



COMMUNITY PARTNER BRIEF

A CLOSER LOOK AT OUR 2020 COMMUNITY PARTNERS

USING INFORMATION COLLECTED FROM OUR 2020 CHANGEMAKER CHALLENGE COMMUNITY PARTNERS WE HAVE COMPILED FINDINGS ABOUT EACH PARTNER'S MISSION, VISION, PURPOSE, HISTORY, PROGRAMS, CHALLENGES, ASPIRATIONS AND TESTIMONIALS FOR USE IN YOUR CLASSROOM.

THINK DIGNITY

Hands-on Advocacy &
Activism with the Homeless

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MISSION

To inspire, empower, and organize our community to advance basic dignity for those living on the streets.

STRATEGY

Our strength lies in our collaborative, volunteer-based model. We mobilize our community partners and volunteers to accomplish our collective goals. Our success story is not grandiose, but comes from small steps taken every day. We call this micro-activism at its finest. The model is simple: We hold monthly open forums at the Basic Dignity Coalition to discuss issues impacting our community. Upon identifying the issue, we gather information and conduct on-the-ground research. From there, we craft community-based solutions to the challenge, including coalition building, organizing, and advocacy.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

On October 5, 2006, nine women gathered for dinner at co-founder, Rachel Jensen's home to discuss the challenges of homelessness. The ladies passed many of their displaced neighbors on the streets and it was becoming increasingly clear that a few bucks here, a meal there, were only temporarily helpful. They desired a tangible way to restore basic dignity to these individuals and understood these unhoused neighbors were citizens too. Each person had their own story: mothers and fathers, someone's child, a man forgotten after becoming disabled during war. Many endured great tragedies and traumatic experiences. That night, the female professionals decided to call themselves Girls Think Tank, originating from "girlfriends." Now named Think Dignity, the organization has grown, and is many members strong, the organization's efforts reaching the masses. From their original project—distributing survival backpacks to those living on the streets during the coldest months— to standing with them at City Council, the organization and its members have learned that by speaking and acting out, real change occurs.

ORGANIZATIONAL PURPOSE

All of the programs at Think Dignity focus on advancing basic dignity for those living on the streets. The organization strives to fill gaps and provide services which are otherwise unavailable. A message from the Executive Director of Think Dignity (included in the organization's 2017 report) stated, "Each of our programs serves to restore dignity for the homeless, a group of individuals who have been ignored and disenfranchised, and provides a way for people to transform and 'feel like a human being again.' With each person we touch, there is one more opportunity for a bright future out of homelessness." Think Dignity and 'Dignity Defenders' (as they refer to themselves), work towards this larger organizational mission in a variety of ways, including different program offerings.

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In 2019, Think Dignity served 2,717+ individuals including:

447 Guests at the Fresh Starts Showers

198 Guests at the Street Boutique

450+ Guests at the Survival Supply Distribution

869 Guests at the Stree Cafe

567 Clients at the Transitional Storage Center

128 Clients at the Legal Clinics

58 Clients at the Homeless Youth Legal & Advocacy Project

PROGRAMS & SERVICES OFFERED

- Basic Dignity Coalition
- Transitional Storage Center
- MOD Squad: Fresh Start Showers
- MOD Squad: Street Boutique
- MOD Squad: Street Cafe
- Homeless Youth Legal & Advocacy Project (HYLAP)
- Legal Referral & Advocacy Clinic
- Know Your Rights Project (KYR)
- Survival Supply Distribution
- Water Distribution

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES USD STUDENTS CAN HELP EXPLORE SOLUTIONS FOR?

In the next section, three problems identified by Think Dignity are described. Each of the problems provides some background as well as poses a question for students to explore and ideate upon. Students will submit a 2-3 minute video featuring an idea to address one of these challenges.

- How might we help Think Dignity reimagine its sanitation process in a way that it complies with sanitation guidelines, is safe for clients, and cost and time effective for the organization, especially during a pandemic?
- How might we help Think Dignity provide access to feminine hygiene products to their clients in a way that it provides privacy while helping break the stigma?
- How might we help Think Dignity provide access for those experiencing homelessness in areas further from downtown to store their personal items in a way that is convenient and safe so that they can have more opportunities to move freely and to take care of their daily needs?

Learn more about each of these Challenges in the next section.

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CURRENT CHALLENGES

In an interview with the Changemaker Hub, Merlynn Watanabe (USD Alumna , 2015), the Programs & Operations Manager for Think Dignity, provided specific information about the challenges they are currently facing. In the sections below, we have provided direct quotes from this interview.

