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We can solve our homeless problem

By Joel John Roberts

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Over 20 years ago, I had recently graduated from Long Beach's educational system - Newcomb, Marshall, Millikan and CSULB - and was anxious to help solve the small, but growing problem of homelessness in Long Beach and throughout the county. If you fast forward to the present, this "small" problem has grown into an enormous societal embarrassment, with nearly 73,000 people homeless in the county, and almost 4,000 people homeless in Long Beach. A visual example of this is Lincoln Park, home of Long Beach's City Hall and, sadly, the address for dozens of chronically homeless people.

You would think that after two decades, our society would have figured out how to help the thousands of people languishing on our streets. But instead of a concerted effort to resolve homelessness, the leaders and stakeholders in our region have resorted to political and legal battles.

There is the legal struggle between homeless advocates, like the ACLU, and law enforcement. Advocates think people who are homeless should not be criminalized and have the right to sleep on the streets, while law enforcement and their political and business backers think the streets should be safe and clean. So lawsuits tie up any actions to solve homelessness in courts for years.

There is the struggle between urban areas (like downtown L.A.) with suburban bedroom communities. When L.A. County wanted to develop regional homeless centers, suburban mayors were adamantly against it. So a comprehensive solution to resolve our regions homelessness was quietly shelved because of the fear of a homeless ripple effect.

The fear of having people who are poor or homeless living side-by-side with middle-class homeowners has resulted into a strong attitude of NIMBYism. So any effort to build homeless shelters or affordable housing turns into a local battle in planning commissions and city councils throughout our region.

Is there hope to a homeless problem that many feel has become just another addition to our community's urban, and now suburban, plight?

Years ago, Long Beach was referred to as "Iowa by the sea," because of a large influx of people migrating from the Midwest who settled here. These new families brought with them their strong work ethic, family values, compassion and neighborhood camaraderie.

In fact, many Long Beach neighborhoods still reflect these values.

Now, Long Beach is poised to be one of only two cities in the region to approve a citywide plan to resolve homelessness. (Pasadena is the other city.) Over 450 Long Beach stakeholders helped design this plan and will present it to the City Council in early 2008.

The stakes are high. But Long Beach, with its heritage of strong Midwestern neighborhood values, can be a model for the other 87 cities in the county in addressing homelessness. Why? Because Long Beach is a reflection of the county's rich diversity. It possesses sprawling valley-like middle-class suburban neighborhoods, a Santa Monica-like beach resort, pockets of urban poverty, a downtown in the midst of redevelopment, Venice-like canals, a big-city school district, and like every other community in the county, both urban and suburban, a nagging homeless problem.

A plan that contains a business approach that is accountable to numerical outcomes (i.e., the number of people who will be off the streets) with an emphasis on placing people into permanent housing is needed in Long Beach and throughout the county.

But any approach to resolving homelessness needs to adapt to a city's (or regions) locale and environment.

A "top down" approach forcing local neighborhoods to provide solutions that are cooked up in a philosophical laboratory is just not realistic or beneficial. Instead, social regionalism should prevail, where solutions to homelessness are birthed out of a local community's needs and attitudes.

As the next generation of Long Beach graduates finishes its educational journey and chooses to make its city a better place, I hope they won't look back 20 years later, only to see a community battling each other over political or philosophical attitudes, but rather see solutions that are dramatically ending homelessness.

Joel John Roberts, a resident of Long Beach, is the CEO of PATH Partners, a member of the Long Beach Human Relations Commission, and the author of "How to Increase Homelessness."

Los Angeles Times

10 Things We Can Do to Perpetuate Homelessness

By Joel John Roberts

Published July 19, 2003

To many people, the world today is upside down. Look at the problem of homelessness, for example. We are the richest and most powerful nation in the world, and yet there are still thousands and thousands of people who sleep on our streets each night.

It doesn't make sense; it is an upside-down reality. But maybe we need to look at homelessness with an upside-down perspective, with an absurd logic that just might illuminate the immensity of this crisis and move us into positive action.

Maybe the utterly absurd conclusion is this: We really want homelessness to exist in the United States.

Maybe homelessness is good for our economy, since doing nothing saves us money. (We avoid paying increased taxes to feed, house and provide the homeless with job training.)

Perhaps it boosts our self-image. (We need to feel positive about our own lives, so it's good to have people worse off than us.)

Homelessness helps our environment since the homeless are great recyclers. (Perhaps homelessness gives us a great reason to clean out the old clothes from our closets.)

