

MINNEAPOLIS

# Minneapolis sex trafficking detective moves into new role as homeless liaison

Sgt. Grant Snyder says his work against sex trafficking sets him up well for role.

By Libor Jany (<https://www.startribune.com/libor-jany/6134700/>) Star Tribune |

APRIL 23, 2018 — 10:10PM

The new job comes with the same worn desk at police headquarters and the same long hours working with the city's most downtrodden or forgotten residents.

Only now, instead of fighting human trafficking, Sgt. Grant Snyder is turning his sights to what authorities say has been an equally vexing and growing problem in Minneapolis. More and more, police have been asked to deal with pressing social problems like homelessness that don't necessarily warrant a law enforcement response, according to the veteran detective.

"I'm going further upstream," said Snyder, [long the face of the department's fight against the sexual exploitation of women and children](http://www.startribune.com/saving-bobbi-a-teen-s-sex-trafficking-ordeal/230536631/) (<http://www.startribune.com/saving-bobbi-a-teen-s-sex-trafficking-ordeal/230536631/>). "How do we sort of play a role where we're solving a problem, as opposed to limiting the access to resources that they need?"

Those living without shelter, many of whom have mental illness, tend to encounter officers during volatile situations that sometimes end with them being taken to jail, he said. But because police must still enforce the law, Snyder went to then-deputy chief Medaria Arradondo last year with the idea of creating the position as a way to bridge the gap between police and those who are homeless. Arradondo agreed. Now, Snyder will seek ways to encourage alternatives to arrest and prosecution.

Arradondo, now the chief, told a group of business and civic executives last month that law enforcement needed to rethink its approach with the thousands living on the streets or in shelters.

"If it continues to be just a police solution, it doesn't work," he said.

In his new role, which began this month, Snyder will work closely with established social agencies like St. Stephen's Human Services in Minneapolis, whose outreach team has for years been fanning out across the city to connect the chronically homeless with services such as counseling for mental health and substance abuse.

A more collaborative approach is needed to address the complex, intertwined causes of homelessness, Snyder said.

"It's not as simple as saying we're going to clean up this corner or we're going to improve accessibility to various shelters," he said.

For the time being, he'll work out of police headquarters downtown. But, Snyder plans to office at one of the agencies in the near future, so that he can be closer to outreach workers.

## A natural extension

Snyder, 55, says he sees the role as a natural extension of his most recent assignment: heading up the department's efforts against human trafficking, for which he gained national recognition. He expects to return to some of the same side streets and back alleys he frequented in his old job, noting the well-documented link between homelessness and the sex trade.



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Sgt. Grant Snyder, the Minneapolis Police Department's nationally recognized human trafficking expert, is taking on a new role as the

He is viewed as an expert in the field, running the department's anti-trafficking efforts [leading up to Super Bowl LII \(http://www.startribune.com/94-arrested-in-super-bowl-sex-trafficking-sting/474604593/\)](http://www.startribune.com/94-arrested-in-super-bowl-sex-trafficking-sting/474604593/) and speaking regularly at law enforcement conferences about the need for a holistic approach to the problem. His most recent assignment was serving on the state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension's human trafficking task force, after stints in the department's juvenile trafficking and child abuse units. The deeply spiritual father of five said he recognizes that some traffickers are themselves victims of abuse — and that he occasionally mentors some of the very men he arrested.

Supporters see the new position as a step forward, particularly at a time when the city's homeless problem is being aggravated by a shortage of affordable housing.

Gail Dorfman, executive director of St. Stephen's, said the city and Hennepin County, where nearly 4,000 people are estimated to be homeless on a given day, are moving away from criminalizing homelessness.

"I think it's quite unique and it's raising it to the next level," Dorfman said of Snyder's position. But, she added: "Frankly, I don't think that any of us know yet exactly how this is going to work."

Tension between the police and the homeless has long been present in Minneapolis.

[A 2015 ACLU study \(http://www.startribune.com/aclu-releases-detailed-report-on-arrests-made-by-minneapolis-police/305330421/\)](http://www.startribune.com/aclu-releases-detailed-report-on-arrests-made-by-minneapolis-police/305330421/) showed that people experiencing homelessness were disproportionately arrested by Minneapolis police for low-level crimes. Many of those offenses were "inextricably related to not having a home," the report said, such as drinking in public, panhandling and public urination.

"The challenge then is that oftentimes, the interaction [between law enforcement and the homeless] is based on enforcing the law," said Monica Nilsson, a local advocate and onetime chair of the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless.

She said she hopes the move represents a change in the Police Department's approach.

"Before Rondo became chief, we had gatherings where people experiencing homelessness met with police officers, from beat cops to sergeants and lieutenants to the chief, and that's always helpful," said Nilsson, referring to Arradondo by his nickname. "I'm hopeful that [Snyder] can help facilitate more of that."

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