

## Catholic Community Services, Pulse for Good aim to improve experience for homeless clients

Salt Lake Tribune

Friday, January 3, 2020

By Taylor Stevens

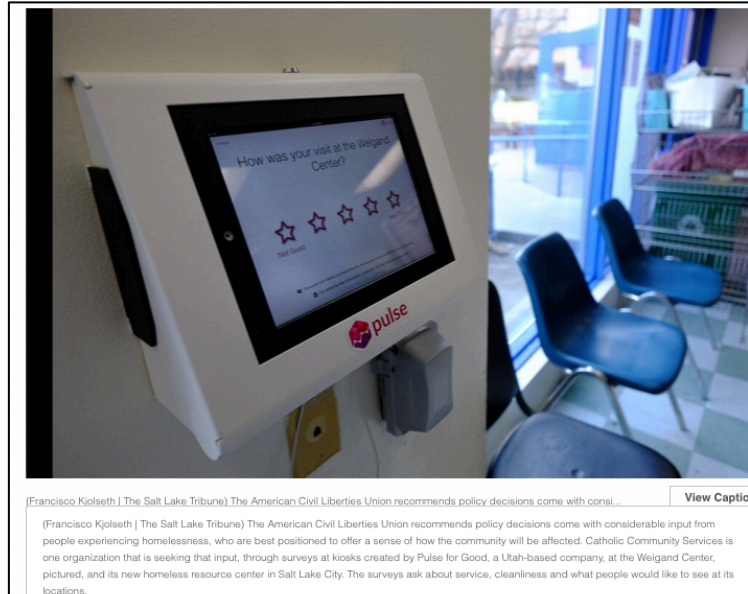
<https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2020/01/03/catholic-community/>

Bus tokens. Wipes to clean up after spilled coffee. New shower faucet handles in the restrooms.

Those were just a few of the items people experiencing homelessness said they needed during a town hall meeting held recently at the Weigand Homeless Resource Center, a day shelter located in downtown Salt Lake City's Rio Grande neighborhood.

The sessions provide an opportunity for Catholic Community Services, which operates the center, to give information about the services it

provides, ranging from job help to legal assistance to health care and transportation. But it's also a chance for the organization to hear directly from people who have lived experiences with homelessness about what it can improve.



"They know what they need," said Joe Pace, a Catholic Community Services employee who often leads the weekly town halls.

The majority of the feedback discussed at those meetings comes through an online survey platform created by Pulse for Good, a Utah-based company that aims to generate input specifically from members of vulnerable communities.

Catholic Community Services was the first homeless service provider in Utah to try the new technology, which is part of a growing effort across the state and in the Salt Lake City area's three new homeless resource centers to give homeless people a voice they've often lacked in the services that affect them.

"Most people label people experiencing homelessness as being the invisible people," said Matthew Melville, homeless services director at Catholic Community Services. "You're at a low point in your life, probably the lowest point you've ever been. Getting in front of policymakers isn't an easy thing at times, so this is a great way to get responses from them in a non-intimidating way."

The service provider installed a Pulse for Good kiosk at the Weigand Center two years ago and put another in the newly opened 200-bed men's and women's shelter it operates in Salt Lake City. Clients can also take the survey in computer labs located in the two centers, Melville noted.

More than 2,100 clients at the Weigand Center have taken the anonymous survey so far, giving the organization a 4.1 rating out of 5 stars for safety, a 4.29 for staff, a 4.08 for cleanliness and a 4.14 overall as of Dec. 24.

Catholic Community Services already has implemented some of the client suggestions, Melville said, including some relating to service hours and cleaning practices. One of the biggest changes, though, has been to client privacy.

Facing a spate of drug overdoses before Operation Rio Grande, a law enforcement campaign to reduce lawlessness near the now-closed downtown Road Home shelter, the organization took all the doors off its restroom stalls in an effort to prevent people from using drugs.

(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) Matthew Melville, homeless services director at Catholic Community Services talks about changes that have already been made after seeking input from the homeless community through surveys at kiosks created by Pulse for Good, a Utah-based company, at the Weigand Center and its new homeless resource center in Salt Lake City. The surveys ask about service, cleanliness and what people would like to see at its locations.

Years later, the culture changed — but the partitions remained off until “we got more and more responses on these surveys saying, ‘We really wish we could have some privacy, [like] curtains when we take a shower, go to the bathroom,’” Melville said.

