

Support the Community Service Patrol

David van den Berg | Posted: Wednesday, October 7, 2015 12:00 am

News-Miner Community Perspective:

There's a program in our community called the Community Service Patrol whose impact is largely measured by what you don't see so much of — intoxicated people in public places throughout the city of Fairbanks. In the last 12 months, the CSP has taken 511 intoxicated or incapacitated people to medical or clinical care 4,464 times.

Yes, it's the same people over and over again. Alcoholism is a disease, and the so-called chronic inebriates seem irredeemably lost to it. Managing this problem — not solving it — is the topic of this article. If Fairbanks didn't manage the intensive needs of chronically inebriated people, at least two things would happen. First, we would all see a lot more unsettling public displays and worse. Second, the city of Fairbanks would be liable to state law, which requires local government to care for people unable to care for themselves in public places.

There are of course lots of ways to manage this problem. For instance, the Municipality of Anchorage funds a \$1.2 million program on tax dollars. But the method Fairbanks defaulted to in 2007 was community support. Back then, the Downtown Association had Ambassadors, whose principal jobs were to answer visitors' questions and help keep a lid on excessive behavior downtown. Back then, the Fairbanks Native Association ran the Community Service Patrol. But then FNA's federal grant expired. The CSP was a good program and seemed pretty indispensable. Couldn't the Downtown Association's Ambassadors assume this other role, too?

The answer was yes, if the city and community pitched in. And that's what happened. While there was community support all along, it took the city until 2010 to contribute to the program after accepting the premise that the CSP's work actually fulfilled the city's obligation under state law.

The CSP operated exclusively downtown until April 1, 2014, when, at the request of Mayor John Eberhart, the program expanded citywide as the most efficient and cost-effective way the city has yet found to manage the problem.

When the CSP only operated downtown, the city contributed 26 percent of the CSP's annual budget. The city increased its support to 53 percent when the CSP began operating citywide as a \$322,000-per-year undertaking. Even with citywide operations, the amount community and private sector donors are asked to donate is the same in absolute terms: \$150,000. Of that, the CSP's core, repeating donors have already contributed \$90,000 this year. The CSP needs \$60,000 from others in the community to operate into 2016.

Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Westmark Hotel and Conference Center's North Latitudes,

Mayor Eberhart will host an educational fundraising luncheon with co-hosts Doyon, Limit, the Greater Fairbanks Community Hospital Foundation, Mt. McKinley Bank and Fairbanks Memorial Hospital, all long-time donors to the CSP. The mayor will speak to the CSP's benefit to city services and the co-hosts will share their particular interest in supporting the CSP over the years, which include preventing victimization, cold-related injuries and death among a vulnerable population; reducing intimidating behaviors and making downtown's public spaces accessible to all citizens; and conserving the community's clinical and medical resources and avoiding greater associated costs.

The state law requiring local government to care for people intoxicated or incapacitated in public places is an unfunded mandate, to be sure. Were Fairbanks released from a state requirement to care for chronically inebriated people, what would Fairbanks do? Whatever Fairbanks did, there would still be a population of chronically inebriated people beset by and causing problems that we would have to manage.

The CSP is still a project of the Downtown Association of Fairbanks, which is able to accept both public monies and private donations to field the CSP. You can learn more at www.downtownfairbanks.com/community-service-patrol.

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