OperationRioGrande.Utah.Gov
Operation Rio Grande

Category: Cross-Boundary Collaboration & Partnerships
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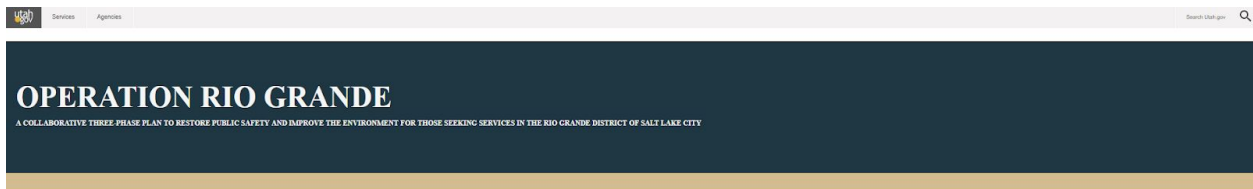State of Utah
Project Initiation and Completion Dates:
August 2017 – August 2017

NASCIO 2018

Project Website: https://operationriogrande.utah.gov

Executive Summary

In August 2017, Governor Gary Herbert and Lt. Governor Spencer Cox initiated "Operation Rio Grande" to restore public safety and improve the environment for individuals seeking supportive services to overcome homelessness in downtown Salt Lake City.

Due to ongoing concerns of the open drug market and multiple homicides in a condensed two-week window, action was taken by official to clear up this area and an unprecedented partnership was formed between state and local government. With this partnership formed, the following three-phase plan was devised to address the abuse that was so prevalent in this once popular and thriving business and recreational community:

- Phase 1 - Improve public safety and order in the Rio Grande Area.
- Phase 2 - Support people struggling with mental illness & drug addiction so they can return to a path of self reliance.
- Phase 3 - Prepare and connect individuals to income that supports housing.

It was apparent from the beginning that creating positive impacts and obtaining lasting outcomes would not be easy for a single entity. There would need to be a synchronization of systems and processes, and a reliance on many people, community partners and government entities, whose intimate involvement in this cross boundary collaboration effort is crucial. The government and community partners included the following:

- State of Utah Governor's office
- Utah House of Representatives
- Utah State Senate
- Salt Lake County
- Salt Lake City
- State of Utah Office of the Attorney General
- Salt Lake County Attorney General Office
- State of Utah Department of Public Safety
- Salt Lake County Sheriff Department

- Utah Department of Workforce Services
- Utah Department of Corrections
- Utah Department of Human Services
- Utah Department of Health
- Catholic Community Services
- Road Home and Community Connection Center; and
- Various other shelters and mental health facilities.

The Utah Department of Technology Services (DTS) was engaged to respond to the technology needs associated with each of these phases, delivering IT solutions within weeks or even days as the operation evolved. These solutions included:

- The creation of a Coordinated Services Database and integration with the State's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)
- Identification cards for service recipients
- A public website: https://operationriogrande.utah.gov

The DTS team developed the initial application to support on-site assessments at the Salt Lake County Jail within two weeks. DTS staff provided 24/7 on-site support to DWS employees and community partner agencies at the Salt Lake County Jail and at Rio Grande, including training and technology equipment set up. The finished product resulted in a photo identification card issuance application that can be searched by name or fingerprint. The card has a unique barcode that is scanned to allow entry into the safe zone, and returns information on the client in a web application, which allows the entry points to be mobile.

Concept

Operation Rio Grande is a multi phased project, designed to eliminate crime, lower drug related issues, coordinate services and ultimately, positively impact change in individuals lives. To achieve these outcomes, it was evident that change was needed. Barriers needed to be removed, communication was needed to be had and cross collaboration of data and process needed to be formed.

The number of substance abuse and homeless individuals in Salt Lake City have been increasing year over year, and the public and private community partners have a responsibility to help these individuals improve their quality of life and return to a path of self reliance. Although these responsibilities exist, the individuals in need of these services and assistance were unknown, which makes it tremendously difficult to deliver impactful services and provide lasting outcomes. Therefore, it was evident that identifying those in need and guiding them through a system of care would be essential to the success of this operation and the citizens it serves.

The State of Utah along with its other public and private partners quickly sprung into action with developing a way to identify individuals and coordinate services. At the center of identifying the vulnerable population and coordination services is the issuance of a newly created "Coordinated Services Card". The Coordinated Services Card allows for homeless individuals who need services to have identification, track and coordinate these services and to provide these vulnerable populations with access to a safe space.

In order to issue the Coordinated Services Card, the project was in need of a sophisticated application (Coordinated Services Application) that allowed for the ability to not only capture personally disclosed demographic information and a unique identifier, but also, an application that allowed for the capture of biometric information.


The web application required the ability to complete an initial assessment at that Salt Lake County Jail. The goal was to complete a triage assessment, print referrals for services and issue the Coordinated Services Card, as well as granting these individuals access to the Safe Space.

