

Keeping documents safe for the homeless

Austin Resource Center for the Homeless offers secure place to store important papers.

By Andrea Ball
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Bernard Williams' backpack has been stolen twice.

Social Security card, birth certificate, identification card: Everything the homeless man needed to cash a check or get a job was gone. And it took weeks to replace them.

"It happens all the time," said Williams, 49.

Now the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless has a solution: the Document Bank.

It's an 850-pound filing cabinet, 5 feet tall by 4 feet wide, devoted to protecting the sensitive documents of Austin's homeless. Driver's licenses, passports, birth certificates, court orders, marriage licenses, voter registration cards: The Document Bank will house them all for free in a locked office on a locked floor of the center, at East Seventh and Neches streets.

"It feels like Fort Knox when you're opening it," said Lindsey Berry, program coordinator for Front Steps, which runs the resource center.

Homeless people routinely deal with theft on the streets or in shelters, Berry said. Social workers often help the same clients apply for the same documents again and again.

The homeless community has been skeptical of the Document Bank, Berry said. But Williams was happy to hand over his documents.

"I think it's good," he said, adding jokingly: "What are they going to do with it?"

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