

# Fighting homelessness with yoga

## La Jolla man launches national drive help cure problem



[\(/staff/gary-warth/\)](#)

By [Gary Warth \(/staff/gary-warth/\)](#) | 5:39 p.m. March 29, 2016



Andrew Beinbrink, second from right, founded Yoga 4 Homeless. He is shown from a few months ago giving yoga mats for some homeless men, including Mark Heffron, second from left. *Courtesy Andrew Beinbrink*

San Diego — A La Jolla man is launching a national effort to help homeless people by practicing yoga.

“This is not a new idea,” said Andrew Beinbrink, CEO of SportsForce, a local college recruiting company. “This is already being done in different communities on a small scale, and the evidence of its successful so far is mind-blowing.”

Yoga, Beinbrink said, has been proven to reduce traumatic stress, depression, insomnia and addictions. It also has been used to help veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

All of those conditions are major contributors to homelessness, and Beinbrink said his plan to bring yoga to shelters and social service programs across the nation could have a profound impact on the problem.

“We believe yoga should be accessible to every homeless person that wants to practice,” Beinbrink said.

The La Jolla resident has launched Yoga 4 Homeless, a nonprofit that he plans to expand nationally throughout partnerships with yoga studios and homeless programs.

So far he’s aligned with about a dozen studios and has set up a GoFundMe page to raise money for mats, teachers and other expenses.

Beinbrink hopes to recruit yoga teachers across the country to work in different cities.

Locally, he already is working with Serving Seniors, which works with a homeless population, and the San Diego Rescue Mission.

“If it does anything to help their mental wellness, their spiritual well-being, and their physical wellness, I’m all for it,” said Michael Johnson, vice president of development for the Rescue Mission.

While yoga may not be the first thing that comes to mind when most people think about the needs of the homeless, Johnson said he could get 10 different answers if he were to ask 10 people about the best way to help them.

“But the sooner we treat them with dignity, respect and give them opportunities, the better they will be,” he said. “And I think the program that Andrew is doing, treating people around wellness and wholeness and focusing inwardly among their own selves, I don’t see how anything bad can come from it.”

Beinbrink donated about 100 yoga mats to the mission, where about 400 people reside on any night, Johnson said.

With some offices moving from the mission's main building to another building across the street, Johnson said he hopes they will have room to hold yoga classes for residents by summer.

Beinbrink said his project is the first national attempt at coordinating yoga programs for homeless people, but there are similar programs across the country.

In the Bay Area, Marty Fleetwood led yoga classes for homeless people as executive director of Homebase, Inc.

"Participants over time started reporting their progress," she said about the program that ran about five years. Some people reported that their doctors had lowered the dosage of medication they were on, and some said they had met goals that resulted in them moving into permanent housing, she said.

Before she stopped the program two years ago because of her own medical reasons, Fleetwood said she and other instructors had worked with Berkeley Support Services in Alameda County and with emergency shelters.

Robert Marbut of Marbut Consulting, which advises more than 100 cities nationwide about homeless issues, also said the yoga program makes sense.

"As soon as I heard about it, I thought, 'That's ingenious,'" he said. "I wish I had thought of that."

Marbut said he believes the major cause of homelessness is not the economy, but mental illness and addictions.

"The balancing, the calming, the breathing," he said about yoga. "Those are all really good processes that help in mental and behavioral health issues or addictive disorders."

No one is talking about diverting resources from existing homeless services for yoga, which has been popping up in all sorts of different places across the region, including wine bars, craft brewery pubs and, controversially to some, public schools.

Beinbrink said he got the idea of creating a yoga program for homeless people in October, when he ran into a homeless veteran sleeping on the sidewalk. He went back home and brought him a yoga mat.

"I'm back in the saddle again," said the man, Mark Heffron, 53. "I just started back in a job, going on a month."

Heffron said he hasn't started doing yoga yet, but he credits Beinbrink with helping him get off the street.

Heffron said he's done yoga in the past and understands how it could help homeless people.

"It's about exercising and feeling good about yourself," he said.

*gary.warth@sduniontribune.com*

*760-529-4939*

*@GaryWarthUT*

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