It is a good object lesson for our children. (If they don't do their homework or find a job, we threaten that they'll end up like "them!") And what else would we do with our spare change?

Sure, this "logic" sounds ludicrous, but so is the existence of homelessness in affluent America. If there really is an absurdist conspiracy to keep people homeless on our streets, then here are the "Top 10 Ways to Increase Homelessness in Our Community":

10. Keep thinking that the homeless are just lazy and shouldn't be helped.

9. Assume foster kids magically become responsible, self-sufficient adults at age 18.

8. Provide public food programs, but ignore the real reasons people are hungry.

7. Make it hard for the homeless to access services by spreading out services all over the county.

6. Encourage NIMBYism.

5. Let law enforcement deal with it. Outlaw homelessness and throw the homeless in jail.

4. Sweep the homeless into other communities.

3. Eliminate the welfare system.

2. Keep minimum wages at a minimum.

And finally...the No. 1 way to increase homelessness in our community:

Reduce the housing stock and eliminate affordable housing.

Sadly, although this Top 10 list might seem outlandish, some in our community encourage such steps. The reality is, if we just do the opposite, we could end homelessness.

It just makes sense that if we take the right steps to end homelessness in our nation, our community and our country become stronger.

Action is needed to house homeless

Published May 23, 2007

BY JOEL JOHN ROBERTS, Guest Columnist

Watching how our regions leaders address homelessness in Los Angeles is like enduring a two-decade- long saga of “Law & Order.” The recent ruling by a federal judge that pronounced the Los Angeles Police Departments actions in downtown L.A.s Skid Row as unconstitutional is just the latest installment.

The back-and-forth lawsuits and police action over whether people who are homeless have the right to sleep on our streets - or whether police have the right to search a potential criminal - have been going on for years.

You know there is a major problem when society picks on lawyers and police officers as scapegoats for ending homelessness.

Clearly, it is admirable for the American Civil Liberties Union to fight to make sure that our democracy doesn't become a police state, however, not at the expense of allowing crime to be rampant or allowing people on our streets to continue to be homeless. Likewise, most people want the police to ensure safe and crimefree streets, but not at the expense of personal freedoms.

There is something lacking in this “law and order” approach to ending homelessness in Los Angeles. The glaring, quite obvious missing piece is what people who are homeless really need - a clean, safe and secure home.

So perhaps the ACLU should also focus its efforts on goading all 88 cities within Los Angeles County to provide enough shelter and permanent housing for people who are homeless. It could advocate for a “Right To Housing” law. The two major barriers in providing enough housing are always cited for the reason why we

have 90,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County - not enough funding, and not enough neighborhoods that will allow the placement of this new housing.

But studies have already shown that the cost of keeping a person on the streets far exceeds the price of building a permanent housing unit for that person. The costs of emergency medical assistance, law enforcement, mental-health care and shelter for homeless people run into the millions of dollars. This is money that could be used for permanent housing. If there were a legal ruling to mandate housing for people, there would be a cost-effective solution.

There is also only one way to build and place enough affordable housing in neighborhoods throughout the county. Every city needs to share the responsibility of building housing in its neighborhoods.

For those of us who have struggled with helping people who are homeless for decades, we are frustrated with this continuing cat-and-mouse saga of lawsuits between the police and civilliberties advocates, without serious action toward housing homeless people.

If we really want to “serve and protect” the homeless, then let's put them in housing. Its very clear. A person who is homeless should have the right to housing, not a right to be homeless.

Joel John Roberts is chief executive officer of People Assisting The Homeless. He is also the publisher of L.A.s Homeless Blog (www.lahomelessblog.org).

Los Angeles Times

Dismantling L.A.'s 'Walled City'

Hong Kong tore down its squalid Walled City in the 1990s and built affordable housing for squatters. Los Angeles must do the same.

By Joel John Roberts

Published September 27, 2006

Years ago I ventured into the Walled City, an infamous block of metropolitan high-rise decay in Kowloon, in the heart of Hong Kong. I felt like Alice falling into an urban rabbit hole.

A majority of the 50,000 residents who live on a mere 6.5 acres rarely saw the sun. Some narrow streets led to nowhere. Surrounded by a modern metropolis, the decayed turf was owned by the Chinese government during the time Hong Kong was ruled by Britain. With no clear political control, it was a lawless land ruled by gangs and drug dealers.

