



case 8-475-299

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The Empowerment Plan (A): Providing Employment to Homeless Populations in Detroit

This case is part of a series of four integrated cases about The Empowerment Plan (TEP), a Detroit-based nonprofit working to break the cycle of homelessness through training, employment, and job placement. Founded in 2012 by Veronika Scott, TEP recruited employees through homeless shelters and provided them with training, education, and full-time employment manufacturing sleeping bag coats. The specially designed coats were distributed free of charge to the homeless population.

Scott developed the idea for TEP during a design class assignment at the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. The class challenged students to design a product to solve a social problem or need affecting the people of Detroit. Having personally grown up in an environment of housing instability due to family challenges with drug addiction, Scott chose to examine the needs of the homeless in Detroit.

Adopting the principles of design thinking, Scott interviewed homeless people in Detroit to understand their needs and pain points and decided to focus on the problem of keeping them warm during the cold Detroit winters. She built a prototype of a winter coat that could also be used as a sleeping bag. She took her prototype to homeless shelters and received feedback that the first version of the coat looked too much like a “body bag.” After making some adjustments to make the coat lighter and more portable, including the ability to fold the coat and wear it across the shoulders, Scott began distributing them.

While Scott was distributing the coats, a homeless woman approached her and said, “We don’t need coats. We need jobs.” According to the National Coalition for the Homeless:

“...climbing out of homelessness is virtually impossible for those without a job. For those with limited skills or experience, opportunities for jobs that pay a living wage are very limited. Additionally, many members of the homeless population have to combat barriers such as limited transportation and reduced access to educational and training programs. In such a competitive environment, the difficulties of job seeking as a homeless person can be almost insurmountable barriers to employment.”¹

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