The Coordinated Services Application (CSA) captures initial individual demographics, including first name, last name, social security number, date of birth, and "Homeless Management Information System or HMIS" case number, as well as a photo and fingerprints are captured. Employees needed the ability to search by name, partial social security number, date of birth, and/or by fingerprints, therefore, a database with fast and accurate search capabilities was required. Before capturing this information, the agencies involved needed to ensure that use of this CSA, biometrics, and issuance of an identity card did not violate a customer's constitutional rights. As a result, it was determined that having customers sign a consent form for capturing the information, would allow the involved parties to collect the demographic and biometric information. Once the consent form has been received, the consent form is uploaded to the CSA, stored, and made available for viewing, as needed.

Despite the open coordination, collaboration and synchronization of services and information coming together a an accelerated fashion, the CSA technical team has not foregone security measures. The CSA team has had security and the individual's privacy at the core of their mission. Top priorities and focus have been given to authentication and access rights to data, to ensure that those individuals that are relying on and trusting in a system designed to help them does not cause them more damage or harm.
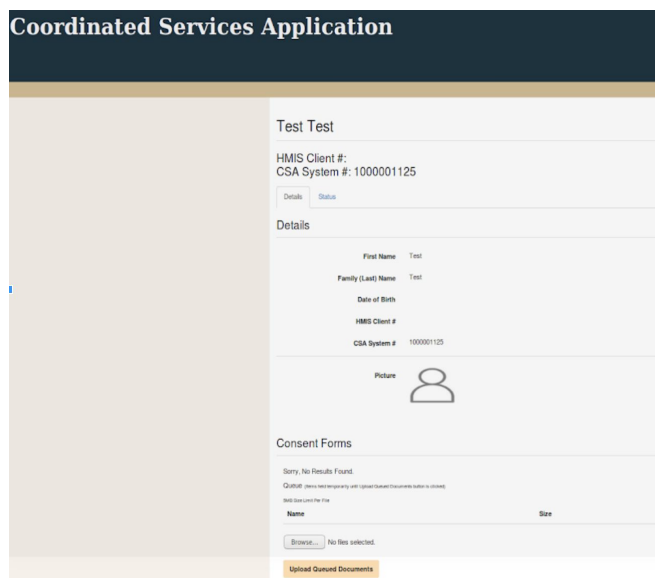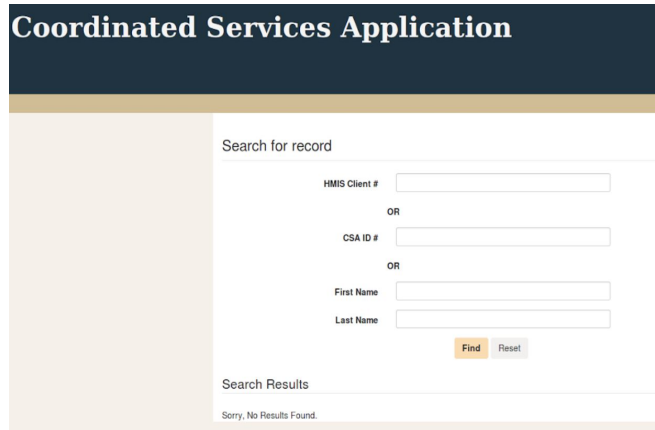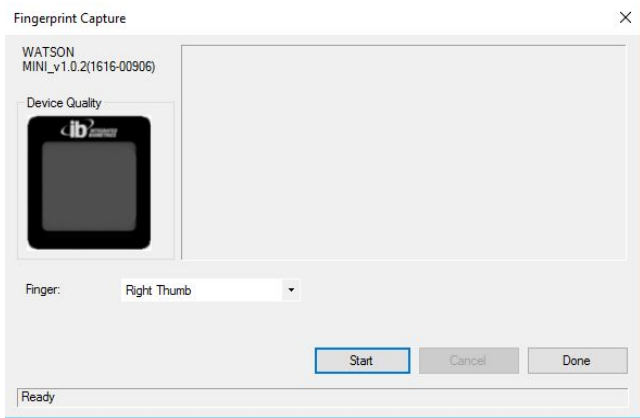
Significance

Operation Rio Grande quickly became one of the highest priorities for the state of Utah, Salt Lake County and Salt Lake City. Creating a safe environment for homeless individuals to access services and for businesses, employees and patrons to conduct business, was essential for downtown Salt Lake City. People experiencing homelessness need support that helps them to make their homelessness brief and nonrecurring. Businesses need to be able to operate safely to support working families and the economy of the entire state.

The deep and broad partnerships participating in Operation Rio Grande highlight the importance of the effort, as well as its complexity. Homelessness has many contributing factors, including job loss, substance abuse, domestic violence, mental illness and high housing costs. Operation Rio Grande is an essential and positive step in making improvements related to these factors, but it will be the continued collaboration of these partners for years to come that will continue to impact lives.

Highest Priorities

With the number of substance abuse and homeless individuals increasing year after year and after multiple homicides happening within a very short period of time, Governor Gary Herbert and Lt. Governor Spencer Cox personally got involved to make "Operation Rio Grande" a top priority to restore public safety and improve the environment for individuals seeking supportive services to overcome homelessness in downtown Salt Lake City.

