Founded in 1994, the Opportunity Center for the Homeless through direct contact, protects, supports, and works to improve the condition of all homeless individuals of the Paso Del Norte Region, regardless of their current condition or social standing. For over 21 years through social, communal, and academic partnerships the Opportunity Center has worked to accomplish these goals without restriction. In 2014, the Opportunity center faced several significant financial cuts and obstacles which made this mission ever more complicated.

These obstacles included:

* A loss of funding to the Mental Health Initiative which provided direct mental health care services to area homeless residents;
* A loss of funding to youth services programs which assisted young individuals who aged out of foster care transition into independent living structures;
* A loss of funding to educational programs which offered ESL, GED, and other educational and training platforms;
* The resulting reduction (loss) in staff as a result of programmatic and funding reductions; and
* An expansion of city ordinances that criminalize homelessness by punishing people who are forced to live in public spaces.

To avoid further reducing the capacity of the Opportunity Center to protect and care for the homeless, the following immediate action responses were implemented in 2014:

* Hired a Fund Developer and Grant Writer to strategically solicit public and private operational support, as well as to strategically restructure fund development practices;
* Restructured the organizational responsibilities of staff members, to include a Director of Social Services, modified staff job descriptions and responsibilities, and implemented the use of an internship program with the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP);
* Reevaluated partner relationships to consolidate efforts and work with like-minded area homeless care providers like Villa Maria, Sin Fronteras, Paso del Norte Center of Hope, and Reynolds House in maintaining care provisions;
* Established and redefined partnerships with community and academic partners to address gaps in resident care and staff development which include a collaboration with the University of Texas at El Paso, a revamped educational program with the El Paso Independent School District, a food share program with area El Paso Independent School District Cafeterias, the establishment of a Spirituality Center with the Sisters from Loreto, and the implementation of a values training program based on the Vincentian Model as suggested by DePaul USA;
* Dedicated significant organizational effort and resources to community outreach, education and activism campaigns through the inaugural HomeRun for the Homeless 5K Run, Walk and Kids dash and the State of Homelessness Conference Series;
* Worked with intra-organizational partners Aliviane, Inc. and Centro San Vicente to maintain, expand and improve resident care and seek additional funding for services focused on the integration of medical and mental health care through peer (consumer) driven programming;
* Focused on security measures within the emergency shelters and residential facilities; and
* Refinanced existing revenue generating properties and acquired additional revenue generating properties in an effort to secure resources for operational support.

To secure the future functionality and execution of the Opportunity Center mission the 2015-2016 Strategic Plan will focus on 5 key strategic areas:

1. Re-establishing the Mental Health Initiative taking into account both integrated and peer-driven models of care.
2. Maintaining, solidifying and expanding care and social services for residents.
3. Expanding Opportunity Center Staff Development
4. Increasing external support.
5. Increasing volunteer participation.
6. Mental Health Initiative:

In early 2015 a planning grant was submitted to the Hogg Foundation to begin the the process of reestablishing the Mental Health Initiative at the Opportunity Center. While this process advances, Centro San Vicente has hired a CSV Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner to address the needs of those with mental health needs. The strategic planning process includes securing funds from local government agencies to assist in funding the newly established mental health initiative. Additional grant submissions will focus on funding a full time permanent mental health specialist to care for residents. This practiconer will coordinate and work with interns, students and appropriate staff to guarantee adequate mental health care is available to all residents. Efforts are currently underway to cooperatively work with local law enforcement to identify those experiencing mental health crises to avoid unnecessary incarcerations and hospitalizations. These processes will include training, probation support and appropriate coordination with area care providers.

1. Care and Service Provisions:

In keeping with the mental health initiative, a modification will be made to increasing the use and availability of psychiatric medication to residents in need of such medication. Through the utilization of the Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner from Centro San Vicente, medication will be more readily available. Additionally, this partnership will address the needs of undocumented residents disqualified from other area programs.

