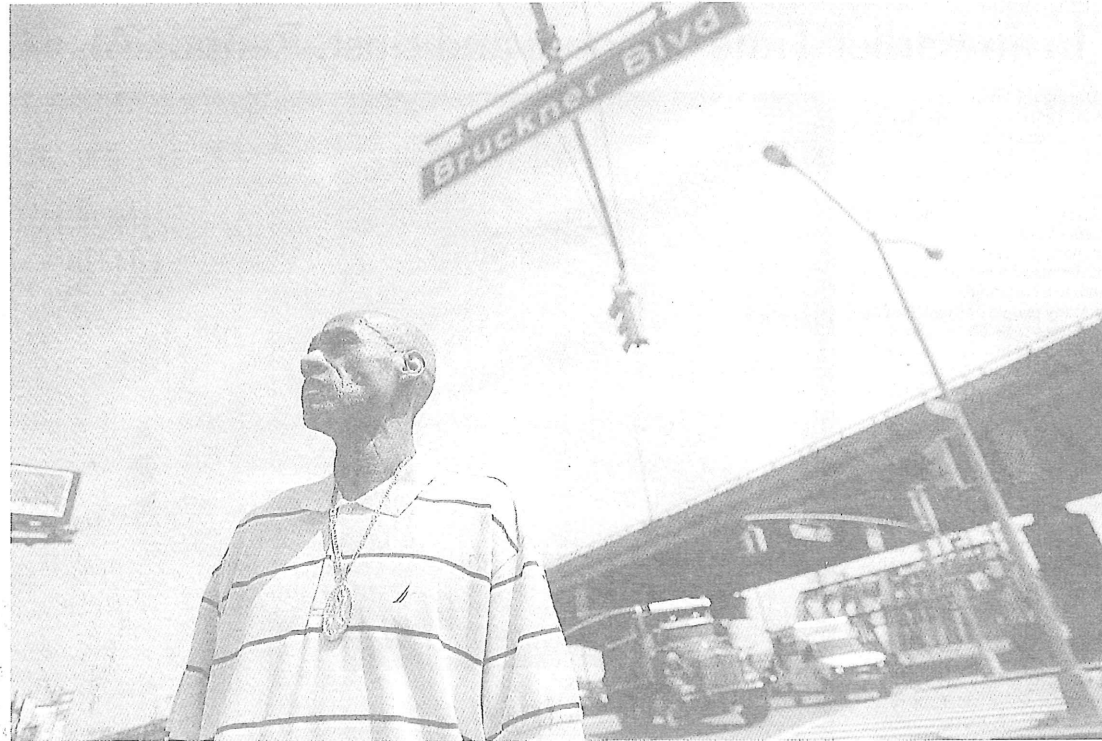
The impact is evident in the

A model also shows success in other boroughs, but not all accept the data.

transformation of a former Marine named Marvin Shepard, 51, who was once considered among the hardest to reach.

Mr. Shepard spent 10 years on Bronx streets, moving from one abandoned vehicle to the next, stealing to finance his crack habit.

He remembers his last day on the streets, when he was living in



ROBERT STOLARIK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Marvin Shepard showed where he used to panhandle while homeless in the Bronx. He was not easily persuaded to move inside.

the cab of a tow truck in Hunts Point, near an underpass where he panhandled. A knock came at the truck's window, and then a voice.

"Marvin, are you ready?" a woman said.

The outreach worker had been asking Mr. Shepard a version of that question for months.

"I used to always say, 'Stop harassing me,'" Mr. Shepard said in an interview at the Bronx apartment where he now lives. "But when you start getting older, the streets start breaking you."

In 2005, when the city conducted its first survey of street homeless, there were an estimated 4,395 people living on New York's streets and in its subways. This year, in January, there were 2,648.

The rate of decline was steepest in the Bronx, where there

were an estimated 115 street homeless people this year, down from 587 six years ago.

The surveys — called HOPE, for Homeless Outreach Population Estimate — occur one night each year, when the Homeless Services Department sends teams of volunteers to survey sample areas of the city's streets, parks and subway stations. The city calculates the total number of people on the streets based on the samples.

Homeless people continue to cluster in certain places, especially in Manhattan, which traditionally has had the most homeless people, and the decline has not been as steep.

A commuter passing through Pennsylvania Station might wonder if there were a decline at all; outreach workers there have struggled to persuade homeless people to leave.

There were 786 street homeless people in Manhattan this year, according to the survey, down from 1,805 in 2005, a 56 percent drop.

While the city has hailed these statistics, not everyone accepts them.

Patrick Markee, a policy analyst with the Coalition for the Homeless, an advocacy group, said street homelessness had certainly declined, but he questioned the reliability of the city's data. He said it was impossible to evaluate these trends because officials would not release details on how the information was compiled.

"What you find on a single night in one neighborhood one year is going to be different than what you would find in another neighborhood on another year," Mr. Markee said. "The year-to-year comparisons are completely

After living in a trailer, stealing and using drugs, 'now I have a life again.'

ridiculous."

The surveys do not include families living in family shelters, who typically are headed by parents having trouble affording or finding housing. The city has separate shelter systems for families and single people.

The number of families in shelters set a record high in late 2009 and early 2010 and will most likely increase again because the city recently stopped subsidizing permanent housing for families moving from shelters.

In August, BronxWorks, which

did street outreach in the Bronx, held a banquet called "Faces of Success" for the hundreds of homeless people the group had helped. Some had been off the streets for five years. Others for only a month.

The event had the air of a class reunion, but the attendees shared memories of shelters rather than of schools, of recovery rather than of careers.

"Trust me, it works," said Teddy Dukes, 48, who takes credit for being the first panhandler to carry the sign saying: "Why lie? I want a beer." He lived on the abandoned subway platform under the Major Deegan Expressway. "Now I have a life again," he said.

Mr. Shepard addressed the audience. As was the case for some of the other homeless people honored that night, his life had not always been dark.

He grew up in a strict, working-class family, played football in high school and enlisted in the Marines after graduation. He later fell for a woman who used drugs, and he soon began using himself. He lost his job and lived with his mother. When she kicked him out, he took to the streets.

Recently Mr. Shepard agreed to show a reporter some of the places he lived while on the street, his first return since he became sober. He walked through a world that was no longer his own, as if in a dream.

The gas station at East 156th Street and Southern Boulevard was still there, but the old box truck with "a million blankets inside" was gone. At his panhandling spot under the Bruckner Expressway, traffic still moved at a steady clip, but the encampments beneath the bridge were gone, and so were the men who had lived in them.

Mr. Shepard has lived in housing in the Morrisania section with social services for more than two years.

His favorite spot in his apartment is a wall near the door, where he has placed photographs of his 10-year-old daughter, whose life he recently re-entered.

"Not every day is my greatest day," he said in his apartment. "But my worst day here is better than my best day on the street."