Today, Los Angeles' skid row reminds me of the beginnings of the Walled City, once the most densely populated piece of land in the world. Ours is likely the most densely populated area of homelessness in the United States, with 10,000 homeless people within 50 square blocks. Community leaders are fighting about when and where laws can be enforced within skid row. Enforce laws during the day, but provide a legal reprieve at night? Law enforcement officials say their hands are tied, so more and more squatter tents are springing up.

A jurisdiction with little or no police presence attracts criminal behavior that brews lawlessness. Could skid row become our version of a lawless, homeless haven, a walled city within a metropolis? The foundational

elements have already been laid – confusing laws that tie the hands of law enforcement, growing squatter encampments, jurisdictional leaders fighting about what to do and surrounding municipalities that are happy that this area – not theirs – is bearing the brunt of the homeless problem.

But there is hope.

By 1994, Hong Kong's Walled City was no more. Community leaders realized that it had become an international embarrassment to an otherwise world-renowned tourist attraction. So they dismantled the enclave even as advocates fought to save it. The government spent nearly half a billion dollars to provide affordable housing for squatters.

With smart, sound solutions – such as providing L.A.'s squatters with a place to live – everything else falls into place. The police can instill law and order, businesses can attract customers, residents are able to feel safe and people who now languish on our streets have a place to call home.

Only when our community leaders can agree that the real solution to this societal plague called homelessness is providing decent and affordable housing for everyone will L.A.'s version of a walled city be no more.

Point of View

Ending Homelessness Profits Business

Joel John Roberts
Special to the Mirror

National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week is November 16-22, when businesses everywhere should intensify the focus on the crisis of homelessness.

Commerce plays an important role in contributing to our quality of life, so this is an especially good time — in this recent era of Enron, WorldCom and even Martha Stewart — for community and business leaders to accelerate their participation in ending the cycle of homelessness.

We need corporate America's partnership, its ability to develop strategies, its creative thinking, entrepreneurial spirit, capacity to hire employees and its willingness to invest in the community. With the unrestrained support of business, we are infinitely more likely to permanently move people without homes off the streets and into stable and secure lives. The statistics prove it.

Homeless people sleeping on our streets and loitering at our shops and stores are bad for business, and just as bad for the desperate people forced into these humiliating circumstances.

So here are four ways business can marshal their efforts during National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week:

Give - Increase your support for charity. In the past few years, corporate America has donated only .01 percent of its pre-tax profits to charity. If all of America's businesses increased their giving from .01 percent to .02 percent, a total of \$10 billion, we could end homelessness as we know it in our country. I challenge Big Business to become Bigger Givers in the world of philanthropy. The bottom line will benefit them short term and long.

Volunteer - Businesses should empower their employees to volunteer in the community and give them the time and encouragement to make it a reality. Secretary of State Colin Powell led the charge years ago in his effort to mobilize Americans to volunteer. It is now up to this generation of corporate America to pick up General Powell's baton and stay the course.

Join A Non-Profit Board. Boards are the backbone for non-profit agencies. We can't operate without them. Former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan made this a priority and started a leadership development program to encourage community membership on non-profit boards. The business community could actually become the foundation of a philanthropic imperative to end homelessness in this generation.

Donate In-kind Services and Products. Help an agency print a brochure, gather hygiene kits for people living on the streets, teach people a job skill, collect children's books for homeless kids — these are but a sample of the ways businesses can positively impact our community.

Just one week of mobilizing our efforts around these suggestions could make a profound difference. What if during National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, our Southern California business community collectively gave \$1 million to homeless agencies, \$1 million of in-kind donations, deployed 1,000 new volunteers and recruited 100 new non-profit board members. Think of the impact. It's staggering.

When it comes to charity, Apple Computer must Think Different, Ford must act with No Boundaries, Nike must Just Do It, and corporate

America must truly make a difference. Because when homelessness ends, the community benefits and business profits.

Joel John Roberts is the Executive Director of PATH (People Assisting The Homeless), a regional homeless agency with locations throughout Los Angeles County. He is also the Chairman of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority Advisory Board.

About P.A.T.H.

Founded in 1984, P.A.T.H. is a non-profit community organization whose mission is to break the cycle of homelessness by empowering homeless people with the tools for self-sufficiency. The agency works towards this goal by providing services that assist homeless people find work, save money, secure housing and empower their lives. Initially a food pantry and 21-bed residence, P.A.T.H. has evolved into a multi-facility organization that provides a comprehensive range of coordinated services for 17,000 homeless individuals throughout Southern California annually.

