

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Kansas City's homeless crisis is worse than ever. Meet the man looking for a solution

BY ANNA SPOERRE

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Josh Henges, Kansas City's new Houseless Prevention Coordinator, will lead community-wide efforts to tackle an increasingly visible and growing problem of houselessness and the issues faced by those without permanent shelter.

BY TAMMY LJUNGBLAD



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Josh Henges pocketed a box of Barclay cigarettes and Narcan nasal spray, used for opioid overdoses. An offering and a safeguard.

Parked at the entrance of Kessler Park, where The Paseo meets Cliff Drive, Henges, Kansas City's first [Homelessness Prevention Coordinator](#), set off to check in on a number of people experiencing homelessness tucked back in the woods in northeast Kansas City.

He ran into Anton Washington, CEO and founder of [Creative Innovative Entrepreneurs](#), who told him that two trans people they'd been working to get off the streets had just secured a hotel paid for by community donations, followed by two weeks at ReStart, a homeless shelter. Then the couple, both of whom grew up in the foster system, and one of whom was recently badly beaten, would be transferred to Lotus Care House.

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“Seriously? Oh my god,” Henges said, sinking into a crouch with a slow exhale. “They would’ve died. I’ve never met two people less-equipped to be in the streets.”

Henges, who spent years doing street outreach, knows what’s at stake.

Homelessness, he tells everyone he can, is his “obsession.” And while [Kansas City leaders have been taking steps](#) over the past several months to find a solution, the metro is still far from a solution.

“You have to think big to solve this problem,” he said. “Big and creative. Because what we’re doing right now is not working, and I think it’s painfully obvious.”



Josh Henges, Houseless Prevention Coordinator for Kansas City, takes a phone call about an encampment with 20 people living in it as he walks through another encampment on Wednesday, March 2, 2022, in an area near Independence Avenue. Henges was conducting a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness. Tammy Ljungblad TLJUNGBLAD@KCSTAR.COM

MISCONCEPTIONS AROUND HOMELESSNESS

It’s a story he’s told many times. Henges was 5. It was July. He noticed a man wearing layers of coats, near what is now the Kauffman Center.

“Is he poor like us?” he asked his mother.

No, she said from behind the wheel of their beat up Chevy Malibu. That man was another level of poor. Henges couldn't wrap his mind around the concept. There were empty homes all over his neighborhood off Parvin Road north of the river. Why couldn't the man go there?

A few years later, on a family road trip to California, Henges, then 8, came across a homeless man on Venice Beach.

Henges asked if the Venice Beach man knew the Kansas City man. Of course they didn't. But Henges, still fascinated, sat with him on the stairs until his parents ushered him away when the man started drinking.

It's his origin story, in ways, but it also gets a point across: Most people understand homelessness about as well as his 8-year-old self.

The majority of people see homelessness in one of two ways. One crowd wants them to stop behaving like homeless people, he said: "Get a job. Stop asking me for money. Don't be an addict. Don't scare me."

The other half donates clothes, gives out cash, volunteers at soup kitchens on holidays. They want to make homelessness comfortable.

But neither is working toward a solution, Henges concluded while giving a [TED Talk](#) in summer 2020, when he was still director of the [Veterans Community Project](#), known for its tiny home villages that serve as transitional housing for homeless vets.

Henges has long sought solutions. In college at the University of Missouri, he started meeting up with houseless folks regularly. His resume came to include experience as a street outreach worker and a case manager, and then finally Veterans Community Project, or VCP.

"He's somebody who continuously thinks about this. And that's what you need," said Bryan Meyer, CEO and co-founder of VCP. "It always has to be on your mind a little bit in order to be innovative and create new things, and he does that."

ENCAMPMENT SOLUTIONS

Henges and Washington stepped off the pavement and onto a grassy knoll alongside Cliff Drive where a small group was camping.

Walking around burnt tarps and old tent poles, Henges and Washington told two women that the city was clearing the place the following day. Increased citizen

complaints regarding their very visible, and very messy, encampment on the side of a road that attracts heavy foot and bicycle traffic were again making the rounds.

One woman said while she understood it was time to move out of the camp, it was still her “home.”

“That’s where I disagree. This is not a home,” Henges said. “This is not good enough to be considered a home. This is not good enough for you.”

As much as he believes that, he knows not everyone can be housed immediately.

