



Recognizing City Employees: Homeless Outreach Team Pioneer Hugo Cardenas

Few people can say they started a groundbreaking program during their career. Even fewer can say the program became a model across the country. Luckily for Chula Vista, the Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) is Police Officer Hugo Cardenas' legacy.



Hugo Cardenas (second from left) with other HOT Team members.

In 2015, Cardenas had recently been hired by the Chula Vista Police Department (CVPD), after laterally transferring from an East Coast police department. He had retired as a police sergeant there, and moved to Chula Vista, his wife's hometown, to be back in California. CVPD leadership asked him to form a team to address a myriad of issues surrounding unsheltered residents throughout the City. Cardenas quickly found a couple of major challenges: City departments were working in silos, and most people thought assisting unsheltered individuals was not a "police matter."

"I needed to be a social worker, not a police officer," Cardenas recalled.

Although Cardenas wore a police officer uniform and provided enforcement when needed, he shifted to spending most of his time building relationships with unsheltered individuals and establishing partnerships with nonprofits and social service agencies. He learned everything he could about housing programs, public health, and social services. He brought in partners, such as SBCS, the San Diego Rescue Mission, and the East County Transitional Living Center.

In 2016, Cardenas and the HOT Team were among the first to apply for housing vouchers when the County of San Diego began "Project One for All," an initiative to provide specific subsidized

housing for those who are chronically homeless and who have severe mental illness. The City secured 40 vouchers, and Cardenas said he is proud that most who received the assistance are still housed today.

Two short years later, Cardenas led an effort to gain CVPD access to the Homeless Management Information System. The system is managed by San Diego County and the Regional Task Force on Homelessness. Officials were leery at first, Cardenas said. But after Cardenas and his team highlighted the need to use the system for comprehensive case management, CVPD received access. To this day, CVPD is the only police department with such access, Cardenas said.



Cardenas credits the HOT Team's success on its willingness to build bridges and spread its message of inclusion and support. He and his team have presented to various homeowner associations, hospitals, schools, and business associations to provide resources on how everyone can engage in supporting unsheltered individuals.

Cardenas, who his fellow officers call 'the Godfather' of the HOT Team, called the program one of the greatest opportunities of his career.

"I got into police work to help people," Cardenas said. "This was truly an opportunity to help people. We met people where they were and brought the resources to them."

Cardenas cannot quantify the number of people he's helped over the last eight years on the HOT Team. However, just getting people to engage with the team is a victory, he said. If his team members could help someone get clean, help fix burned bridges and reunify them with their families or loved ones, those are three major victories.

Cardenas retired from CVPD in 2022 but was quickly recruited to serve as a homeless services coordinator with the City's Department of Housing and Homeless Services. In this role, he was able to assist with veteran clients and referred many to The Village (Chula Vista's transitional housing).

In May, he retired for the third time. This time, he said, he will continue his occasional teaching to certify police instructors in scenario training and play golf and senior softball.

Cardenas said he is grateful for his time with the City of Chula Vista and the support he provided to unsheltered people.

"This is the true definition of why I became a police officer," Cardenas said. "I was at the end of my career and maybe I could leave something behind."