

## HOMELESSNESS

‘These people do heroic work.’ Outreach workers refuse to give up on the homeless



Alejandro Pulido, right, and Nate Dressel, outreach specialists from PATH San Diego, head out to make contact with clients near the San Diego riverbed on July 29.

(Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

It takes time to coax someone into housing. ‘Today’s no can be tomorrow’s yes.’

BY KELLY DAVIS

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It’s a Friday morning along Pacific Highway, just north of Old Town. Alejandro Pulido is rummaging through the trunk of his black Ford C-Max, filling up a backpack with bottled water and ziplock bags containing personal hygiene items.

On the hatchback's large rear window, Pulido, an outreach worker with People Assisting the Homeless, or PATH, has drawn a map of the surrounding area. There's a key at the bottom corner: Purple squares represent known homeless camps and maroon squares are camps recently cleared out by police.



Outreach Specialists Alejandro Pulido, left, and Nate Dressel from PATH San Diego look over a hand-drawn map on the back of the car window where they plan on going to assist and offer resources to people living in tents. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

His plan for this morning is to find clients — people he's been trying to match with housing — whose encampment was dispersed by police earlier in the week.

“I asked this encampment right here,” he says, pointing to a maroon square, “If I can't find you, where are you going?” They're like, ‘river bed.’”

Once his backpack is full, he starts down a paved ramp that connects to a path alongside the San Diego River.

Pulido is one of roughly 30 outreach workers — 16 employed by PATH — assigned to territories throughout San Diego, part of an effort launched by Mayor Todd Gloria in March 2021 to get a census of the city’s homeless population and, when it’s available, link them to housing or a shelter bed.

This fiscal year, the city will spend \$4.6 million on outreach.

Much of Pulido’s territory includes the San Diego River, one of the more challenging outreach assignments. People who don’t want to be found are there, often setting up camps hidden deep in scrub brush, cut off by stretches of mud.

But Pulido is unflappable. The San Diego Union-Tribune spent two mornings with him, trudging up and down embankments and stepping carefully though the mud. Pulido is a welcome presence in the river bed’s makeshift communities — almost everyone seems to know him and he knows everyone.

Soon he spots a small encampment of around a dozen people. At one end, a woman is tidying up an area blocked off by a black tarp.



Alejandro Pulido, an outreach specialist from PATH San Diego, checks on Sheila “Chye” Nezzie and Juan “Chino” Sota. Nezzie and Sota have been homeless for the past three years. Nezzie recently lost all her belongings after an abatement forced her to leave most them behind.  
(Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

“Hey, Sheila!” Pulido calls out. “I’m so glad to see you!”

Sheila’s husband, Juan, stands nearby, leaning on a cane, looking weary. Juan has stage 4 cancer and lost his backpack with his medication in the recent sweep. The couple had gone to get some food, Sheila says, and when they returned, police were clearing out the encampment.

“They took everything,” she says.

Every item they have with them now was pulled from dumpsters on the way to the river bed.

Shelia tells Pulido that her wallet was in her backpack and, with it, her EBT card, which helped cover the cost of food.

“On Monday I’m going to pick you up and take you down to the EBT office,” Pulido tells her. “I’ll come check here and if you’re not here, I’ll look around for you in this area.”

Pulido says he’s been working with Sheila and Juan for a couple months, trying to get them into housing.

“It’s frustrating,” he says, “but it’s just a matter of waiting for it to happen.”

“I’m not going to lose track of you,” he tells Sheila before leaving to check on another camp.

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The city's current outreach efforts differ significantly from past efforts, says Ketra Carter, program manager with the city's Homelessness Strategies and Solutions department.

"Outreach in years passed didn't have a clear definition or clear structure," Carter says. "Many of the outreach efforts were so sporadic and thin, people didn't know who was doing what when."

Service providers were doing their own tracking, Carter says. Now everyone is linked into the regional Homeless Management Information System, or HMIS. Each outreach worker carries a cellphone, iPad or laptop that allows them to enter information about their clients into the database to find out, in real time, if anyone else is working with the person.

And when a housing unit becomes available, outreach is immediately notified.



Outreach Specialists Alejandro Pulido, right, and Nate Dressel check on Sheila "Chye" Nezzie.  
(Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

“We need that information at the point of connection and at the point of conversation with the person standing in front of us,” Carter says.

“We’d go looking for people for six months with a unit available.”

One of Pulido’s clients was a woman whose four children had been placed into foster care. One hour before she was to appear in court to try to get her children back, Pulido received notification that she had been matched to housing.

“I was able to call her up and say, ‘You’ve been matched to a program, let the judge know that you’re on PATH.’ She’ll probably have her kids back in a month,” he says.

The mayor describes outreach workers as “the first step” in the city’s larger effort to address homelessness.

“They’re the entry point,” he says. “A lot of people drive by encampments or see an individual and want something done about it. These are the people that do something about it.”

