Homelessness is a social problem affecting nearly three million Americans each year (Caton, Domiguez, Schanzer, Hasin, & Shroot, 2005; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007; Schindler & Coley, 2007). Recent studies have shown that the root cause of homelessness goes beyond unemployment and unaffordable costs of living: factors such as poor physical health and psychological well-being are significant contributors to becoming and remaining homeless (Bates & Toro, 1999; Caton et al., 2005; Tsemberis, McHugo, Williams, Hanrahan, & Stefancic, 2007; Shankar-Brown, 2008). Further, homelessness has led to the social exclusion of many citizens. Researchers have urged the need for diverse and innovative initiatives to help ease the problem (Caton et al., 2005; Shankar-Brown, 2008), with sport identified as an appropriate initiative to address the issues of social exclusion and anti-social behavior (Coaffee, 2008). As such, “sport for development” has become a recognizable term in the sport management literature. A recent SportDiscus abstracts search revealed 101 hits on this phrase. Hylton and Totten (2008) define sport for development as initiatives in sport and recreation organizations that address inequalities in society’s approach to mainstream sport. Sport for development programs respond to the attractiveness of sport to individuals. Participation in sport activities can be seen as an intricate collection of social practices, involving the development of relationships with a range of individuals and with a view to achieving an array of different outcomes (Green, 2008). Sport participation can therefore be viewed as reflective of the kinds of necessary activities that an individual must undertake in the course of societal participation, making it an ideal form of social intervention (Hartmann, 2003).

Across the globe, there are roughly one thousand sport for development initiatives (N=1035) working to facilitate personal and societal change at the local, national and international levels (Lyras & Wolff, 2009; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2010). The number of initiatives led Crabbe (2007) to observe that “belief in the wider benefits of sport has rarely been so strongly advocated” (p. 27). These initiatives range from using sport to facilitate dialogue between peoples historically in conflict in order to build bridges and foster understanding (Lyras, 2007; Sugden, 2008), to using sport as a means to help homeless individuals build self-confidence and make positive life changes (Welty Peachey, Borland, & Lyras, 2010). Scholars have suggested that sport for development programs promote positive social change by fostering collective social responsibility, enhancing self-concept and self-efficacy, and by building organic solidarity through cooperation, cohesiveness, respect and awareness of others (Henricks, 2006; Kauffman & Wolff, 2010).

Over the past decade, as the world population grows and global social issues become more localized due to enhanced technology that provides instantaneous communication, researchers and practitioners have suggested that social change can be promoted by challenging dominant ways of thinking (Frisby, 2004; Zeigler, 2007). Further, we are challenged to redesign sport programs to achieve health outcomes, positive socialization of children, and support for community development (Chalip, 2005). At present, however, there is little empirical evidence providing support for the impact of sport for development programs, or research on the organizational structures and systems that enhance their efficacy (Coulter, 2007; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2010).

Given this conceptual and empirical gap, the purpose of this proposed symposium is four-fold. First, we will present an overview of the challenges sport for homeless initiatives face by utilizing a case study analysis of Street Soccer USA (SSUSA). SSUSA is a non-profit, homeless advocacy organization situated under the umbrella of HELP USA, one of the nation’s largest providers of homes, jobs and services to homeless Americans. SSUSA’s mission is to use soccer as a means for social change. The SSUSA Cup, held in Washington, D.C. each summer, is the marquee event of SSUSA. It brings together teams of homeless participants from 20 cities to compete in a four-day tournament. At the culmination of the tournament, the national men’s and women’s teams are chosen to represent the U.S. at the Homeless World Cup, held this year in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Second, we will provide an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation, termed the Sport for Development (SFD) Theory (Lyras, 2007, 2009; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2010), which sport researchers and practitioners can use to assess the effectiveness of sport for development programs, and which can serve as an organizational and programmatic framework. Third, we will present a
three-phase methodology that researchers can utilize to assess sport for homeless initiatives. Finally, we will provide findings and recommendations from the impacts assessment of the 2010 SSUSA Cup, which was conducted with players and volunteer coaches and administrators. In addition to the research team, taking part in the symposium will be the executive director of SSUSA, as well as homeless individuals who participated in both the SSUSA Cup and the Homeless World Cup. The symposium will engage attendees in dialogue and conversation on sport management’s role in sport for development, theoretical and methodological issues, academic/practitioner partnerships, ideas for student involvement, and future directions for research and practice.

