

# **HOMELESS DONATION METERS – MAKING CHANGE COUNT**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Homelessness is a complex issue arising from many different personal circumstances. The San Luis Obispo City Council, as part of the 2013-2015 Financial Plan, identified reducing homelessness as a major city goal and directed staff to implement a comprehensive strategy to address this.



This led to the formation of the Directed Giving Campaign Committee (Committee). It is composed of: San Luis Obispo Police, Parking, Community Development and Parks and Recreation Departments; San Luis Obispo Downtown Association (Downtown Association) and United Way of San Luis Obispo County (United Way). The Committee implemented the Make Change Count program. Under this program, colorful, specially marked repurposed parking meters were installed in high foot traffic areas in downtown San Luis Obispo as donation sites.

## **METHOD**

The 2014-2015 San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) physically looked at the location of donation meters in the downtown area. The Appendix lists the locations and donors. The Grand Jury interviewed representatives of the city, Downtown Association, United Way and Friends of Prado Day Center. The Grand Jury also reviewed materials on relevant websites regarding this program, similar programs in other communities and related information.

## **NARRATIVE**

San Luis Obispo is experiencing an increased number of panhandlers in the downtown area. These are individuals who beg for handouts on sidewalks making some people feel guilty,

uncomfortable, or intimidated; this can create an adverse environment for shoppers, merchants and other passers-by.

In April 2014, the two-year pilot program, Make Change Count, was officially launched by the City of San Luis Obispo. The intent of the program included educating the public and redirecting money given to panhandlers to agencies helping the homeless. The meters are a different approach in helping the public consider whether there is a benefit to giving money to a panhandler who may or may not be in need and who may or may not spend the money on necessities. Rather, wouldn't it be better to give that money to an agency that will try to help homeless people improve their lives? The campaign is intended to raise that question and provide a means for contributing to an organization specializing in helping people make the transition out of homelessness. By providing funding for better support services, Make Change Count promotes long-term stability for troubled individuals and generates more effective help than just a direct handout.

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND OPERATION OF THE PROGRAM**

The Committee received a Community Grant of \$2250 allocated by the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors and a donation of approximately \$3000 from the San Luis Obispo Police Department's operating budget to cover its start-up costs. These included the marketing program strategy; installation and initial maintenance of the seven meters; and development of the artwork and printing of posters, flyers, pamphlets and other materials. The Downtown Association coordinated the publicity for the program. It also found community sponsors for each of the seven meters. In addition, Dignity Health sponsored television and magazine advertisements to help with the implementation of the program.

IPS Group, Inc., the vendor for all City of San Luis Obispo parking meters, donated eight parking meters valued at \$2500 each to the Make Change Count program. These meters accept both coins and credit cards. Initially, the city was absorbing the maintenance and repair costs but IPS Group, Inc. is now repairing the meters at no cost to the city.

The city's contracted meter coin collector, FSC Collections, gathers coins regularly from the donation meters for transfer to United Way at no charge in support of the program. The canvas collection bag is sealed by an employee of FSC, turned over to United Way, then delivered by a representative of United Way to Heritage Oaks Bank where the bag is opened by a bank employee and the cash counted and deposited. The bank also donates its services.

United Way serves as the fiscal agent for the funds. In lieu of administrative fees, United Way directs 10% of the Make Change Count donations to support its 211 program<sup>1</sup>; it received \$1099 in 2014.

### **FUNDS COLLECTED AND DISPERSED**

From April through December 2014, the Make Change Count program grossed \$11,114.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of donations (\$7000) came from meter sponsorships of \$1000 each for the two-year pilot program. Additional sponsors of the program donated \$2218. A total of \$910 was collected in coins and \$986 in credit card donations for a total of \$1896. The only costs the program incurred were \$1099 for the 211 program and \$659 for credit/debit card fees (67% of the total credit card funds collected). During the first month of the program, there were initial merchant fees of \$267 associated with the use of debit or credit cards. Through negotiation with credit card companies, the program had some fees waived and others reduced.

Recently the Make Change Count program donated \$8500 to Friends of Prado Day Center. It was designated the first grant recipient by the Committee and will receive an additional grant in 2016. This left the Make Change Count program with a reserve of \$855.

Friends of Prado Day Center is a fundraising nonprofit organization whose goal is to keep the Prado Day Center open. It is an all-volunteer organization; no one receives a salary or other compensation. All money raised is turned over to the Community Action Partnership of San Luis

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<sup>1</sup> The 211 program is an informational and support call center referring local citizens to a variety of available service providers including homeless shelters, rent or utility service payment assistance, food pantries, health clinics, mental health services, domestic violence counseling, legal aid, transportation or employment resources.

<sup>2</sup> All figures have been rounded to the nearest dollar.

Obispo (CAPSLO) to help cover the cost of operating the center. CAPSLO takes 6% of these donations for administrative costs.

A person familiar with the program stated, “The value of the meters is more than money; it’s creating awareness and trying to make people self-responsible.” The meters are a fresh approach in addressing a very big problem. If the program continues beyond the two-year pilot period, other charities could benefit. The Committee will make that determination.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Make Change Count program is an innovative way to collect money for homeless services and to challenge residents and visitors to consider whether giving money to an individual contributes to the panhandling problem rather than addressing it. By creating an alternative the program encourages downtown patrons to stop giving to panhandlers and instead donate to local programs working to improve lives. The meters themselves have not been a huge success as a fundraising tool partly because the Committee has been unable to effectively promote public awareness of the program due to limited funds. Make Change Count may be discontinued after the trial period if the public does not become more supportive.

The education of the public and the idea of the homeless donation meter program are to be applauded. The generous donations of the sponsors are also commended. City departments, the Board of Supervisors, merchants, Dignity Health and nonprofit organizations have come together to make us aware of possible ways to reduce the panhandling problem.

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

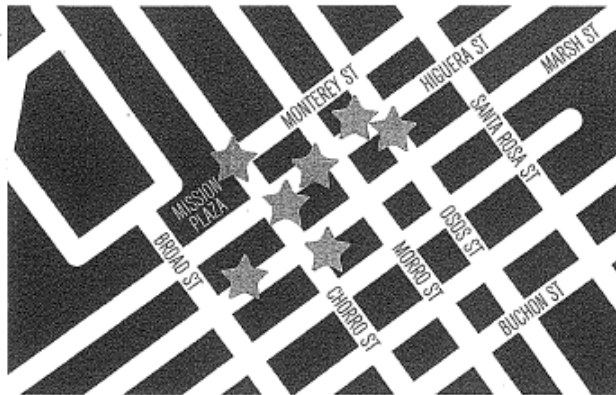
This is an informational report. No responses are required.

## APPENDIX

The following is a list of the meter locations and sponsors:

1. Broad Street at Marsh Street – San Luis Obispo Mayor Jan Marx
2. Chorro Street at Marsh Street Parking Structure – by those who believe, “Compassion Leads to Opportunity”
3. Higuera Street at Chorro Street – The Wineman Building, LLC
4. Higuera Street at Court Street – Copeland Properties
5. Higuera Street at Downtown Center – Copeland Properties
6. Higuera Street at Osos Street – Eric Meyer
7. Monterey Street at Chorro Street (Mission Plaza entrance) – Rotary Club of San Luis Obispo Daybreak

Source: [www.slocity.org](http://www.slocity.org)



Monterey @ Chorro

Higuera @  
Court Street

Higuera @  
Downtown Center

Chorro @ Marsh

Broad @ Marsh

Higuera @ Chorro

Higuera @ Osos