

Inspired Life

Trump's budget cuts jobs programs. This Republican mayor has inspired cities to invest in employing the homeless.

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Since his divorce about three years ago, 63-year-old Joey Martinez has been without a permanent home. He has slept on friend's couches, in his ex-mother-in-law's garage and in the most desperate of times, in Denver's parks.

His small \$500 monthly retirement check from his years working for the city of Denver and the odd jobs he picked up here and there were not enough to afford rent on his own, especially since he prioritized sending a significant portion of it to his 21-year-old son to help him through school.

Until a few months ago, he'd hid from his youngest child how dire his living situation was. It was part pride and part determination to continue helping with his son's education, he said.

"I told him, 'My life's pretty much gone. You're going for an education, and that's the most important thing.'" Martinez said. "That's my heart and soul. He's such a good kid. I told him, 'You get there, and I'll get you through it somehow,' and I tried to keep up my end of the bargain as much as I could. I'm not going to let him drop out, even if I have to stay homeless."

But now, thanks to a new pilot program in Denver, Martinez has hope for the first time in a long time that he will be able to earn enough money to support his son *and* find a permanent place to live.

Mayors around the country are beginning to invest in a simple employment plan for their cities' most vulnerable populations as the Trump administration is proposing a 21 percent cut to the Labor Department's budget, targeting some national training and job placement programs. With progress stalled at state and federal government levels, it's been up to mayors to take the lead on bold initiatives.

Denver Mayor Michael Hancock, a Democrat, developed the "Denver Day Works" program after hearing about a similar effort in Albuquerque. It was the brainchild of that city's Republican mayor, Richard Berry, who nearly two years ago conceived of a program to bring job opportunities to the city's homeless population after he saw a panhandler with a sign that read: "Want a Job. Anything Helps." His idea was quite simple in scope: Hire a van to drive around the city to offer people living on the streets a day of work making more than minimum wage doing beautification projects.

The program succeeded in its basic mission: To allow people living homeless the dignity of an earned paycheck at the end of a hard day of work — something many said they wanted, but felt limited in their ability to achieve. While the program was never designed to solve homelessness, and is limited to those people physically able to do the work, it also allowed the city to begin connecting the day workers to other social support services.

Since Berry launched "There's a Better Way" in September 2015, mayors in other cities around the country, and the world, have taken notice. Similar initiatives have started in Dallas, Portland (Maine and Oregon), Tucson and Denver. Berry has also received calls from officials in Calgary, Canada; and Melbourne, Australia, who are interested in adopting his concept.

"We started something and it's working incredibly well, and it's teaching us a lot of things as a community. It's changing our mind-set about how we address persistent social problems," Berry said. "We're just ready as a world full of humans to stop kicking the can on some of these issues and tackle it head on. It's a small bellwether for people willing to do something better."

Denver unveiled its version in November with an even more ambitious goal of moving the workers into permanent employment after they'd been in the program for 10 weeks. The city partnered

with a local nonprofit, Bayaud Enterprises, which provides job training and placement to people with barriers to employment, to administer the program.

Through this supported employment model, the workers are learning a skill on the job, rather than being trained in a trade and then expected to find work on their own.

“What we’re doing is training them in how to be a landscaper, and that is a very transferable skill,” said Julie Smith, spokeswoman for Denver’s Department of Human Services. “More importantly, we’re helping people build experience so they have a current work reference. Some of the participants have said that it has been so meaningful to say, ‘I have a job with the city, and here’s my supervisor, and they’ll tell you I’m a good worker.’”

Already, the city has hired four people from the program to work full time for the Parks and Recreation Department, with two more starting there soon. The city has also enlisted private companies to participate. Napa Auto Parts, Goodwill, Wendy’s and Colorado Petroleum are among the businesses that already hired out of the program. So far, 23 people have new permanent jobs.

Kevin Tindall, 47, was hired by Colorado Petroleum two weeks ago. Like Martinez, he also ended up homeless after separating from his wife. A cook by trade for 30 years, he was still working at a restaurant part time, but he wasn’t making enough to afford rent, so he was staying at a shelter. He wanted to change careers to earn more money when a friend told him about the Denver Day Works program.

As he went through the city’s program, it was a relief to know week after week that he’d have enough money to pay for laundry or for bus fare to and from job interviews, he said. Now, he’s working 40- to 50-hour weeks at his new job doing maintenance, starting his day at 7 a.m. He’s picking up extra weekend shifts when he can because he wants “to get out of [living homeless] faster,” he said.

“I feel like I’ve put in a good day’s work, I’m proud of myself, I’m happy and really thankful. I needed a hand up, I needed help getting on my feet,” Tindall said. “I’m just an average guy, sometimes bad stuff happens to good people. Most people are one paycheck away from being in my situation. It’s not getting knocked down. It’s whether you can get back up.”

Steve Bergin, the program’s director from Bayaud, has spent hours a day at the sites getting to know the workers. During their shifts, Bayaud representatives will pull workers aside to ask them questions about their lives and discuss the social services that may be available to them — providing emotional and practical support.

Many of them have so many barriers to employment, not least of which is persuading people to take a chance on them, Bergin said. The city’s program doesn’t drug test or do criminal background checks or inquire about past job history. All the people have to do is show up and be willing to work, and they’ll end the day with around \$70 in their pockets.

One day a young man was leaning on his rake crying, Bergin said. He went to check on the man, who shared that he was thinking about how his grandmother used to talk to him about the importance of a strong work ethic and he felt he hadn’t lived up to it until that moment.

“Once they are given the opportunity, once those major barriers are removed, the barriers that make it so people don’t even look at them, they consistently rise to the occasion,” Bergin said. “They talk about how good it feels to be treated kindly and with respect, to go to bed with \$70 in their pocket, to feel less homeless for a night.”

For Martinez, who will soon start a full-time job working for Denver’s Parks and Recreation Department, the opportunity has been the lift he needed.

“I think this program is an excellent resource for a lot of homeless guys who want to upgrade their lives,” Martinez said. “You feel so sorry for yourself, and this gave me a push on the back to get going again. I was a real prideful guy, and I let that fall by the wayside. I walk around with a smile again.”