That’s why, a couple weeks back, he dragged a stray brown tarp to an encampment on a hill in Kessler Park. He hoped that by replacing one homeless man’s bright blue tarp with a more neutral one, fewer passers-by would notice, and the city would get fewer complaints.

The man wasn’t messing with anyone, so Henges didn’t want him messed with either.

Josh Henges, Houseless Prevention Coordinator for Kansas City, talks to a man living in the tent in a wooded area not far from Independence Avenue on Wednesday, March 2, 2022, in Kansas City. Henges was conducting Point-in-Time (PIT), a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing houselessness. Tammy Ljungblad
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When the city starts playing “whack-a-mole,” he said, referring to camp cleanups, also known as sweeps, outreach workers lose track of people. “It’s a disaster for relationships.”

Right now, the city is working to devise a plan and procedure for giving notice ahead of camp sweeps. City officials, himself included, currently aim for 48 hours notice, Henges said. But he likened the difficulty of finding housing for someone in that short a time to telling someone to walk to North Dakota.

Helping smaller groups find housing ahead of a sweep is more attainable than large groups, especially those that double as political movements, like the camps erected by the [Kansas City Homeless Union](#) in front of [City Hall](#) and at [Westport](#) following the death of [Scott “Sixx” Eike](#), who froze to death last year following a sweep of his encampment.

Henges said those inside the city are starting to think more deeply about how to conduct sweeps with dignity. To him, in most cases, that means no police presence,

no construction equipment — last year, the city brought a front loader to at least a few sweeps — and plenty of time and resources to establish those living in tents under a real roof before the city cleanup crew arrives. Ideally, 90 days.

“I don’t love how they’re living, but I want to protect them from being (messed) with until we get there,” Henges said.

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The state of homelessness in Kansas City has never been this bad, those working in outreach say. The pandemic exacerbated an already growing problem as people lost income and resources and the housing market became more competitive than ever.

Marqueia Watson, executive director at The Greater Kansas City Coalition to End Homelessness, estimate there are roughly 2,000 houseless individuals around Kansas City. As fast as they’re getting people housed, just as many people seem to be entering homelessness for the first time.

Meanwhile, she said the city finally recognized homelessness is increasingly a city management issue, and more than just a social services issue, and that they needed someone with knowledge helping make decisions from inside City Hall.

“The authority that (Henges) has on the subject and the passion that he has for the work that we do, was something that was absent in a lot of ways from our city departments,” she said, adding that she hopes Henges brings a more person-centered and humane strategy to addressing encampments, including getting people into housing rather than doing sweeps.

CHANGING THE SYSTEM

When Henges dropped by the camps, he used all his senses. He listened for anyone at home. He felt the earth to see how fresh the footprints were. Sniffed, smelling for fire lingering in the air. Looked for signs of women and children, who are usually most vulnerable in camp settings. Took note of a POW flag flying high.

At one camp, he chuckled at a stolen community watch sign nailed to a tree. Sometimes he likes the vigilante-ism of it all. At another, he scooped up a small clear baggie of “shake and bake,” a cheap-made meth.

Henges understands the complexities of who is living out in the tents and what they’re facing.

Housing is like medication, he said. But people are told they have to get well first before they can qualify for a home.

“The system we’ve set up is pretty much based on a lie,” he said two years ago at his Ted Talk.

On paper, it’s a linear process. If homeless people meet a few demands, they can go from the street to shelter to transitional living to permanent housing.

But shelters often come with fears of safety. And transitional housing, while providing some independence, “is like living with the strictest parents ever,” he said. “Parents who answer to institutional rules. You have to give up who you are and be who they require you to be just so you can stay.”

Those who want to maintain their autonomy, or who fail to succeed in the system, pay the dangerous price of living on the streets.

Henges has seen countless people kicked out of shelters or transitional housing for not attending programming or for breaking rules. Once that happens, they’re back on the street.

“You cannot teach houseless people a lesson by not housing them,” he tells students when he lectures at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Once they are safe, they can start addressing their other problems, traumas and addictions. The ones that led them to the streets. The ones that got them kicked out of shelters.

“House the homeless first,” he said.

But housing people isn’t so easy right now.

Kansas City is a liberal pocket in a red state, so he doesn’t count on much support at a state level like local governments in California, for example, do.