In light of that feedback, Catholic Community Services employees ultimately decided to replace the curtains and stalls they'd once removed.

“It's been really nice that they can give us feedback and if we can accommodate it, we can,” Melville said. “And if we can't, we'll sit down and talk with them and say, ‘This is why we can't do this or some of the negative side effects of doing this.’”

‘A leap of faith’

In the past, resource providers seeking feedback on their services have often turned to formerly homeless individuals to sit on their boards or look at their policies, according to Blake Kohler, one of six co-founders of Pulse for Good.

“And the problem is if we take just that method, we end up putting in a form of survivor's bias because we get people that are no longer homeless, so things worked,” he said. “When you do more surveys from people who are currently homeless, you'll find more things that need to be improved for people because it's obviously not working.”

But getting feedback from currently homeless individuals can be expensive and time consuming for already resource-strapped nonprofits, Kohler said, which is where Pulse for Good comes in, helping them to automate and anonymize those processes while freeing up resources for other tasks.

The survey platform is also meant to assuage the fears many people experiencing homelessness have that if they provide honest negative feedback, they might lose access to the help they need to survive.

"If I go to Panda Express right now and say, 'Oh, this is horrible,' they don't care," Kohler said. "Or they may care, but it's not going to lose me anything. I can go somewhere else. In the case of homelessness or mental health or a domestic violence shelter, there is nowhere else to go. So me giving an honest review takes a leap of faith, and we make it safe for them."

None of the clients The Salt Lake Tribune interviewed after a recent town hall meeting said they'd had a chance to take the Pulse for Good survey yet, and some were unfamiliar with it altogether. But all seemed interested in the concept of providing more input, noting that they haven't always felt listened to in the past.

For David Christopher Thomas, the thing he needs most is a home to call his own — and that's much harder to obtain than bus tokens or a new shower faucet handle in the restroom.

"That was supposed to be our Christmas present this year," he said dejectedly, holding hands with his wife, Virginia Thomas, in the Weigand Center. "We want our own place."

While seeking and receiving feedback isn't a solution on its own to the myriad problems facing their clients, advocates for people experiencing homelessness — including the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah — have nevertheless noted the importance of the process in improving services overall.

And homeless service providers in Utah are starting to take notice, with the Pulse for Good kiosks soon becoming available in all three of the new homeless resource centers.

But the idea of welcoming more evaluation remains a tough sell to some service providers, who say they don't want to handle any more bad input than they already receive, Kohler said.

"It makes sense; they're opening themselves up to [putting] themselves in a vulnerable situation to get feedback and they're worried sometimes," he said.

Melville acknowledged that the responses are often negative, since they're working with people in a difficult time in their life, but he still believes it's worth it.

"We don't want to ignore anybody's input," he said.

That input is often surprising and insightful, he said. People have written, for example, that they wish there was a swimming pool or a bowling alley to keep them busy in the center and get their minds off their current situation.

Once, someone wrote that they wished their mom was there.

"I couldn't help but think of that and think, 'That's what I'd want,' right?" Kohler said. "If I'm in a situation where everything in life just turned against me, I'd want someone to take care of me and that's explicitly what they were asking for."

"It really gave me a new level of empathy for people going through these type of experiences," he continued. "And, in general, that really describes a lot of what we do as a whole — try and help people have more empathy."

(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) Mark Weaver, left, and Blake Kohler, developers and co-founders of Pulse for Good, a Utah-based company that seeks to gain input from the homeless community to better serve them, talk about starting the program on Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2019. The American Civil Liberties Union recommends policy decisions come with considerable input from people experiencing homelessness, who are best positioned to offer a

sense of how the community will be affected. Catholic Community Services is one organization that is seeking that input, through the surveys at kiosks at the Weigand Center and its new homeless resource center in Salt Lake City. The surveys ask about service, cleanliness and what people would like to see at its locations.

(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) Mark Weaver, left, and Blake Kohler, developers and co-founders of Pulse for Good, a Utah-based company that seeks to gain input from the homeless community to better serve them, talk about starting the program on Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2019. The American Civil Liberties Union recommends policy decisions come with considerable input from people experiencing homelessness, who are best positioned to offer a sense of how the community will be affected. Catholic Community Services is one organization that is seeking that input, through the surveys at kiosks at the Weigand Center and its new homeless resource center in Salt Lake City. The surveys ask about service, cleanliness and what people would like to see at its locations.

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