SFD Theory (Lyras, 2007, 2009; Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2010) will provide the theoretical foundation for this symposium and the research we present. This theory holds that sport initiatives working for social change should employ a framework consisting of five components (i.e., organizational, sport and physical activity, educational, cultural enrichment, and impacts assessment). Lyras and colleagues designed and implemented a number of action research initiatives with positive social change indicators. Through their fieldwork with the Doves Olympic Movement Project, they identified organizational and educational components that facilitated positive social change. Evidence from the field was provided by utilizing mixed methods data collection and analysis, consisting of pre- and post-intervention assessments, focus groups and in-depth interviews. Findings from the action research initiatives were used to build the SFD Theory and were published in a number of national and international sport and peace conference proceedings (Lyras, 2003, 2005, 2007; Lyras, Yiannakis, & Kartakoullis, 2005, 2006; Lyras & Kotziamani, 2008; Lyras, Votsis, Kotziamani, & Charalambidou, 2009; Lyras, Welty Peachey, Hum, & Wolff, 2008).

After discussing this undergirding theoretical framework, we will review a three-phase methodology for assessing the impact of SSUSA on effecting positive life changes among the homeless. This large, longitudinal study is currently in process, and involves a collaboration between researchers at three universities and SSUSA. Phase I is a content analysis of existing data and documents collected and published by SSUSA over the last five years. Preliminary results from this ongoing analysis of over 100 documents (annual reports, web sites, media reports) indicates that SSUSA helps participants make positive changes in physical and mental health, self-esteem, self-confidence, social networks, and in job placement and sustainable housing. Through a NASSM Research Grant of $2,000 awarded at last year’s annual conference, we launched Phase II to assess the impact of the 2010 SSUSA Cup on players, coaches and administrators, and to uncover the organizational systems, structures and processes utilized by the event.

The SSUSA Cup study used qualitative research design procedures. Participants, who consisted of administrators, coaches and players of SSUSA, were asked to consent to a pair of focus groups, one taking place the day before the SSUSA Cup, and the second following the event to assess possible changes in participants. The focus group discussions lasted 45-60 minutes and were audio recorded, with the interview guides based upon the tenets of SFD Theory. Participants were comprised of a purposeful sample of 12 players and six coaches and administrators. The 12 players were split into two focus groups; the six coaches and administrators made up a separate focus group. Players from six different cities were represented as a means to gather data from a wide range of experiences. Furthermore, coaches and administrators came from four different cities. We interviewed administrators, coaches and players to ensure dependability of the data. The data analysis process consisted of open, axial and selective coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Two researchers, independently, went by line through the transcripts, field notes and memos to identify emerging thoughts and concepts. The researchers noted similarities and differences in the experiences of the participants, selecting quotations from the transcripts that best represented their experiences.

We noted six significant impacts of the SSUSA Cup on players: (a) facilitating goal achievement; (b) building community and enhancing social networks; (c) creating hope and a positive outlook; (d) developing outward focus (trusting and helping others); (e) fostering health-related success; and (f) enhancing personal development (self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-confidence and leadership). For coaches and administrators, four impacts emerged: (a) breaking down stereotypes about the homeless; (b) encouraging active involvement with the homeless; (c) providing a “toolkit” to take back to their own communities; and (d) enhancing their motivation to use sport as a development tool. From an organizational and programmatic standpoint, the Cup provided several cultural enrichment and educational opportunities which facilitated its impact, as well as built strong volunteer-player relationships through active involvement of the coaches with the players. However, a conflict between the stated mission of SSUSA and the competition format of the Cup lessened the potential impact on players. Finally, in Phase III of the broader project, a quantitative impacts assessment instrument will be developed from the data gathered through Phases I and II, to be administered prior to and post-soccer season to all players in the 20 cities to assess changes on various indicators.

The results of this research will provide a blueprint of components on which sport for development researchers and practitioners can promote evidence-based program design and implementation. Understanding predictors and identifying risk factors associated with homelessness can help service providers, sport practitioners and researchers focus efforts on appropriate interventions and prevention (Bates & Toro, 1999; Caton et al., 2005).