

# Healing Souls

## Amid Opioid Addiction and Homelessness

By Amy Korpi, staff writer

What does it cost to help a person facing homelessness and recovering from addiction better understand he or she is a child of God?

As little as \$85.

It's an extremely simplified answer to a tremendously complex question, but it's a start.

### THE CRISES

Whether they make the news every day doesn't matter; homelessness and addiction are very much with us. Consider this:

- According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, on any single night in 2018, more than 550,000 people were homeless in the U.S.
- Opioid abuse—of both prescribed and illegal substances—has taken on crisis proportion in recent years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate the number of overdose deaths involving opioids in 2017 was six times higher than in 1999 (the Midwest saw an increase of 70 percent from July 2016 through September 2017).
- The roots of and solutions for the opioid crisis are deeper than the drug itself. As a 2018 *American Journal of Public Health* article put it, “Although drug supply is a key factor...the crisis is fundamentally fueled by economic and social upheaval,” with opioids being “a refuge from physical and psychological trauma, concentrated disadvantage, isolation, and hopelessness.” The authors’ conclusion: “A broad focus on suffering should guide both patient- and community-level interventions.”

### ENTER JESUIT MINISTRIES AND IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

Twenty years before this conclusion was written, Fr. Bill Creed, SJ, and Ed Shurna co-founded one such intervention: the Ignatian Spirituality Project (ISP).

The ISP provides retreats, days of reflection, and ongoing spiritual companionship to men and women facing homelessness and in recovery from addiction. Blending elements of Ignatian spirituality and the 12-Step recovery program, ISP retreats are an effective resource in laying a foundation of hope, community, and healing for those living on the margins.

ISP executive director Tom Drexler reminds us, “Being homeless does not preclude a spiritual life. When we see someone living on the street, we must remember this person is on a spiritual journey. We’re all on similar paths, even if we’re in different places.”

### INNOVATIVE PROGRAM RELIES ON BEST PRACTICES

Over the years, ISP has developed an infrastructure, created a reproducible format, and codified policies, materials, training, and formation procedures that have made possible expansion to 30 cities across the U.S. and in Canada (retreats in Ireland are planned for later this year).

And it works. A DePaul University pilot study, coauthored by Drexler and published in *Psychology* in 2015, found that over time, ISP retreat participants reported significant decreases in loneliness, a critical factor in addiction recovery. Drexler indicates plans for additional research, but anecdotal evidence is also powerful.

For example, one woman recalls



Ignatian Spirituality Project retreats have spread all over the nation, including this one for women, which took place in New Orleans.

her story: “I grew up in a great neighborhood...I went from a Catholic schoolgirl involved in Girl Scouts, sports, cheerleading, drama, and book clubs to a teenager on the honor roll. I lacked for nothing physical. My pain was more emotional.” She salved that pain with drugs and alcohol.

After years of substance abuse, three related heart attacks, and several stints in jail, she sought recovery in a shelter environment and then participated in an ISP retreat. Today she says, “I can definitely give a lot of credit for my continued sobriety to my ISP connections...The fact that I even feel comfortable in reaching out now is truly a miracle.”

In nearly six years as the ISP men’s coordinator in Cincinnati, Tim Boyle has seen many such stories take shape.

“It is heartrending to know some of the horrific struggles our retreatants have experienced,” he explains. “Violence, abuse, and neglect fuel the desire for the temporary comfort of drugs and alcohol. Once addicted, the force of the person’s illness is so strong that many have done heinous things to support it. And if they become part of the network of selling, they can feed their habit, make a great deal of money, and feel powerful. But eventually, it must come crashing down, either through overdose, violence, or incarceration.”

The situation in Cincinnati is daunting. “Some of the first ‘pill mills’ in America

were in southern Ohio, and there is despair in communities that have lost numerous jobs,” says Boyle. “Many people would be surprised by how easy it is for individuals in the mainstream population to buy heroin.”

“People’s motivations for coming to the retreats vary,” he adds. “Some realize this might be their last chance. Some think it’s a way to get a respite from transitional housing. Sobriety is hard—and an addicted dealer might be making thousands of dollars a day, being a ‘big deal’ in his community, and supporting his habit. To stay in transitional housing—often court-ordered—he has to take a low-paying job, stay sober, and follow the house rules. Not everyone makes it.”

But one thing is clear: Once retreatants are ready to change their lives and realize they are in a safe place with people who have similar hopes and fears, they can reap great rewards from sharing their stories.

## COST-EFFECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Today, the ISP network serves more than 2,000 retreatants through more than 200 retreats a year. How is this possible with a paid leadership staff of only six persons?

“We’re a lean but effective team, thanks to our protocols and the dedication of over 800 active volunteers who serve as coordinators, retreat facilitators, and fundraisers. Many have transformed their lives through retreats and expressed a desire to give back,” says Drexler. He estimates that from July 2017 to June 2018, volunteers put in \$800,000 worth of time.

Of course, even a cost-effective system needs resources. “The need is so great,” says Boyle. “We could host a retreat every weekend if we had the money. Even at \$85 a person for a weekend retreat, our capacity has limits. But that \$85 does go a long way.”

The goals for future cost-effective growth continue, with a strategic plan calling for establishing more institutional affiliates among Catholic parishes, retreat houses, and similar organizations. ✠

## Pope Francis Center Addresses Rise in Need

ISP is not the only Jesuit ministry addressing the opioid crisis. Another is the Pope Francis Center in Detroit.

On average, the center welcomes more than 170 guests daily, with nutritious meals, hot showers, laundry facilities, and access to doctors, dentists, lawyers, and housing providers through free clinics. Plans for a housing project are in the works.

As indicated on the center’s website, staff and volunteers interacting with guests “see the humanity and goodness in each person who arrives. . . and treat them with the dignity God intends for all His Children.”

A recent annual report describes the story of Mike, who became addicted to heroin as a teen. For nearly 15 years on the streets, he was a regular guest of the center. Believing his life was destined for doom, he recalls, “Life was just going to be misery, and then I was going to hell. It’s what I deserved.”

The center helped keep Mike alive, though, and eventually some caring people led him to enter a methadone clinic to get clean. Mike was able to turn his life around. He works, he’s married, and he and his wife volunteer at a rehabilitation center where he counsels others with addictions.

As the report concludes, “This same man, who once believed he was destined for hell, now believes in the power of angels and a miraculous Father who dearly loves him.”

‘A lot of guys I knew didn’t make it. It’s a miracle I’m still here,’” Mike says.

## ISP’s Four-Fold Approach

- Offering retreats and spiritual companionship inspired by Ignatian spirituality to those who are homeless and seeking recovery.
- Building a network of volunteer teams to respond to the spiritual needs of those who are homeless and seeking recovery.
- Including on our teams men and women who have themselves experienced homelessness.
- Collaborating with individuals and agencies working to end the injustice of homelessness.



Tom Drexler (left), executive director of ISP, with participants at a Bay Area ISP retreat. ISP now offers retreats in more than 30 cities

## How You Can Help

To invest in the Ignatian Spirituality Project, please visit [www.ISPRetreats.org](http://www.ISPRetreats.org). At the ISP website, you can also learn more about volunteering at one of the ministry’s locations.

To invest in the Pope Francis Center, visit: [www.PopeFrancisCenter.org](http://www.PopeFrancisCenter.org).