

CORONAVIRUS

'We're not doing enough.' The race against COVID-19 to test and house Miami's homeless

BY JOEY FLECHAS AND ALEX HARRIS

A moving pad, a magenta blanket and a few pillows separate the Bachmans from the concrete sidewalk on Southwest First Avenue in Miami. The coronavirus pandemic has rendered this stretch of downtown quiet, save for a few vehicles through the day and the occasional pedestrian. Anyone on foot can easily walk down the middle of the street.

Ashley Bachman, 34, has multiple sclerosis. Her 36-year-old husband Robert Bachman has epilepsy. The couple have been sleeping on their makeshift bed on the concrete near the intersection with South Miami Avenue for almost two months.

Ashley Bachman and her husband, fearful of contracting COVID-19, have been able to get into a Camillus Health program that allows them to get mental health evaluations and housing. But they are stymied by delays as shelters move people around in an effort to create distance between them and isolate those who might have been exposed.

"Ain't no telling how long it's going to take though," Robert said.

"Because of the virus, that's the major problem right now. Everything is on hold," Ashley said.

Bachman is one of a few dozen people experiencing homelessness on this block of downtown. She's one of hundreds in downtown and Overtown who have seen the pandemic manifest in ways that [people with housing don't experience](#). On the street, feedings have decreased, access to shelters and programming have become more difficult and the stream of people who would normally offer a helping hand no longer walk by.

Several weeks after the COVID-19 crisis upended daily life for people across Miami-Dade County, advocates are working to address the challenges faced by people sleeping on the street. They are frustrated that more people are not being provided housing and testing and they blame the Homeless Trust.

That frustration has been amplified by the [first known death of a homeless person in Miami-Dade County](#), a 26-year-old man who was a resident at the Chapman South Homeless Assistance Center in Homestead. He had arrived at the Chapman health clinic Friday, before he was taken to the Jackson South hospital. He passed away a few hours later.

The urgent need to help the unhoused has drawn advocates from different corners of the area's social safety net into a coalition that is taking on work they say the Trust and its chief, the powerful lobbyist Ron Book, should be doing.

Book paints a different picture, one of an agency whose employees are working aggressively on behalf of the homeless and that is dipping into its reserves to help them.

On Friday, a coalition of advocates led by University of Miami doctor Armen Henderson called a press conference to announce new measures to serve the homeless, from expanded COVID-19 testing to showers and portable toilets in Overtown.

Henderson and members of other community groups, including the [Dream Defenders](#), the Circle of Brotherhood, Miami Workers Center and [Struggle for Miami's Affordable and Sustainable Housing](#), criticized the Trust for what they considered inaction in the face of the pandemic. Henderson said his offers to collaborate with the Trust were rebuffed. In response, he took matters into his own hands.

"It's obvious from the conditions that I've seen of humans living out the street in Miami-Dade County, that we're not prepared and that we're not doing enough," Henderson said. "We should absolutely do more."

Henderson has distributed food, tents and toiletries for several weeks during the pandemic, and [he's tested 30 homeless people since mid-March](#). He said all 30 tests have come back negative. The physicians had 25 more swab tests to offer Friday.

The doctor also made headlines when a Miami police officer [handcuffed him in front of his home](#) while he was placing used boxes on the curb for pickup. The doctor said he could not discern any reason for why he was handcuffed. Miami's police chief said the incident would be investigated.

Henderson and the coalition, which includes a team of physicians and medical students, on Friday handed out more tents and food to people living on downtown's sidewalks. They also collected more samples for COVID-19 tests, swabbing people who wanted to get tested.

“I think it’s awesome what these volunteers are doing, coming out here to help us,” said Silvia Stagg, a woman who was tested under the overpass on Southwest Second Street.

Natalia Echeverri, a South Miami Hospital physician who administered COVID-19 tests Friday, said she was one of multiple local doctors who were using the little time they have between shifts to volunteer on the street. She called on the government agencies to put all of the homeless in housing immediately to truly enact the “stay-at-home” orders that are in place statewide.

“I am here because as a physician, I took an oath to help others,” she said. “This is a public health emergency for all, not for those with homes, not for those with insurance, but for every single human out there.”

Book refuted the claim that the Trust isn’t doing enough. He said staffers have been handing out brochures, masks, hand sanitizer and food for seven weeks now; they have been moving people into hotel rooms for more than a month.

“I have been moving people into hotels for days and days and days,” he said. “These folks want you to believe we’ve done nothing.”

A new contract for 200 beds at the Red Roof Inn in Homestead kicked in on Friday, bringing the Trust’s total available beds to 649. Of the total, 161 are occupied — some by families. The rooms cost the Trust \$35 to \$78 a night, on top of cost of three meals a day and staff to monitor the residents to make sure they don’t leave the hotels, as the first few isolated guests did weeks back. Thursday, Book said, a man threw his TV out the window of his hotel room in frustration from having to stay inside the hotel.

“Can I put everybody [in a hotel room]? I can’t afford to do that,” he said.

Book said he has no idea how much it would cost to house everyone on the streets, but said the Trust’s board gave him permission to tap into the reserves, so he is. He’s also counting on federal cash to fill in the gaps. The Trust’s plan is to triage housing — starting with senior citizens and those with underlying medical conditions. The end goal is to get each of those people in hotel rooms permanent housing afterward and not just send them back to the street when the pandemic abates.

“For somebody to come in and say we don’t have a plan? Kiss my butt,” Book said.

More than 1,500 people currently live in one of the Trust's shelters and another 4,734 live in more permanent, affordable housing that comes with regular access to social services.

The Trust is working off a batch of 144 nasal swab tests and 100 throat tests. Book said he doesn't have a total count for how many tests have been completed since they began swabbing people last week, but said on Thursday alone 20 people were swabbed.

Staff is focusing on people who live downtown as well as senior citizens inside the shelters.

Some people have refused shelter, fearing they may be at greater risk entering dorm-like lodgings. Some have also refused a hotel room. Book, who went along for the testing on Thursday, said they encountered multiple people who refused a test or a hotel room.

"There was this 77-year-old-man. I got on my knees and begged him to go to the hotel, but I couldn't get him to go," Book said. "But I got two older women to go."