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HOMELESS, NOT HOPELESS

Ten steps toward a solution

BY ROBERT V. TOBIN

It's dark, and there's a chill wind blowing—you pull your overcoat even more tightly around your neck. You hurry down Market Street, trying to ignore the forlorn figures of men and women huddled in doorways, on benches—or worse, prone on the sidewalk. Suddenly, from under the eaves of one of the anonymous storefronts, a ragged old woman (or does she just look old?) limps out and asks you for "a little change." You normally don't respond to such pleas, but it's so cold out, and the woman seems so destitute... As you fumble in your pocket for money, you see in your mind's eye not only this one person standing before you, but scores—hundreds—of homeless stepping forward to beg, and you feel absolutely impotent: your quarters and dimes here will ultimately make no difference, the situation is hopeless. What can you possibly do?

Recognize the Tip of the Iceberg Effect

For every drunk with a bottle or bag lady losing a one way argument, there are two or three homeless people you won't even notice, trying to make their life better and keep their appearance from getting worse. Focusing only on its most visible aspect misrepresents both the nature and scope of the problem, and misdirects efforts toward its resolution.

Reject Simplistic Analyses of Complex Problems

If the Bay Area's warm weather and humanistic programs are creating a "magnet effect" for the entire country's homeless population, how come there are still 500 homeless in Anchorage, Alaska? If they all came from state mental hospitals which closed in the early sixties, where have they been hiding for nearly thirty years? If the nationwide "economic recovery" is so strong, how come so many of its new jobs pay a minimum wage that has lost 30 percent of its buying power since the last adjustment in 1981?

Understand that Shelter Is Not Housing

Emergency shelter responds to the most pressing consequence of homelessness, but none of its causes. For many, it is the first step from the streets to self-sufficiency, but it can create an out of sight/out of mind situation that eliminates evidence of the problem and thereby reduces demand for solutions. Availability of permanent low cost housing pervades all aspects of this issue, and access to transitional residential programs and support services is a necessary step for those with special needs.

Support a Long-Term Approach as the Shortest Term Solution

It has become almost a cliché that people who get put in jail or other institutions usually end up back on the same corner doing whatever they had been incarcerated for. While there is a need for such facilities, they are often the most expensive and least effective means of correcting the problems they address. In an era of limited resources, there is inadequate support available for prevention/early intervention programs that have demonstrated their ability to help people maintain independent lives. The absence of such

programs virtually guarantees increased demand for more costly crisis oriented approaches. The money will be spent either way—why not the way that works?

Demand a Mechanism for Coordinated Response

Homelessness is a problem which pervades jurisdictions of health, housing, employment, and social services, yet no entity has county wide authority to demand accountability from these local agencies, let alone their state and federal counterparts. Taxpayer dollars are being spent, and the taxpayers' quality of life is affected. There must be a vehicle for providing the most efficient utilization of resources targeted toward this issue.

Encourage Diversified Sources of Support

The public sector is responsible for the support of core areas of response to the homeless problem, but no one effort can succeed on its own. There must be support from other sectors which supplement these primary efforts by gathering small amounts from many sources. Providing a small check off on property tax payments or hotel bills which directs an additional dollar toward a specified service area; having civic and professional groups adopt a program that addresses aspects of the problem not supported by tax dollars; or giving an agency the benefit of bulk rate purchase by allowing them to buy office supplies through large corporations' regular purchase orders.

Help Annualize the Holiday Spirit

People can die on Bay Area streets at night in a summer fog as easily as a winter chill. We can't support response to a year-round problem in a month long holiday season, or expect long term results from short term interest in an issue. There are things that could be done any day of the year to help provide opportunity for those who have nothing.

Initiate Regular Food and Clothing Drives

Members of large companies and small church groups have found that personal involvement in the concerns of their community can be achieved in simple yet rewarding ways. Alternating collections of canned foods and clothing on a regular basis help make people feel a part of the solution in a way that also enables them to better understand the problem and its impact. Such involvements also reduce a program's operating costs.

Extend Job Opportunities to the Homeless

The biggest disease among the homeless population is unemployment. While they should be considered for job vacancies based on their abilities and not their circumstances, there are particular obstacles which make even the application process difficult for those without a phone or address. Some shelter programs have employment components to provide screening and referral for qualified prospects, but they can only send applicants to vacancies they know about. Give them a call if you are looking for someone motivated to earn a paycheck.

Realize that Homelessness Is Just a Pay-check Away

With credit cards to the limit, extended family now the exception instead of the rule, and "career jobs" a thing of the past, how many of us have the capability to withstand even brief lapses in steady income? With hardly 25 percent of those without jobs receiving unemployment, just how well can one be expected to cope with the stress, stigma, scariness and fear associated with the loss of our primary means of security, stability and support? It's easy to tell them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but how does one do that when one has no boots?

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