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Miles away from the river bed’s rough terrain, outreach teams from City Net, a homeless services nonprofit, work the areas alongside state highways, where encampments started springing up during the pandemic.

In October 2021, Gloria announced a partnership between the city and Caltrans to have City Net provide outreach to people camped on Caltrans rights-of-way.

Under the agreement, City Net teams have two to three weeks to make a connection before Caltrans sends in workers to clean up an area.

Karyn Garner, a field program supervisor with City Net, said her teams can ask for more time if they feel they’re making progress and don’t want to lose track of someone.

“We have such a great relationship with Caltrans, that if we wanted to ask them to maybe pause and give us another week to really facilitate some services with the client, they will,” she said.



Outreach Specialists Alejandro Pulido, middle, and Nate Dressel, left, check on Sheila “Chye” Nezzie.  
(Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Roughly 100 people a week are placed into shelter, according to data provided by the city. It can take several engagements to earn the trust of someone who’s been living on the street, outreach workers say.

“When you take someone who’s only known street life, who’s struggling with mental health, substance abuse, and you’re trying to get them housing focused, it can be a journey,” Garner says. “But it’s doable. And when you get to see them get housed, it’s really amazing.”

On the morning The San Diego Union-Tribune accompanied a City Net team, Garner kept an eye out for a client who wasn't answering her cell phone. When Garner and her team spotted the woman's tent, they found someone else was occupying it.

Garner finally found Alicia (who asked to be identified by a pseudonym) about a half-mile south of where she usually camped. The woman in her old tent had kicked her out and taken her cell phone. Alicia had bruises on her face from the ensuing scuffle.

Despite what had happened, Alicia is hesitant about moving into a shelter. She needs a bottom bunk so she could bring along her dog, but bottom bunks are difficult to come by. And there are other valid reasons people like Alicia are hesitant to accept a shelter bed. They may have had a bad experience in a shelter; a chaotic communal living environment could overwhelm someone who struggles with mental illness.

Garner recently spent 45 minutes talking to Alicia about her past. She told Garner she recently kicked a meth habit and was struggling to stay sober.

"She shared a lot with me about her hardships and her traumas and what she's been through," Garner says. "Being sober, that's really hard to do, especially given what she's just been through (with her tent and phone being stolen). It could have very easily triggered a coping mechanism. It's very easy to go back to using when you're living on the streets."



Juan “Chino” Sota leans on his walking cane as he listens to Alejandro Pulido, an Outreach Specialist from PATH San Diego.  
(Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

“I tried so hard last time to pitch shelter to her, I really did because it’s not good to be out here on the streets,” she adds.

Garner has a motto: “Today’s no can be tomorrow’s yes.”

“It’s a cheesy motto, but I ultimately stand by it,” she says. You never know when someone’s going to change their mind about housing or a shelter bed.

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City Net has had success with largescale outreach efforts. In 2017, the city of Anaheim hired the nonprofit to outreach to more than 700 people who had set up camps along the Santa Ana River, near Angel Stadium.

Matt Bates, City Net's vice president, recalled coming across "some of the most sophisticated encampments" he'd seen, which included solar panels, electrical generators and multi-room structures.

"People said, 'Look, you know, I'm sort of living the dream here — look at my living room, look at my bedroom and look at my solar panels, and I've got a TV here and I've got everything that I need,'" he said.

But the dream had limits and, over time, people started asking City Net caseworkers about housing.

"We saw the real grind," Bates said. "You're hauling water every day. And you're peeing and pooping in a bucket and having to haul that away. There's no privacy and everything's dirty all the time."

Bates says his teams are persistent at trying to offer help.

"Experience has taught us that if we can develop that trust and kind of get to the real underlying story, people want to be housed," he said.

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A homelessness outreach worker in San Diego earns \$48,000 a year, on average. Pulido, who lives with his in-laws, said he has colleagues who, like the people they help, are on a waiting list for subsidized housing.

"Most outreach workers live with roommates or have a shared living space," he says.

Then there are the job's inherent challenges. In many ways, outreach workers are like first responders. Their clients might be suffering from an untreated illness or injury. Individuals they approach might be dealing with mental illness or myriad traumas.

