

# Criminals...

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urinating and defecating on their property. JSO officers patrolling the area arrest the trespassers, who perhaps simply find a new location, but as more businesses get involved, vagrants will find that the sidewalks, alleys and park benches of Jacksonville are closed for overnight stays.

The HITZ program is also the avenue to rehabilitation, via the Habitual Misdemeanor Statute (FL Statute § 775.0837 (2005)). Violators are those who have four or more specified misdemeanor offenses, including charges for assault, prostitution, trespassing, drunkenness, loitering, drug abuse and indecent exposure, resulting in a minimum of six months in prison or in a residential treatment program.

Faced with these alternatives, the violators often choose treatment.

**For downtown and Springfield residents /businesses, "No Trespassing" signs for enrollment in the HITZ program are available at The UPS Store, 221 Hogan Street.**

But is this one avenue of attacking vagrancy enough? Are punitive measures the answer? JSO, the downtown businesses and residents, and the homeless service organizations are united in their concern about the situation, but it appears the unity ends there. Law enforcement officials focus on protecting citizens from harassment and fear, while the homeless service providers,

whose mission is to provide hope and help, open their doors to anyone in need.

Despite conflicting priorities of law enforcement and homeless service providers, everyone agrees that Jacksonville needs to do something more. Some believe the next step is to focus on stopping panhandling and trespassing, possibly accomplished by increasing the number of officers on patrol in the downtown area and strictly enforcing city ordinances. Others believe the solution has to be more far-reaching. To eliminate panhandling and other problems, there needs to be accountability to stop drug addicts and alcoholics from abusing the system.

private company.

Additionally, proponents of this idea point to the crime in homeless shelters. The actual crime rate in shelters is unknown because crimes there are often unreported. Identification is a way to protect the staff and to ensure a safe haven for the 37 percent of homeless families with minor children.<sup>3</sup>

Street people who have criminal records are forcing out the truly needy. By identifying the addicts, service providers could offer food only if an addict agrees to enter a rehab program. If he/she refuses to enter a program, the addict will end up on the street, and likely will be arrested for trespassing. Eventually, they will qualify as a habitual misdemeanor offender and will then choose between prison and a treatment program. This is one way to close the loopholes so that no one falls through the cracks.

Although the homeless service providers are open to

Pioneers4Jax is an association of downtown residents and small business owners who are willing to get involved and assist in creating awareness of issues in their community. They would like to see the rest of Jacksonville do more than make a quick trip across the bridge to visit downtown for an hour or so. There is much talk about how the downtown area needs to be revived, but that rebirth is dependent on eliminating vagrants from the streets. PIONEERS-4-JAX Home Page.

Downtown Vision, Inc., "a non-profit organization [since 2000] whose mission is to build and maintain a healthy and vibrant Downtown community and to promote Downtown as an exciting place to live, work, play, and visit," offers a guide to all the places that provide shelters, meals, healthcare, jobs and other help on the street. Their motto is: We don't give a handout, we give a helping hand. <http://downtownvision.org/>

several JSO officers patrol their area 24/7 – on foot, bicycle or horseback. Of course, so would many other businesses and residents throughout Jacksonville; obviously, there is a marked decrease in crime when officers are present.

The number of vagrants is a source of shame for downtown Jacksonville, for the business owners and for the residents. It's a disgrace that almost three thousand people live on the streets in this incredible city, many who are legitimately homeless and ashamed of the circumstances in which they exist. Eliminating criminals from the street population would go a long way toward alleviating the high statistics of homelessness while enabling service organizations to reach those who really need their help.

*Melanie Schneider, a student at Florida Coastal School of Law, is volunteering at the Justice Coalition this summer.*

*For information on homelessness and how other cities in the United States are handling the homeless problem, see the National Coalition for the Homeless at [www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org)*

## Homeless service providers may have the highest percentage of criminals using their services than any other business in town.

