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# Atlantic City Looks To Bus More Homeless Back Home

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*ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP)* – Larry Bogan knows precisely how much it costs for a bus ticket from Atlantic City back home to Pompano Beach, Fla.: \$126. Unfortunately, that’s \$126 more than he has at present.

And so instead of cooking in a restaurant or driving a tractor trailer for someone like he used to do, Bogan eats at a soup kitchen and sleeps on park benches or in a train or bus station each night. He’s one of about 500 homeless people living in the nation’s second-largest gambling market.

Reducing Atlantic City’s homeless population is a key element of a new effort to help the struggling casino resort get back on its feet after more than four years of plunging revenues, lost market share and layoffs. A state agency plans to allocate just under \$100,000 to a local homeless shelter to buy bus or plane tickets back home for any homeless person who wants to leave.

The Travelers Assistance Program, operated by the privately run shelter, has been around for years, but would be greatly expanded from its current limited form with the additional funding.

If the travel program is the carrot, there’s also a stick being brandished: the prospect of stepped-up sweeps of the entire Boardwalk to move homeless squatters along.

Bogan, 55, came to Atlantic City years ago with his father, who was recruiting pickers for crops in Florida.

“I fell into a little slump, and I’m on the streets now,” he said. “You hope when night time comes you can get into a nice bed or lay down on a couch. But you just sleep on a bench.”

Bogan says he lost his wallet two years ago with all his identification and personal documents. He wants to travel to Jacksonville, Fla., in order to obtain a copy of his birth certificate, the first step toward getting a driver’s license and then a commercial driver’s license, to enable him to work as a truck driver in or near Pompano Beach.

Susan Ney Thompson is acting executive director of the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, the agency carrying out Gov. Chris Christie’s Atlantic City rescue plan, which created a state-run tourism zone district encompassing the 11 casinos, the Boardwalk, outlet shops and downtown. She said people like Bogan “literally get stranded here.”

“It’s one of those quality-of-life issues for our visitors and frankly, our residents here who are confronted by the needy,” she said. “We’re looking for a good way to help those people who end up stranded here get back home.”

The state intervention comes amid a 4 ½- year decline for Atlantic City that began in late 2006 when the first Pennsylvania slots parlor opened and started chipping away at the resort’s customer base. There are now 10.

Atlantic City has lost nearly a third of its business over the past four years, falling from \$5.2 billion in revenue in 2006 to \$3.6 billion in 2010. Casinos in New York and Delaware are also luring away customers, having recently added table games to compete more directly with new Jersey’s casinos.

Tucked away on a quiet street behind the massive Atlantic City Convention and Visitors Center, the Atlantic City Rescue Mission is the last resort for most of the homeless who wind up here. They are sent here by welfare agencies from other counties or cities, are released from prison, jail or the hospital with nowhere else to go, or come to the casino mecca looking for work and fail to find it. And some come here hoping to strike it rich, lose their money and become stranded in Atlantic City.

Bill Southrey, executive director of the rescue mission, said 300 of the city’s homeless live at his facility, an additional 100 or so are on the streets or live under the Boardwalk, and still another 100 live in other places like abandoned buildings. But his facility served nearly 3,000 people last year, not all of whom were chronically homeless. He has operated the Travelers Assistance Program for decades on a much smaller scale, with whatever funds he could carve out of his agency’s budget.

That usually amounted to \$25,000 to \$40,000 a year, which he said will typically help a few hundred people a year get back home. The \$92,000 being provided by the casino authority “will let us help a lot more people,” he said. One man at the mission is trying to get back home to the Philippines.

The program is strictly voluntary; no homeless person who wants to stay put will be forced to leave. And before anyone leaves, the mission will make sure there is someone back home who is willing to take them in.

“We will never just put someone on a bus and just send them away,” Southrey said. “I don’t believe in Greyhound therapy.”

Not everyone is upset by the presence of the homeless near the casinos. Interviews with nearly 50 tourists last week on the Boardwalk or inside casinos did not turn up a single person who felt bothered. Ernie Malafronte of Naugatuck, Conn., sympathizes with them.

“If there’s a guy playing a saxophone or singing to try to make a buck, I’ll give him one,” he said.

“It’s a bad time for them, too,” said Domenick Troiano of Staten Island, N.Y. “They don’t bother me; who are they hurting?”

Reconnection with family represents the kinder, gentler end of the spectrum. On the opposite end, regular sweeps by police and social service agencies under the Boardwalk and in public places will continue, possibly at a stepped-up pace, Thompson and others say.

These sweeps—there were 150 last year—aim to remove the homeless from dangerous living conditions and put them in touch with services like temporary housing and medical care. But the days when the underside of Atlantic City’s Boardwalk was famously known as the “Underwood Motel” are over.

In September 1989, when photographers covering the Miss America pageant were looking for an iconic shot, they overturned a lifeboat on the beach as swimsuit-clad contestants smiled for the camera. But underneath the boat were two homeless men who had been sleeping on the beach. Their picture was splashed on the front page of newspapers across the country.

“It’s not a healthy environment,” Thompson said. “There’s a lot of debris there, and it’s exposed to the cold and the elements. The goal is not to harass people; it’s to help them.”

Some question just how helpful it is. Joseph “Papa Joe” Bocchino, cooks at Sister Jean’s Soup Kitchen, where hundreds of homeless each day line up right across the street from the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort. It’s not an image you will find on any Atlantic City postcard.

“There are homeless in every city; you’re not going to stop that,” Bocchino said. “They sleep under the Boardwalk. That’s their home; you can’t just erase them. You can’t just put them on a bus, send them back home and forget about it. That’s just moving people around, not solving the problem.”

Las Vegas runs two similar programs, also aimed at getting the homeless away from the casino zones and back to where they came from. Homeless advocates reacted much the same way at first, according to Rich Penska, director of homeless services with HELP of Southern Nevada, a social service agency. But when it became clear that the agency was making contact and setting up reunions, those objections vanished, he said.

“It does work and it can be gratifying,” he said. “It has reconnected families with missing loved ones that had not heard from in years.”

Bogan, the homeless man living in Atlantic City, longs to return to the work world and reconnect with relatives.

“I got skills,” he said between bites of fried chicken, vegetables and freshly baked bread at the soup kitchen. “I could be driving somebody’s truck or bus, and I’m a chef by trade.

“If I could get back home,” he said, “it would feel like a million dollars.”