“If you think the white people in Jefferson City are going to vote for Black people to get housing, you’re out of your mind,” he said. “That’s what we’re up against, and it’s

so frustrating.”

So he’s helping the city build up its current plans. Working their way through City Hall right now are proposals for pallet shelters and a hotel in south Kansas City to be converted into affordable studio apartments.

Councilwoman Rayna Parks-Shaw, 5th District, and a leader of the city’s Houseless Task Force, has been part of many of these conversations early on, trying to learn about homelessness as she goes.

“This is not an area that the city has expertise in, so being able to hire someone with his level of experience is huge for the city and will give us the opportunity to really be able to make a huge impact,” Parks-Shaw said.

Henges also hopes to create a city-sanctioned enclosed encampment for those still living in tents. That way, they will have regular access to resources and a safe place to put down stakes until they can move into transitional housing. The biggest hurdle is finding a neighborhood that will allow it.

Also on his wish list: clinicians to do street outreach, easier access to medications, a one-stop shop for services and printable IDs for those who lose original copies.

Once more people are housed in the coming months, Henges wants to start engaging more neighborhood associations, property owners and investors in conversations around low-income housing.

“Prevention is cheaper, and prevention is going to help far more people,” he said.

Washington, with Creative Innovative Entrepreneurs, said Henges is quick to uplift those doing street outreach, while also holding everyone, including City Hall, accountable, something that so far has been lacking.

Josh Henges, Houseless Prevention Coordinator for Kansas City, approaches a tent used for shelter set up in a wooded area not far from Independence Avenue on Wednesday, March 2, 2022, in Kansas City. Henges and another houseless advocate, were conducting Point-in-Time (PIT), a count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness. Tammy Ljungblad TLJUNGBLAD@KCSTAR.COM

RESILIENCY AND GRACE

In 2020, Henges got some local air time after he [used martial arts to disarm](#) a young man attempting to rob him at gunpoint.

Afterwards, Henges called the prosecutors office and asked that they not send the man to prison, blaming the decision on the man's desperation.

He knew the time behind bars can lead to homelessness long-term. And, he said with a shrug, while he was the victim, he didn't feel like one. Ultimately, the man was paroled.

Henges, who spent a short stint of his early life as a preacher, believes in grace, and humanity's resilience.

It's why he hates the phrase, "if I could just help one person..."

The problem is too big for that.

After stopping at a few encampments in northeast Kansas City, Henges swung by [Lotus Care House](#), an old Days Inn turned into transitional housing that serves as an alternative to emergency shelters.

A growing number of tents were set up next door, filled with people hoping for a chance at an empty room. But Lotus is usually full.

Henges ducked into the room of one couple who had recently survived a fire in their tent as they tried to keep warm. The man's feet were badly burned. An amputation was scheduled for the following week.

"He's scared to death," the man's wife told Henges, who offered them the Barclay cigarettes.

Ultimately, after getting housed, and getting some money, she wants to start her own crocheting business again. Henges jotted down some notes on his phone. What color yarn did she want? Anything but pink. What size hooks? Any will do.

Mostly, she wants to get their daughter back from state custody. She turns a year old soon.

The woman held up a photo on her phone of a baby with a head full of dark hair.

A fighter. Born four months premature.

Henges smiled.

"What a good thing to fight for," he said.

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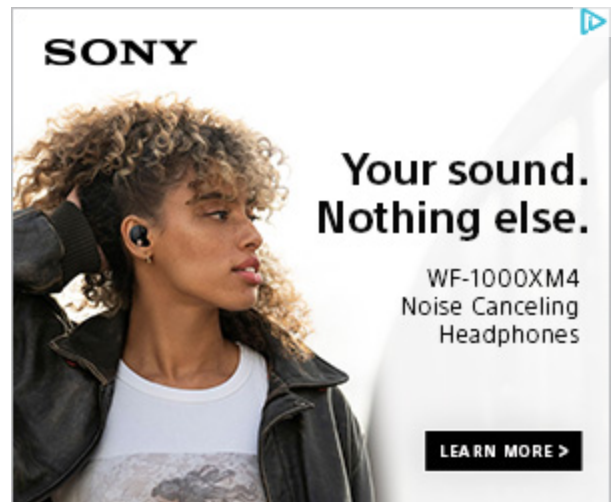
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