Governor Gary Herbert holds a news conference with city, county and state leaders to discuss the crisis in Rio Grande. (Photo by Ben Winslow, FOX 13 News)

Safe Space

In an effort to make Phase 1 a reality, it was important to ensure the apprehension and eradication of criminal elements was achieved and therefore, a concentrated and enhanced law enforcement presence in the Rio Grande area was required.

On the first day of Operation Rio Grande going live, a mobile law enforcement command center was deployed onsite to provide immediate, synchronized and coordinated support to deployed law enforcement, in conjunction with receiving support from state and local agencies, enabling law enforcement to provide five times (5x) the normal coverage, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

With this coordinated and concentrated law enforcement presence, they were able to identify, arrest, and lock up dangerous criminals, many of which preyed on homeless individuals.   There was aggressive prosecution, utilizing jail bed space for serious crimes. Law enforcement had the flexibility to address criminal activities that moved to other locations and neighborhoods, outside of their normal jurisdiction.

As important as it was to identify, arrest, and lock up dangerous criminals, it was also as important to identify and support individuals that need a safe place, for those who are seeking refuge and assistive services. In collaboration with Catholic Community Services, the Road Home, and the Community Connection Center they were able to create the "Safe Space." The "Safe Space" closed off a portion of Rio Grande street providing public safety and secure, controlled access to integrated services for homeless individuals.   The area offers shelter, case management, employment support, a computer lab, temporary assistance (food stamps, general assistance), housing support, restrooms and showers, food services, laundry, additional restrooms, bike lockers, shaded space to protect people from weather elements, and outreach workers for service engagement and referrals.


Services were coordinated through a new "Coordinated Services Card" provided through a brief intake by providers at the safe space. The card allowed access to the safe space, provided identification for homeless individuals needing services, and tracked/coordinated services for these individuals.

Impact

The following charts reflect the outcomes to citizens of Utah in each phase of Operation Rio Grande.

Phase 1: Improve public safety and order in the Rio Grande Area.
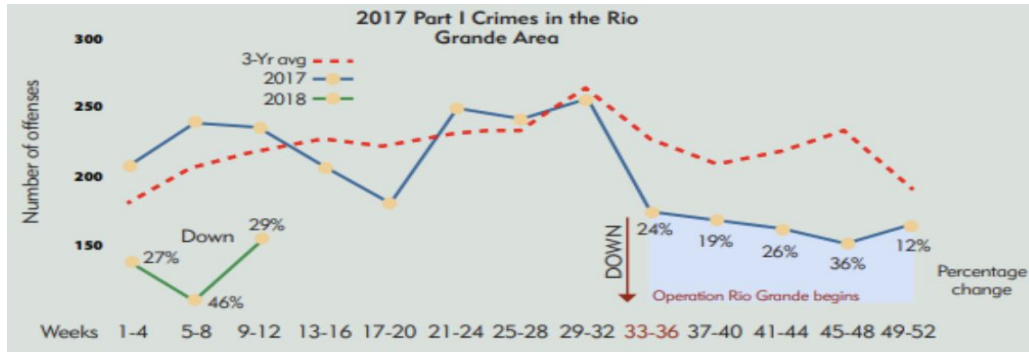
Beginning October 12-December 31, 2017, 4,507 Coordinated Service Cards were issued and 54,549 were scanned into the Safe Zone and granted access to social services. This also provided law enforcement the opportunity to focus on serious criminal activity in the area and it offered the government and community partners the opportunity to have a stronger understanding of the needs of the customers entering the Safe Zone.

Phase 2: Support people struggling with mental illness & drug addiction so they can return to a path of self reliance.
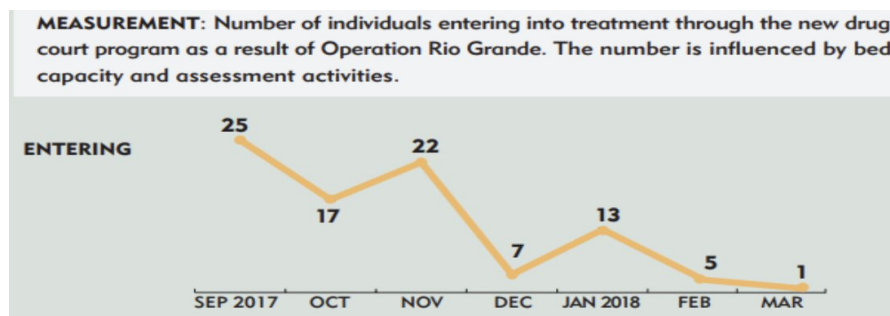
Since the implementation of phase 2, Seventy One (71) individuals have entered into treatment and starting their journey back to the path of self reliance.

Phase 3: Prepare and connect individuals to income that supports housing.
Individual employment plans: 90
Individuals with permanent employment: 18
Drug court participants with employment plans: 21
Number of employers providing job opportunities: 19
Number of "Dignity of Work" job postings from the employer list: 5