Front line staff personnel will create new monitoring measures to record and track the incidents and episodes of psychotic and dangerous behavior of residents. This monitoring mechanism will identify those in greatest need of care and services and will ultimately attempt to reduce the number of violent and psychotic episodes resulting in emergency room visits, police calls and incarcerations. This will also supplement care strategies provided by the on-site psychiatric nurse practitioner and subsequent mental health programs. Staff will undergo training for mental health first aid and best practices.

A streamlined and modified intake process will gather a more comprehensive and constructive resident history at the time of shelter registration. Residents will begin their registration process at the front desk and will be entered into the Opportunity Center in a more efficient manner, expediting their access to care and services. A restructuring of the veterans admission process will also guarantee that those identified as veterans qualifying for VA based services acquire access in a timelier manner.

Attention will also be given to expanding educational and employment services at the Opportunity Center when possible.

Homeless forums will begin again at the Opportunity Center Men’s Shelter. These monthly “chat sessions” with shelter residents help disclose underlying sources of irritation in living in close proximity with other residents. It allows the free discussion with shelter staff and residents about program policies and procedures, and helps define expectations of both staff and residents. It also helps to identify what works for the good of the residents and what does not, and offers suggestions for necessary changes to care and service provisions.

1. Staff Development:

Beginning with Values Training, Opportunity Center staff members will begin focusing on how to perform tasks and duties in the spirit of customer service based on the Opportunity Center Mission Statement. Organized by the Spirituality Center, a team of 5 individuals have begun to identify how to incorporate and communicate how best to implement the values and objectives of the Opportunity Center Mission into daily operations. The intent of this undertaking is to extend ownership of the Opportunity Center to all staff members and begin to develop leaders on the Opportunity Center campus. The Opportunity Center Staff will work toward being mission and value focused in all undertakings and operations. This will begin with employee orientations.

In addition to working on interpersonal staff training, the Opportunity Center will work diligently on improving intra-personnel relationships. Quarterly meetings between all agencies working within the Opportunity Center will focus on resident care, communication and collaboration of best practices to guarantee the mission of the Opportunity Center directs all cooperative undertakings. The Opportunity center will continue to serve as a local, regional and national model in caring for the homeless by expanding its peer led principals of training formerly homeless individuals on how to care for the homeless.

To secure the relationship between staff and the Opportunity Center as an institution, a staff member will be tasked with coordinating staff outings, gatherings and events to celebrate, recognize and acknowledge the tremendous undertakings of the Opportunity Center.

1. Increasing External Support:

A focus on new fund and revenue opportunities will drive this initiative. Under the direction of the Executive Director, Grant Writer and Fund Developer, all Opportunity Center Staff members are encouraged to suggest and promote new or innovative strategies to generate support for the Opportunity Center and its programs.

Building on the success of the academic partnerships with UTEP, the El Paso Independent School District, El Paso Community College, and various religious affiliations, the Opportunity Center will continue to build communal partnerships that introduce outside organizations to the center in an effort to increase and maintain service support. Meetings with the County of El Paso will focus on probation initiatives, jail diversion and funding for mental health programs and services. Additional partner opportunities will be sought with area industry and partners as well agencies with similar or parallel interests.

The Opportunity Center will increase the utilization of social media platforms as a marketing and messaging mechanism. Platforms like Face Book and an updated web page will serve as tools to cultivate a new generation of participation.

A targeted focus and emphasis will be placed on improving and leveraging relationships with locally elected leaders. Partnerships with leaders at the municipal, county, state and federal levels will focus on public awareness and education, financial support and programmatic integration. Utilizing best practice models from similarly structured cities throughout the region and nation, the Opportunity Center will work to cultivate a complimentary partnership between homeless care providers and legislative leaders. This initiative is designed to guarantee a long term continuum of care for the Paso Del Norte Region homeless care providing organizations and the Opportunity Center.

1. Volunteerism:

The Opportunity Center will seek to establish a Volunteer Coordinator to organize, attract, and cultivate volunteer opportunities for the Opportunity Center and its residential facilities. The Volunteer Coordinator will volunteer their time to assist in placing new and existing volunteers into areas that best serve their talents to assist the Opportunity Center in maintaining its mission and established expectation of resident care. This individual will be responsible for conducting an orientation for volunteers and will serve as the primary liaison between volunteers and the Opportunity Center.