Think Dignity Challenge 1- SANITATION

Mod Squad: Fresh Start Showers

Think Dignity's Fresh Start Showers is a 2-shower mobile trailer that brings basic dignity to San Diego's unhoused neighbors by providing access to safe shower facilities in various communities throughout the County. Think Dignity offers more than showers by pairing with hairstylists, barbers, social service providers and more, to create a holistic experience for participants. A specially-fitted mobile trailer with two shower units travels to twelve pre-arranged sites on a regular rotation. In 2019 Think Dignity was able to provide nearly 1,000 individual showers and hygiene kits. Currently, they are the only non-profit that goes around the entire county providing this service. With this initiative, they are trying to address one of the primary concerns throughout San Diego for all unsheltered people: the lack of hygienic resources. This was a significant issue before the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has only become more important since.

DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM

"One of the challenges Think Dignity has with its Fresh Start Showers initiative is that it takes time to sanitize the showers after they are used, and thus, clients must sometimes wait in line for hours to take a shower. There is a need to decrease the time it takes to clean the showers in a way that maintains proper sanitation standards. If the showers can be cleaned more efficiently, then more unsheltered people will be able to utilize this service. Think Dignity hosts approximately eight to ten Fresh Start Shower events per month. The small trailer can serve up to twenty-four people per event, which results in 500-750 unsheltered persons per year. With the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increased need to clean the showers more quickly, while also following the country guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and U.S. state and local health authorities to ensure that both the unsheltered persons using the showers and Think Dignity staff members and volunteers remain safe. In March 2020, Think Dignity decided to suspend its Fresh Start Showers initiative because of health concerns. Specifically, due to the various transmission methods of the Coronavirus, Think Dignity was concerned that if they allowed mobile showers to operate, they would be putting unsheltered persons and its staff and volunteers at risk."

WHY IS THIS PROBLEM IMPORTANT TO YOUR ORGANIZATION?

"The time is important because we don't want to have clients waiting for a long time to take their shower. Currently every single guest that comes into the showers gets fifteen minutes, if they have any physical disability then it gets extended to twenty-five to thirty minutes. We try to cut down the cleaning time so that within the three-hour period that we are on site we can actually serve twenty four people already in line.

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An additional problem is that when the cleaning time takes a lot longer, then our staff needs to stay longer, usually an extra hour, which then cuts into our budget because we have to pay people over time. Each event is coordinated by three staff members on site in charge of checking in clients as well as sanitizing the showers. Even though they have been doing a great job, we also see that this can lead to burnout. If staff thinks they are only there for three hours but end up staying five hours then it has an impact in other areas. Because the same staff that runs the mobile showers is the same staff that does data entry, advocacy, etc. So, that extra time that we spend cleaning really starts pushing other areas and tasks. We also have five sites on a waiting list, (a combination of churches and local community groups). Local events take place in parking lots or beaches where they want to bring the mobile services. The challenge is the distance, i.e. Alpine or Fallbrook requested events there, but we would spend more money and time just driving there.”

WHAT HAS BEEN TRIED BEFORE TO ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM?

“The process that we had in place took us about ten to fifteen minutes, because we were sanitizing every single thing that was touched. We also had some clients who had some issues with their personal hygiene, so it required more cleaning. And then we were able to buy a few more equipment, we invested in some items that could be multipurpose. So, we had a mop that could be used as a scrub, that helped us make it easier and speed the process. We checked how long each step took while maintaining the required standards for sanitation. The fastest that we got was five minutes, and we have been good at staying within these five minutes. But with this pandemic, we have to better sanitize every single thing. We recognize that would extend our time again. Now we have to consider [some of the following questions]: Do we start sanitizing the air vents? Do we need to clean all the walls? Every single wall and ceiling? Now that we are thinking about what this future will look like, we need to figure out how to maintain proper sanitation while reducing our time. In a prior conversation with other mobile shower service providers across the country, we found that we had similar sanitation procedures (e.g. using bleach water or EPA-approved sanitizers) but were still facing the challenge of placing our staff and volunteers at risk of infection as our procedures were not automated and required manual labor to effectively clean our shower units. I think the vision that many shower providers have is a type of design where you turn on the switch and it washes down the entire place and one other switch that dries it out. I think that could be the most effective way, but because we don’t have that process, we use a combination of manual efforts, squeegees, mops, and bleach water in every aspect.”