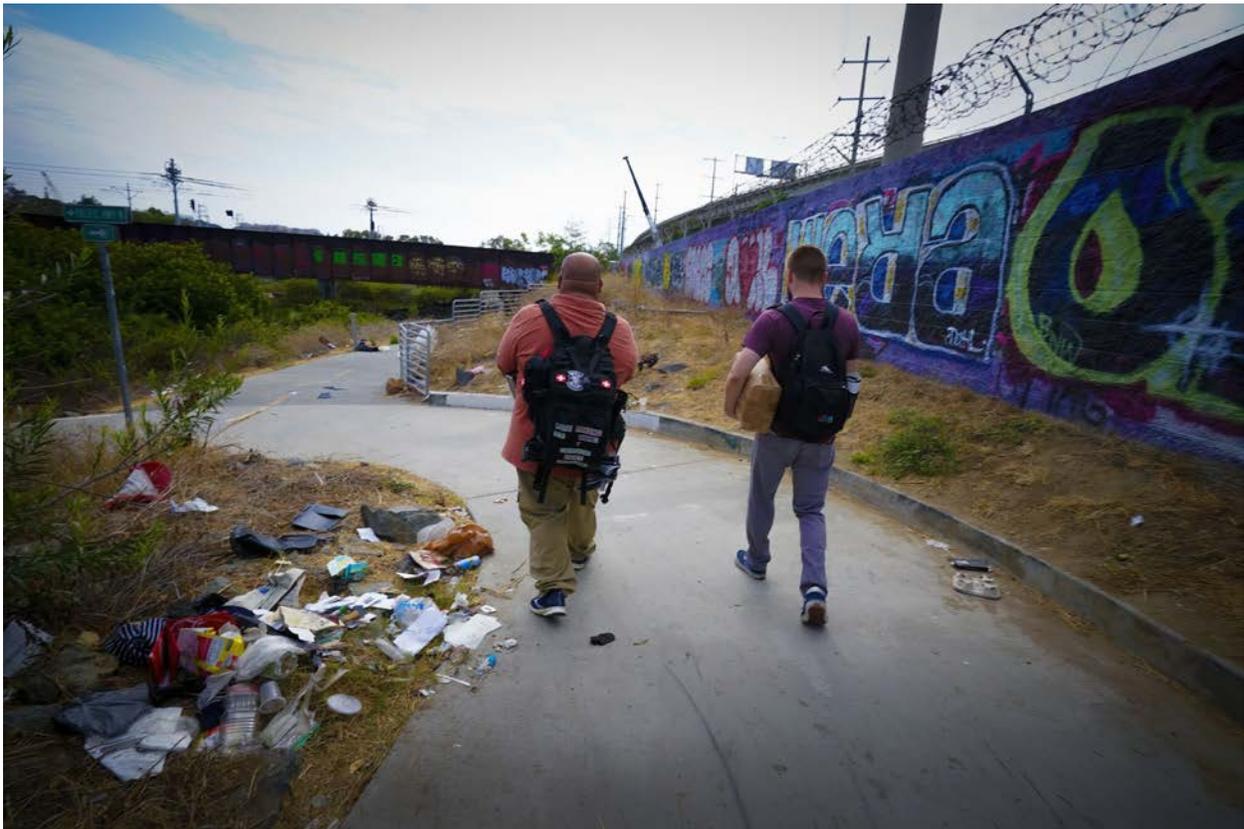
"As outreach workers, we might have one kind of specialization, but we end up being just everything," says Nate Dressel, an outreach program manager with PATH.

The weight of the job can wear people down.

That's why it's important to celebrate wins to stave off burnout.

"Last week I had two housing matches. This week, I had two housing matches," Pulido says. "So, those things, we have to really take time to appreciate, because it keeps us going."

"We don't get a whole lot of wins every day," Carter says. At weekly meetings with outreach workers, she sets aside 20 minutes to celebrate successes.



Alejandro Pulido, left, and Nate Dressel, right, Outreach Specialists from PATH San Diego, head out to make contact with clients (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Bates says that prior to the pandemic, City Net encouraged its staff to eat lunch together, meet for brainstorming sessions and be a source of mutual support. But the pandemic has made building camaraderie a little more difficult.

“These people do heroic work,” Gloria says. “It’s unheralded and often overlooked. It’s not extremely well-compensated. That’s a problem, generally, but it’s exacerbated during these times we find ourselves in.”

Gloria said the city is trying to make outreach workers’ jobs easier by providing more housing opportunities, though affordable housing projects often face significant community resistance.

“I continue to encourage people to understand that you can’t simultaneously complain about homelessness and then oppose new construction or siting of new facilities,” Gloria said.

“Our whole goal is that when someone raises their hand, we want to have an option for them right then and there,” he said.

But despite the low pay, people are drawn to careers in outreach.

In October 2020, San Diego City College and the San Diego Housing Commission launched the Homelessness Program for Engaged Educational Resources class, or PEER. Students learn about the history of homelessness; the role of homeless-services providers; federal, state and local policies affecting homelessness; and what it takes to be an outreach worker, housing coordinator or case manager.

Kirin Macapugay, a City College professor of human services and social work who helped create the PEER program, said the initial goal was to attract 15 students. As of the end of July, more than 200 students have taken the class or are currently enrolled. Some are working toward an associate’s degree; others have higher degrees and want to switch careers.

“So many of our students have experienced homelessness themselves,” Macapugay says. “Not that lived experience is necessary in social services, but those who have, we see greater longevity with them in the field.”

When people ask her what makes a good outreach worker, Macapugay tell them a person needs to have “unconditional positive regard” — the ability to remain empathetic and demonstrate compassion no matter how often the people you are trying to help might resist that help.

It's not easy, Macapugay says, but it's a quality that we could all work on.

“We would be such a better society, right?”

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