

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE METRO ATLANTA TASK FORCE FOR THE HOMELESS

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### I. The Beginnings, 1981-1990

The origins of the Task Force go back to 1981. In his inaugural address delivered that year, President Ronald Reagan told Americans that the nation was sinking under the weight of “unemployment, human misery, and personal indignity.” Bloated budgets and runaway deficits, he said asserted that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” True to his word, Reagan slashed federal aid to the cities at the very moment that the U.S. entered the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression. The Reagan recession of 1981-1983 coincided with an explosion of homelessness across the country. In response to the highly visible poverty flooding downtown Atlanta, a small group of progressive ministers and concerned laypersons began meeting at the recently-opened Open Door Community, which was modeled a Catholic Worker house, to discuss the crisis and develop a plan of action. The group included several self-described “social entrepreneurs” and “change agents” who would become instrumental in the expanding nonprofit social service sector during the 1980s. They represented a new force on the political scene. Convinced that public-private partnerships represented the future of urban social provision, the social entrepreneurs proposed the creation of a third-sector organization to coordinate the homeless relief effort in close consultation with business and political leaders.

Thus was born the Task Force for the Homeless. Mayor Andrew Young, the most entrepreneurially-inclined among Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s inner circle, bestowed his official blessing on these efforts, convinced that “compassionate capitalism” rather than “redistributive justice” would fill the void created by Reagan’s roll back of the welfare state. For their part social entrepreneurs saw in

the homelessness crisis an opportunity to test-run a public-private partnership on behalf of the city's disenfranchised.

It soon became clear, however, that the task at hand was far greater than anything the Task Force's architects had imagined. The number of people seeking shelter did not decline but continued to surge in the years following the Reagan recession.. At this critical juncture the leadership of the Task Force passed into the hands of Anita Beaty and Jim Beaty. Hired as co-directors in 1985, they steered the Task Force in a radically new direction, parting company with social entrepreneurs who were reluctant to do or say anything that might antagonize the governing regime of white business leaders and black elected officials. While the Beatys did not go looking for a fight, they were less interested in forging partnerships with the biracial power structure than in transforming the Task Force into an independent voice for social justice.

Energized by fresh leadership, the Task Force threw its institutional weight behind a boldly progressive analysis of the dynamics of homelessness, one that put housing rather than pathology at the heart of the crisis afflicting Atlanta. *Homelessness in Metro Atlanta* served as the organization's political manifesto and strategic plan. Written by Anita and released in 1987, the document was most noteworthy for setting out the Task Force's guiding principle that the shortage of affordable housing ranked as "the single most important cause of homelessness."

In staking out this position, the Task Force put itself on a collision course with Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), described by one commentator as the "politburo" of downtown business interests. In 1984 and 1985 CAP, which had long recognized the importance of "objective" research in shaping public opinion and promoting the business agenda, funded a pair of studies that attributed homelessness not to dysfunctional housing and job markets but to alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, and criminality—in short, to broken bodies and broken minds. Undaunted, the publication of *Homelessness in Metro Atlanta* signaled that the Task Force

would not remain silent as CAP attempted to produce in-house research that pathologized and criminalized poverty. The battle lines between the two organizations hardened. ,

By 1990 the Task Force had come of age, building a network of homeless service providers and policy advocates virtually from scratch. A 24-hour, emergency housing hotline was soon up and running at the Task Force's new offices. Anyone who was homeless or facing the prospect of homelessness could call the number, speak to a staff person, and receive a referral to the appropriate service agency. Caller case files were fed into a computer data base enabling the Task Force to produce empirically-rich reports and recommendations on housing, employment, and access to social services. ~~The~~The hotline staff fielding over twenty-thousand calls a year, and the Task Force assembled an enormous body of data that it made available to public officials and academic specialists. At the same time, the Task Force served as the principal coordinator of homeless services and advocacy for the entire metropolitan region. It organized separate policy teams for housing, employment, mental health, welfare entitlement, veterans' affairs, healthcare, emergency shelter, and legal advocacy. Composed of service providers, public agency representatives, advocates, homeless people, and concerned citizens, these teams met once a month and forwarded their proposals to the Task Force's monthly forum meeting, which acted as the sounding board for policy formulation. Expanding its work beyond the metropolitan region, the Task Force launched the Georgia Coalition to End Homelessness, a state-wide advocacy and service network that would eventually include the cities of Albany, Augusta, Macon, and Savannah.