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More info:

- [Mobile Showers program](#)
- YouTube channel (features a video called [don't look away](#) that gives a better idea of the mobile showers initiative).
- [Mobile Showers Manual](#), an indepth look into the program, it requires a donation to download it. The Hub will provide a limited amount of [PDFs](#) for distribution to faculty embedding the Challenge into their course and selecting this community partner (the Hub made a contribution to Think Dignity to be able to provide these manuals).



WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE USD STUDENTS CAN HELP EXPLORE SOLUTIONS FOR?

How might we help Think Dignity reimagine its sanitation process in a way that it complies with sanitation guidelines, is safe for clients, and cost and time effective for the organization, especially during a pandemic?

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Think Dignity Challenge 2- DISTRIBUTION OF HYGIENE PRODUCTS

MOD SQUAD: THE STREET BOUTIQUE

The Street Boutique, part of Think Dignity's MOD (Mobile Operations of Dignity) Squad, is aimed at providing homeless folks with access to menstrual and incontinence products, as well as new undergarments such as bras and underwear. Guests have the opportunity to "shop" and choose a limited number of items to "purchase" from the Boutique for free – whether it be a month's worth of menstrual or incontinence products, several pairs of new underwear, a fancy bra, or any combination of products. Providing access to menstrual products, incontinence products, new bras and underwear in a manner that allows them the freedom of choice not only helps restore basic dignity to homeless individuals but also aims to prevent unwanted physical health outcomes from lack of access to hygienic garments and products. Additionally, access to these items allows folks to stay cleaner and healthier, may increase levels of self-esteem, and has the potential to increase the likelihood for someone to obtain a job or get off the streets."

DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM

"For a lot of homeless women individuals who menstruate there has always been a lack of access to menstruation and feminine hygiene products. During the pandemic, we have been delivering menstrual hygiene kits to shelters and homeless service providers so that their clients and residents have access to feminine hygiene products, yet the challenge is that we are unable to reach unsheltered individuals and homeless encampments who are not often reached by service providers or homeless outreach teams. Even without the pandemic that has always been an issue. A lot of homeless individuals don't know where to find them, and those who have these products don't know where to drop them off. Because it is also such a taboo topic, anything dealing with feminine health is difficult to discuss or advocate for. Even finding feminine hygiene products anywhere aside from purchasing it themselves [has been difficult]."

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WHY IS THIS PROBLEM IMPORTANT TO YOUR ORGANIZATION?

“The way we have distributed these items was through our second mobile program, the Street Boutique. [This was] originally design[ed] to be a pop-up store for women. [E]very single client could shop for a set of a brand new undergarments and a month's supply of their preferred menstrual hygiene products for free. We wanted to make this shop more inclusive so we started serving the LGBTQ community and we started receiving more donations of boxer briefs and men's underwear so we could slowly start serving more men. However, with a more diverse group, it can sometimes open up traumatic experiences for certain guests, such as women who have been victims of sexual assault and domestic violence or individuals who were assaulted for their gender identity and sexual orientation. This prevents all guests from comfortably shopping for their items and feeling like they can openly speak about their needs to our staff and volunteers.. It has been helpful going to women's shelters where people are more open about that and can talk more openly about that need. But when we are out in public, people feel uncomfortable with approaching the Boutique as they feel exposed and vulnerable, and it prevents us from effectively meeting the needs of unsheltered individuals. We have not figured out how to make it not private but also how to break the stigma and not exacerbate the taboo topic, but also respecting people's privacy and not putting it all out there. With the pandemic, we have re-launched our Street Boutique on a retail-like website so that residents at partnering homeless shelters can still freely shop for their preferred brand new undergarments and menstrual hygiene products, yet we are still facing the challenge of not being able to effectively reach individuals living on the streets.”

WHAT HAS BEEN TRIED BEFORE TO ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM?

“There are two groups that I can think of that have done or are currently doing this work: Distributing Dignity and Period. Period has four different clubs in colleges (UCSD is one of their bigger branches). Distributing Dignity focuses on distributing menstrual hygiene products to women's shelters or homeless service providers throughout the country to reach homeless individuals on a community-level. I have seen some [that] they put in [a] brownbag, discreetly packaged, with messages of hope, compassion, courage. In the U.K., an agency developed a vending machine that dispenses essential items that homeless people need (e.g. socks, menstrual hygiene products, fruits, water, books, etc.) using coupons/tokens provided by homeless service providers. A lot of homeless individuals didn't know how to get ahold of these products without having to be very vocal about it. People get turned off because they don't want to talk about it. So, women, tend to make make-shift items rather than ask for products. Some shelters partner with Think Dignity or other services like that to provide these items, but they generally don't have them available (because of budget or other reasons).”