For example, drug abusers take advantage of homeless services to obtain free meals, then they use the money obtained from panhandling to buy drugs and alcohol instead of food. After getting a fix to feed the addiction, the addict illegally sleeps on someone else's property and may be arrested for loitering, public intoxication or other reasons. Concerned about the self-destructive lifestyle and the safety of the community, those advocating that vagrants be held accountable believe the revolving door has to stop revolving.

### Require identification

One solution would identify addicts in order to get them into a program. Allowing anonymity is simply a form of enabling the addiction; therefore, in order to obtain services, even food, vagrants should have to show identification. If they do not have a valid ID or driver's license, they would be fingerprinted. A step further would then be to obtain a background check, which would occur through JSO or a

ideas, their priority is to provide food, shelter, and hope. The risk is that those who need help will not seek it because they have criminal charges for prostitution or owe child support, for example. Service providers do not want to scare them away, regardless of criminal records or self-destructive habits.

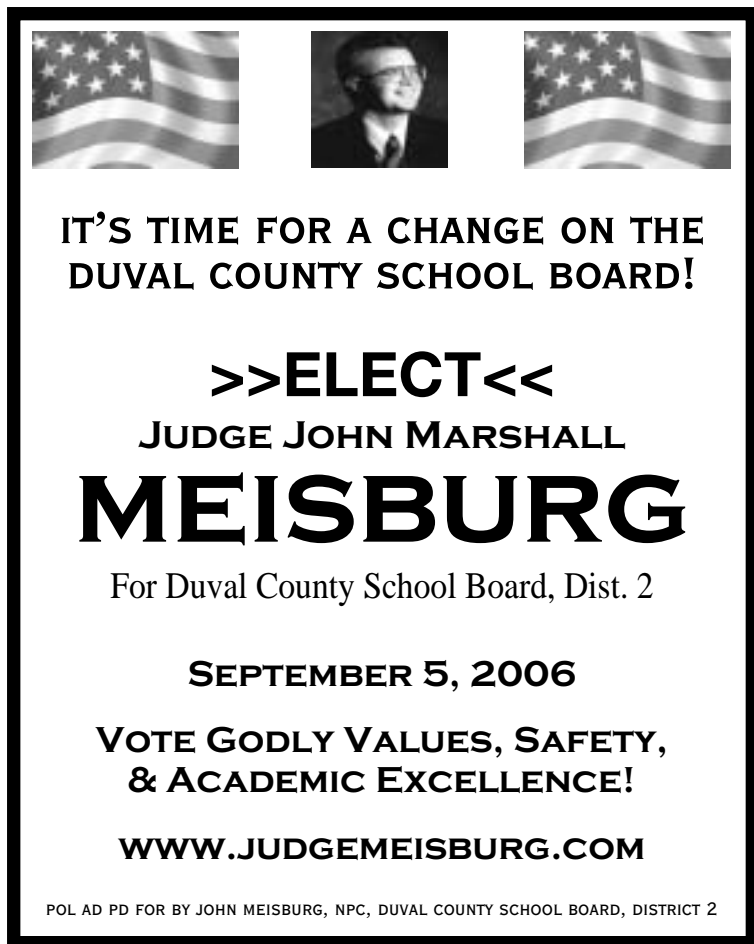
Proponents of an identification process argue that most businesses require identification of their customers (try cashing a check or using a VISA card), and these homeless service providers are businesses. Furthermore, they may have the highest percentage of criminals using their services than any other business in town. However, these businesses are non-profit organizations; they are in business to give. Similar to law enforcement, they are on the battlefield every day.

For Jacksonville, the issue is to determine what the next step should be and then proactively attack it with the full force of a united front – the homeless service providers, law enforcement and downtown property owners, including businesses and residents. Pioneers4Jax would like to see

<sup>1</sup> Annual Report on Homeless Conditions in Florida, published by the Department of Children and Families, Office on Homelessness (June, 2006). (Editor's note: Because homeless service providers do not validate identification, recipients of services may be counted more than once.)

<sup>2</sup> Id. Drug and alcohol addiction is the leading disabling condition of the homeless, followed by mental health, physical disability, HIV or AIDS, and developmental disability.

<sup>3</sup> Id. 37% of the overall homeless population included minor children.



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