## **II. The Olympic Juggernaut, 1990-1996**

On September 18, 1990, Atlantans received news that the International Olympic Committee (IOC selected Atlanta as the site of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games.

The leaders of the city instantly entered a state of collective euphoria, while Anita Beaty prepared for the battle to come. She knew that the hosting the Olympics would s realign the balance of political forces, rolling over local resistance to gentrification, displacement, and securitization. On the very day of the IOC announcement, the Task Force fired its opening salvo, a press release demanding that the secretive Atlanta Olympics Committee (AOC) unveil its development plans, and that city officials “guarantee HOUSING to all homeless people before building housing for tourists and athletes.”

Toward that end, the Task Force spearheaded the formation of the Atlanta Olympics Conscience Coalition, a biracial alliance of homeless advocates, neighborhood organizers, progressive clergy, and left-leaning unions to put the AOC on notice that any attempt to use the Games as an instrument of “discrimination and injustice” would meet with resistance. 300 community leaders signed a document urging city officials to “protect housing and civil rights and social services of Atlanta's poorest and most vulnerable people.”

Between 1991 and 1996 two ~~traditionally, historically~~traditionally, historically African American neighborhoods in the city emerged as battlegrounds. The decision to locate the Olympics stadium in Summerhill/Peoplestown, once thriving African American neighborhoods that had previously been steamrolled by waves of postwar urban renewal, elicited furious if ultimately futile grass-roots opposition. As the Conscience Coalition predicted, the stadium proved to be a cancer for area, creating a wasteland of burned-out buildings, gypsy parking lots, and acres of asphalt that caused nearby homes to flood whenever it rained.

A few miles away stood the similarly ill-fated Techwood Homes and Clark Howell Homes, black public housing projects chosen for the site of the Olympic Village because of their prime location next to Coca-Cola’s corporate headquarters and the Georgia Institute of Technology. Activists warned that the demolition of these projects would set a dangerous precedent in the struggle for affordable housing, and they were right. Using the Olympics opportunity, the Atlanta Housing Authority succeeded in

eliminating its entire stock of public housing between 1994 and 2011, a breathtaking experiment in gentrification and displacement. From the rubble of 14,000 units of public housing arose shiny, new mixed-use developments to which only a handful of the original residents would return.

But it was a third small space, Atlanta's central business district, that became the frontline in the Task Force's fight against celebration capitalism. Within weeks of the IOC announcement, a three-part effort to securitize, fortify, and sanitize downtown Atlanta was underway. In June 1991, the city council, under heavy pressure from Mayor Maynard Jackson and CAP enacted a new set of ordinances that prohibited panhandling in an aggressive manner, loitering in or around parking lots, and lying or sleeping on park benches.

The second part of the plan deployed techniques of landscape design to purge downtown of its unwanted black poor. Woodruff Park was not only the anchor of downtown Atlanta, it was also ground-zero for a homelessness population that city officials and business leaders wanted out of sight. Donated to the city in 1973 by Robert W. Woodruff, the long-time president of Coca-Cola, the 3.8-acre park had become a favorite hangout for homeless people, due to its proximity to the Union Mission, Salvation Army, Grady Hospital, and church-operated shelters and soup kitchens. In 1994, with opening ceremonies just two years away, the Woodruff Foundation decided that a \$5 million facelift would make the park presentable to Olympic visitors.

