

OPERATION CHILLOUT

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SPRING 2010 Newsletter

PASSAIC STREET SWEEP REPORT

A UNIQUE INTER-AGENCY WAY OF SERVING HOMELESS PEOPLE IN AN URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Doug, Tony, and I arrived at the rendezvous point in Passaic to help Sgt. Jorge and his first recruit "the artillery guy" load 60 prepared hot meals into our vans. The meals consisted of "arroz con pollo" - chicken, red beans and rice donated by the locally-owned supermarket in Passaic. The manager, Guillermo, made sure the meals were kept warm in the Sterno-fired hot-boxes. Guillermo had a heart of gold and told us about how he emigrated from Peru in the 1980's. His boss, Daniel was just as nice and even though he was from Ecuador, Tony was convinced he was a long-lost "paisan" from the old country!

We then followed the Army guys to the Passaic EMS. Doug did a great job of maneuvering the mean streets of Passaic at rush hour without losing sight of the minivan with government plates. No light was too yellow; no lane change too bold and we met up with Dennis, EMS Technician "par excellence", at HQ. Dennis was born to be an EMT in Passaic. He grew up poor and overcame challenges of his own before becoming an EMT. He knows Passaic like the back of his hand "this area is known for gunshot wounds while on the other side of town is more of a knife-wound area, we prefer knife wounds" and he speaks the lingo. An EMS for 8 yrs, he is also familiar with the residents both on and off the streets. Dennis is great with people and knows how and what to say to each person for encouragement and hope when there is barely any. We could not have asked for a better guide. Dennis started his outreach project for the homeless on Facebook before Christmas, collecting food and clothing. He was completely overwhelmed by the response and sent the surplus to Haiti relief. This level of success speaks volumes about his connections and the kind of person he is. Armed with the hot meals, toiletry bags from the Red Cross and our backpacks, the Passaic Street Sweep was underway! Our first encounter, right on Passaic's main drag, was "Johnny the boxer". Johnny was well-known in this area, is a vet and once boxed professionally in Madison Square Garden. He thoroughly enjoyed the "arroz con pollo". Dennis then led us to a Polish enclave in an open field behind a large supermarket. He had seen a group numbering in the teens earlier in the day. When we arrived, we only found five men. Mark was from the south of Poland and was very appreciative of our contributions. "Polish John" sported a fantastic moustache and was clearly new to streets - he did not have the look in his eyes yet, he was newly homeless. Crying, he assured us, or himself, that he would be out here "just a couple more days". When we listened to his story and took the time to respond, he broke down even more. This is when Dennis' people skills took over. His reassuring words of encouragement settled John, at least temporarily.

We made a second round later in the evening to the spot hopeful to find the entire day-time posse Dennis encountered but we only found 2 more. We doled out a couple more meals and backpacks. Waiting to enter an SRO hotel / "flop house", we encountered Jeff, who along with his best friend Dave, have been living under a highway overpass for the last 8 yrs. Both have lost fingers and toes due to frost-bite. At last January's trip, Dave asked us for socks to place inside his boot, not on his feet, to fill the space that his frostbitten toes once occupied. But Jeff was alone this night. We asked him about his "other half" and he replied that he has not seen Dave in months, since he went for treatment to have his foot amputated due to frost-bite. Jeff's only company now was his pet cat. In addition to having no home, Jeff lost his only friend and ally in the fight against despair. As he told us how he has no idea where Dave has been, we could see tears welling up in his eyes and his utter sense of solitude. At this stage, Dennis said he would try to locate his friend Dave. Due to the treacherous climb down to Jeff's abode, we delivered his meal later that evening by lowering the to-go plate from the highway overpass with an improvised rope made of arm-sling cloth, Rapunzel-like. The first SRO rooming house we reached housed a crew of 10-12 people, consisting of two vets, Gary and a Signal Corp officer who was also a systems analyst. He was retired 16 years from the Army and was very well-spoken. Dennis informed us that these tenement-quality houses charged \$15-20 per week for rent. Towards the end of the evening, we reached a more upscale location housing 8 people in single rooms with two "community style" bath rooms. Only two people were home at the time: an older gentleman who was grateful to have his hot meal while he watched the Celtics game, and a younger woman who was not interested in anything to eat. This location commanded higher rents of approximately \$40-60/week. In all, we gave out 56 meals, 25 men's duffel bags, and 6 women's bags - and hopefully some encouragement. As evidenced by several flashing lights emanating from both police and ambulatory vehicles, the mean streets of Passaic were still mean this Friday night but maybe we were able to take a little bit of the edge off.

Submitted by: John K. OPERATION CHILLOUT Team Member