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More info:

- [YouTube channel](#)
- [The Street Boutique](#)
- [Survival Distribution program](#)



WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE USD STUDENTS CAN HELP EXPLORE SOLUTIONS FOR?

How might we help Think Dignity provide access to feminine hygiene products to their clients in a way that it provides privacy while helping break the stigma?

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Think Dignity Challenge 3- TRANSITIONAL STORAGE

TRANSITIONAL STORAGE CENTER

The Transitional Storage Center (TSC) is a place for homeless individuals to safely store their personal belongings, allowing them to use public transportation, job hunt, work, attend classes, meet with health professionals and other service providers, and begin to transition off the streets, while freeing the streets of over 30,000 pounds of personal belongings. It is a win-win solution for all. The TSC was started in 2011 due to a settlement won against the City of San Diego, which involved homeless individuals whose belongings were wrongfully taken and destroyed by the City. Think Dignity took over operations and management of the TSC in 2012. Think Dignity currently serves approximately 400 individuals every day, with 304 lockers and about 96 bins. Since Think Dignity took over operations, over 500 people have been able to gain employment, obtain housing, and move off the streets because of the TSC. The TSC is located at 252 16th Street, San Diego, at a lot owned by the San Diego Housing Commission, graciously provided for the use of the TSC.

DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM

"I know that we are one of three storage facilities in the county. But all the storage centers are located centrally, so we are thinking, aside from providing people storage, how would people navigate the city or the county if the storage is located in one area. Is there a way that this service can be expanded, is there an innovative way for people to have safe storage? I know some people have thought about backpacks that can also serve as a blanket and a pillow, so, having multipurpose items, so that people don't have to keep carrying a variety of items with them. But also, [they need] something that is weatherproof. I think that is something people have talked about on the streets but we don't really know what [that solution] looks like. Aside from personal hygiene items and clothing, most people need to carry around their important documents (birth certificates, social security card, any type of ID). I have seen people carry with them a lanyard, and then they get some of these documents laminated or they have them in a zip lock bag or plastic bag. That is one type of item they keep in their bags and often is the one that gets destroyed the fastest. We have been getting a lot of inquiries (to our legal team) about how to get copies or newly issued documents. Sometimes they carry around tarps and blankets, [and] if they have a sleeping bag, they also carry that. Many like to travel light, so generally they would have a blanket and a tarp."

WHY IS THIS PROBLEM IMPORTANT TO YOUR ORGANIZATION?

"Most people are putting things in storage during the day so they can go to work and attend appointments or interviews without having to worry about the safety of their belongings. The majority of people need to access storage daily, people are checking in every single day. In the past seven years or so we have seen over 500 people transition out of the storage center because they have been using it to find a job, go to housing

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appointments. We have seen them use it more often like a daily storage, where it helps them navigate different services while leaving their items in a safe area. Maybe about 10-15% of clients use it as long-term storage. Our regular policy is they have to check in at least once a week (once they have a bin or a locker) so that we know they are active and utilizing it. I think it's only been a few people, for whom housing is not a top priority but also can't get into temporary housing because it is just too dangerous for their health. These would be the clients that use storage for longer term."

WHAT HAS BEEN TRIED BEFORE TO ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM?

"To increase access to safe storage, the City of San Diego created two more storage facilities for individuals living on the streets. The storage locations available are located in central San Diego: two storage facilities [including our TSC] are located in East Village and Barrio Logan/Logan Heights area and the other is located in the El Cerrito neighborhood. Storage has been more catered towards supporting neighborhoods and communities' needs, since there are not many homeless services in that area." However, we also have clients and individuals on the waiting list from other parts of the County who are in need of storage spaces but are unable to access it because of transportation limitations. We have tried looking into different partnerships for affordable transportation but have not been able to accomplish this.

More info:

- Homelessness in San Diego [Podcast Episode featuring Think Dignity](#)
- [KPBS story](#)
- [Think Dignity in San Diego](#)

WHAT IS THE CHALLENGE USD STUDENTS CAN HELP EXPLORE SOLUTIONS FOR?



How might we help Think Dignity provide access for those experiencing homelessness in areas further from downtown to store their personal items in a way that is convenient and safe so that they can have more opportunities to move freely and to take care of their daily needs?