The architectural plans emphasized security and surveillance, featuring benches designed to ~~to~~ discourage sleepers, and high-intensity street lamps were installed. . Most important, the plans called for removal of the landscaped berms running along Peachtree Street so that police would have an unobstructed view of the park from their patrol cars. In October 1994 the park was officially closed and enclosed by a chain-link fence; it did not reopen for a full year, enough time for homeless people to find someplace else to hang out.

CAP was directly responsible for the third part of the plan. Since 1987, it had deliberated the pros and cons of establishing a community improvement district (CID). Empowered to levy taxes on commercial property holders in a special tax district, CIDs were criticized for pillaging the city's tax base, advancing business over public interests, and importing the governance structures of suburban gated communities to the urban core. It took the Olympics to overcome CAP's aversion to paying taxes, even self-imposed ones. The Atlanta Downtown Improvement District (ADID), launched in 1996 with an annual budget of \$2 million, was a CAP replicant in everything but name; the two organizations went so far as to share the same president.

ADID's biggest budget item was its Ambassador Force of fifty uniformed safety personnel who coordinated with the Atlanta Police Department (APD) and the estimated 1,344 police and private security guards in the downtown area. While the Ambassadors were not authorized to carry weapons or make arrests, they were equipped with two-way radios putting them in direct contact with the APD. Each morning, Ambassadors assigned to the Wake Up/Stay Up Program walked their beats with an Atlanta police officer, looking for homeless people who were asleep in Woodruff Park or the entryways of downtown businesses. A firm "move along" or poke with the police baton was usually enough to get the sleeper on his feet—usually, but not always. To head the Ambassador Force, ADID hired Wayne Mock, a retired Atlanta police major who had earned the nickname "John Wayne" during his thirty-year career.

At each turn in this effort to roll out spatial cleansing, the Task Force pushed back. Calling the 1991 ordinances "a dry run for the Olympics," Anita told reporters: "This is the first shot to restrict people's movement Downtown, particularly the poor and homeless. We absolutely will fight it every step of the way." The Task Force's staff began documenting violations of the aggressive panhandling ordinance. They compiled and analyzed statistics on arrests of homeless people, identified and vetted potential plaintiffs, constructed and administered affidavits in which victims of police harassment told

their stories, and tracked and videotaped officers in the act of making illegal arrests. Homeless arrests invariably spiked during major sporting events, convention, and trade shows, ~~indicatt~~indication that APD was conducting coordinated street sweeps.

In its most dramatic action, the Task Force organized a demonstration at the Woodruff Park groundbreaking ceremony where Mayor Bill Campbell and other city dignitaries were scheduled to give speeches. What Campbell did not expect was to be surrounded by a crowd of homeless people and advocates who drowned out his words with shouts of "No justice, no peace," "More displacement of the poor," and "Stop the Olympic war on the poor."

By 1993 the Task Force had assembled a Legal Resource Team of a dozen lawyers and advocates to explore the possibility of litigation. Three years later, the Task Force convinced a Boston law firm to file suit in federal district court against the City of Atlanta and Police Chief Beverly Harvard for "the unconstitutional policy, practice and custom of harassing, intimidating, detaining and arresting homeless persons for engaging in harmless, inoffensive and lawful activities they, by reason of their homelessness, are forced to perform in public." On the very day of the Olympics opening ceremonies, the judge in the case issued a temporary restraining order against the enforcement of the quality-of-life ordinances, a satisfying victory for the Task Force and embarrassment for the mayor and police chief, both of whom had to endure the indignity of being deposed by the plaintiffs' attorneys.

## 1982-1990

- a. Open Door Community, Central Presbyterian
  - b. Beatys; nonprofit status
  - c. Functions: hotline, placement, service coordination, policy
2. 1990-1997
- a. Olympics
  - b. Street Sweeps; court case
  - c. HUD money
  - d. HAG, HAP
3. 1997-2007
- a. Peachtree-Pine
  - b. Battle with city: permits
  - c. Continuum of Care
  - d. Homeless Management System
4. 2007-2017
- a. Water
  - b. Lawsuits