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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Jim Palmer's Unique Approach to Homelessness in Orange County

BY SIYAMAK KHORRAMI AND TARA MACISAAC | June 11, 2020 Updated: June 16, 2020 Print



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on the Homeless



IRVINE, Calif.—“We’re sort of the anti-shelter shelter,” said Jim Palmer of the [Orange County Rescue Mission](#).

“What I mean by that is, we call all our facilities ‘campuses.’ The [homeless](#) that we help, we call them ‘students.’ They progress through a program that starts with being a ‘freshman,’ and then a ‘sophomore,’ and then a ‘junior,’ and a ‘senior,’” Palmer told The Epoch Times.

The Mission consists of 14 campuses where the students live, do volunteer work, gain stability through comprehensive support, and eventually graduate—almost always with a job set up and a new life in sight.

“Success is measured in so many different ways,” Palmer said. “We have a 100 percent success rate in people being sober in our programs. That’s a huge goal, recognizing the fact that many people have addiction issues.”

When the Mission has followed up with alumni two years after graduation, it has found 85 percent of them still succeeding in many ways. “They’re still sober. They’re still operating, supporting their family, and not receiving

government funds,” Palmer said.

He joined the mission 28 years ago, when it was \$90,000 in debt and close to collapse. When Palmer took the helm, he knew he had to chart a new course.



Jim Palmer is the president of the Orange County Rescue Mission. (Courtesy of Jim Palmer)

“In the old-style format of warehousing homeless people, there’s not much success, and that’s really why I had to change things,” he said.

He sent out monthly letters to potential donors, and he realized he had few success cases to highlight in those letters. It was hard to find one success each year to highlight, let alone 12.

He recalled his thought at the time, “God, if you get this organization out of debt, I will always use

real stories of real people and their pictures, and I'll never borrow a dollar.”

The Mission has thrived under the new approach.

Campus Life

The transitional program can last anywhere from a year to four years, depending on the needs of the student. It includes [mental health](#) screening and treatment, help with addiction, financial and legal counseling, general health care, and more.

A lot of that is introduced in the “freshman” stage.

About 67 percent of the students self-identify as having an addiction, Palmer said. About 34 percent self-identify as having a mental health issue—but many who have mental health issues are unaware of it, Palmer said, so the numbers are higher than that.

The freshman stage is most challenging, he said. During that stage, students only leave campus with an escort.

“That person is still feeling the impulses and the voices that are like, ‘Go get more drugs, go get high.’ So by sending someone with them, they’re able to make sure that they don’t slide back to

going to find their dealer or going to get high again,” Palmer said.

When the Mission saw some of its students approached by drug dealers outside medical facilities, it even created mobile medical clinics so students could instead be treated right in the campus parking lot.

In the “sophomore” stage, students have become more stable, and it’s one of the greatest growth stages, Palmer said. They have been sober for some time, and their minds are clearing. They have often received some mental health treatment.

When students become juniors, that’s when they’re ready to help mentor the freshmen.

Before becoming a senior, students have an intensive week-long training on how to find and retain a job. They learn about how to dress, speak, and handle themselves at interviews. The students often have a job waiting for them already upon graduation, since the Mission helps connect them with opportunities.

Students don’t pay for housing, clothing, medical care, or food on campus. But they do work 8 hours per day at volunteer jobs onsite. They might do landscaping or warehouse work, for

example. In some cases, they start to learn trades.

Often, students are also studying for high school completion certificates or other educational credentials. These students graduate alongside others in the school district's adult program.

But the Mission itself has a full graduation ceremony, with regalia, keynote speakers, and all.

“It's like going to a small community college,” Palmer said. The campuses look nice, he said, and they're located in the middle of residential areas.

He feels it's important to use the word “students” instead of “residents, guests, or clients” to set the right tone for the learning and growth that occurs on the campuses.

Palmer told the success story of one of his students.

This man was addicted to drugs and had a criminal history. “He got off drugs and really straightened out his life,” Palmer said. He wanted to work with cars, and a local car dealership thought he would make a good salesman.

The dealership wanted to hire him, but the state wouldn't give him a sales license because of his

criminal record. The Mission advocated for him, and he received the license. He's now one of the dealership's best salesmen.

A big part of the Mission's work is also prevention and outreach—making sure people don't become homeless and identifying those who need help. Outreach has been the most difficult part during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We continue to be cautious with general outreach,” Palmer said. “We understand that some of the homeless that have been tested for COVID-19 and found positive have decided to stay on the streets and not avail themselves of a free motel room, etc. It's because of this that we are concerned that volunteers could be exposed to the virus.”

How Palmer ‘Became a Rescuer’

Palmer's mission to help began when he was a child. He was bullied when he was younger, and he “became a rescuer,” he said.

When he was 14, a family friend became homeless. He worked tirelessly to find help for her, a single mother with a 7-year-old son.

As an adult, he fostered nine children and adopted four. And he realized this rescue work was a calling from God. He said faith is an anchor that many of the people he works with need.

The organization's stated mission is "to minister the love of Jesus Christ to the Least, the Last, and the Lost of our Community." It fostered spiritual growth alongside social and vocational growth.

Since Palmer started with the Mission, it has gone from being in debt to raising some \$27 million annually in donations.

Many businesses help with donations, including for example, Trader Joe's. The direct mail campaign—which had made him first realize so many years ago how few success stories he had to share—has been an important way to garner donations.

It's not only wealthy donors who keep the Mission running. Donations come from all kinds of people, he said. "It's also people who identify that, if they lost two paychecks, they could be homeless themselves."

For ways to help the Mission, visit its website at RescueMission.org.

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