**VOORTREKKER ROAD CORRIDOR IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT**

**INTERNATIONAL DOWNTOWN AWARDS 2017**

**Submission category: Downtown Leadership and Management**

**CREATING A SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ECOSYSTEM**

In 2012, the business areas of Parow and Bellville – considered Cape Town’s second central business district – had reached a tipping point in a familiar urban story. The town centres were affected by crime, decay and grime caused by disinvestment, neglect and lack of business confidence. The Voortrekker Road Corridor Improvement District (VRCID) was formed to address these issues, to create and maintain a clean, safe and sustainable urban environment along the Voortrekker Road Corridor.

**THE PROBLEM**

South Africa’s particular socio-economic context forces many people to leave their homes to seek employment in city centres, or to escape abuse. However, many cannot find work and, without enough shelter beds available, many are left homeless. City systems lack sufficient infrastructure and resources to help those who need it.

Shortly after we opened our doors, we gained a clear understanding of how these factors had affected our own urban environment.

Within our 8km2 boundary, 500 people, including 10 children, were living on the streets. Only 130 shelter beds were available within the area. Of these, 67% had lived on the streets for two years or more, and 48% had escaped dysfunctional families. Prostitution, poverty and unemployment were rife.

**A NEW APPROACH - BUILDING AN ECOSYSTEM**

**We recognised that the roots of urban decay are embedded into the socio-economic problems affecting our communities**

In response, we developed a new coherent, collaborative approach that could address the complex challenge through an interconnected ecosystem of all players working to combat homelessness. Operating within an ecosystem advances the efficiency and effectiveness of individuals who would otherwise be operating in silos. The ecosystem facilitates the creation of stronger partnerships, maximises opportunities and unlocks additional resources. We also identified key activities:

* A holistic approach that encompasses the entire social development ecosystem within our urban boundaries
* A multi-purpose centre where individuals could address the basic needs of food, shelter, clothing and income, and chronically homeless could reduce harm to themselves
* Family re-integration and family preservation
* Skills development, education (adult literacy), job rehabilitation and providing job creation opportunities

**EXECUTION**

**1. Creating stronger partnerships**

**We established a joint operations committee (JOC)**, comprising non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations; the City of Cape Town; security contractors; South African Police Services; social workers; town councillors and others. This is the first multi-stakeholder initiative of its kind.

This unique integrated approach helps to cross silos, maximise resources and reduce duplication. The JOC meets monthly, providing a platform for information sharing, resource sharing and mutual support. Task teams facilitate broader and more effective cooperation to devise new initiatives and alternative solutions. Task teams focus on three areas to address the cause and effect of homelessness: service delivery and accommodation; safety and security; and prevention and awareness.

**We built partnerships with NGOs**, to help maximise scarce medical and social, resources, access additional shelter spaces and reunification or economic services required to care for the city’s homeless. These partnerships support and supplement their services by extending networks and facilitating access to resources.

**2. Maximising opportunities**

**We committed resources to skills development and job creation** **programmes**. The GROW programme is a work-rehabilitation programme linked to coaching and developmental activities initiated and executed by our partner NGO, MES. Through the programme, individuals commit to achieving personal growth goals and civic responsibilities in exchange for income-generating opportunities. Our corporate partners engage the GROW teams in their own private domains, too, extending the work opportunities.

**We implemented awareness events and campaigns** to encourage citizens to ‘do good, better’. We ask people not to give money directly to people living on the street, but to rather redirect their donations to NGOs working to help the homeless. We also implemented a food voucher system, through MES, other NGOs and with the support of a local radio station, to offer people with alternatives to giving money. We also encourage citizens to play a part in managing their urban environment, through park clean-ups and supporting community events.

**We developed a self-sustaining system that keeps citizens safe, provides an additional revenue stream and creates jobs.** In collaboration with Safe2Park, a parking management contractor, we selected, trained and employed individuals who were previously living in car parks in the area. The parking management system enables us to maintain clean, safe car parks, provide a sustainable employment growth path for individuals, and earn additional revenue for the VRCID which is then channelled back into our social development programmes.

**3. Unlocking additional resources**

**We lobbied the City of Cape Town to release land for a Safe Space**, which provides homeless people in the area with a safe place to sleep at night, access to clean ablution facilities and lockers to protect their scarce possessions. The Safe Space, developed and managed by MES, was launched at the end of May 2017, provides an additional 50 bed spaces, increasing the number of beds available by 42%.

The facility provides a centralised point for NGOs, law enforcement and social services to connect with the most vulnerable in our society. Individuals can meet their practical needs at the Safe Space: a safe place to sleep, meals, blankets, clothing and toiletries. They also have access to other social services including assessment, referrals and social work interventions, mentorship, harm reduction programmes and administrative support for replacing documentation or reuniting them with their families. They are also able to participate in daytime workshops and other activities. The Safe Space offers people living on the street a chance to restore their dignity, remain safe and access critical social support when they need it.

**REPLICATION**

The ecosystem approach forms a model that other improvement districts can replicate. It places the improvement district organisation at the co-ordinating centre of all social development activities within its area of operation. It enables partners, NGOs and security and civil entities to form cross-disciplinary relationships beyond their immediate networks.

**OUTCOMES**

The VRCID was established in 2012. Through collaboration and partnership, we have made steady progress in dealing with one of our most pressing challenges. The statistics bear this out. The table below outlines how our partnership with MES has delivered real change:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** |
| Social work assessments completed | 88 | 167\* | 710 | 680 |
| Grow Job Rehabilitation opportunities made available | 1056 | 5766 | 9168 | 8933 |
| Family reunification and reintegration | - | 3 | 62 | 57 |

The Safe2Park business employs 32 individuals as crime observers, parking marshals and supervisors, creating 32 new job positions as a direct result of the partnership with the VRCID. Crime within the perimeters of the parking areas has tumbled to almost zero, with only occasional petty matters being reported. In past years, an average of three cars were stolen from parking areas every two weeks. In almost two years of operation, no cars have been stolen with the new management arrangement in place.

Other outcomes are less quantifiable. Greater collaboration between partners leads to better information sharing. Better information sharing enables resources to be spread and developed more widely and managed more effectively.

Our developmental approach enables people living on the street to receive a hand up in society, and not a hand out from society. And switching mindsets from individual to collective action enables all parties within the ecosystem to go further, together.