Housing facilities are located in Los Angeles at the Regional Homeless Center in Hollywood and at the West Los Angeles office (2346 Cotner Avenue). P.A.T.H. also operates five job centers in South Central Los Angeles, West Los Angeles, Hollywood, Santa Monica and the Antelope Valley.

Among its services are Transitional and Affordable Housing, Outreach and Referrals, Employment Assistance Education and Job Training, Health Services Supportive Social Services.

Its programs include: PATHMall: A model collaboration of 19 community and government

social services organizations, all housed in one shopping mall-like setting that provide a comprehensive range of services and resources to the homeless population; PATHFinders Job Centers: Provides job readiness and job search assistance with access to job listings, career counseling, fax, telephone and computer equipment. Employment centers located in West Los Angeles, Santa Monica, Hollywood, Antelope Valley and South-Central Los Angeles; PATHAcademy Job Training Centers: Job skills training program that provides four eight-week classes in one of four career areas followed by a four-week internship for on-the-job experience; PATHWays Housing: Transitional housing and supportive services for a total of 130 men, women, families and homeless with special needs at facilities in Hollywood, West Los Angeles and the mid-city area. Includes the Rhonda Fleming Family Center, P.A.T.H. Women's Center and P.A.T.H. Cares Center; PATHVillas: Affordable housing to formerly homeless families in Los Angeles and Inglewood; PATHHealth Clinic: Addresses immediate needs, preventative care and health promotions for the homeless community; Street Outreach: Case managers travel in vans and on foot to encourage homeless people on the streets and in encampments to utilize available services and resources. Outreach services in Beverly Hills, Hawthorne, Hollywood, Inglewood, Los Angeles and West Hollywood; PATHAlumni Club: Open to all P.A.T.H. graduates, the club provides once homeless individuals access to supportive services such as workshops, employment resources and special quarterly events; PATHAccess Center: The Center provides initial intake and assessment of new and current clients. It also serves as the main hub for P.A.T.H. internal and external referrals to programs and agencies.

For more information visit www.epath.org

Los Angeles Times

Going for Clean, Not Mean, Streets

Commentary

Joel John Roberts

Published May 4, 2002

Mayor James K. Hahn's new annual budget is basically a carbon copy of previous years and makes a dismally low investment in assisting the homeless.

I recently was a panelist on Gov. Gray Davis' first-ever Summit on Homelessness, where I was proud that California was taking a lead in ending homelessness - including backing up words with dollars through a proposed \$2.1 billion housing bond. I hoped Hahn would join this effort in ending homelessness by investing more city money in our community effort.

Homelessness affects those who live on the streets and those who simply walk by them. We all see them - men on the freeway ramps carrying tattered cardboard signs with scrawled messages; older women hunched over rickety shopping carts pushing their life's possessions; families living in parked cars. Shelter Partnership, a nonprofit research and advocacy agency, says there are 84,000 homeless people on Los Angeles County streets on any given night, and yet there are only about 13,000 shelter beds available.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff wants to build a drop-in center for mentally ill homeless people near downtown. And the county opens up a limited number of emergency shelter beds when the weather is cold or rainy. But this is only a small battle within a larger war.

San Francisco sterilizes its sidewalks, cleans off discarded items and tells the homeless to move on. The critics say that their streets are mean and violate a homeless person's civil rights.

Do homeless people have the right to sleep on our city's streets and sidewalks? When a person falls through the cracks of society,

don't they have the right to at least be able to sleep in a public park? Or, on the other hand, are businesses and residential neighborhoods justified in their claim that homeless people scare away customers and decrease property values? It's a tough call. New York City invested \$530 million and guarantees a shelter bed for every homeless person within the city limits. The city of Los Angeles' financial commitment to the homeless is barely a blip on the radar screen. Mayor Hahn's commitment to \$100 million for the Housing Trust Fund is a terrific first step in waging war on the terrible conditions on our streets. But we need more.

We are all tired. The homeless are tired of surviving day by day on the streets. And our community is tired of seeing this human blight day after day.

The city of Los Angeles needs to fight this war on two fronts. For the community's sake, we need to follow San Francisco's model of cleaning our sidewalks and streets so that the whole community can live in a safe, clean, and secure homeland. As a compassionate and responsible community, however, we can only do this if we follow New York's model of providing a bed for every homeless person.

There is a solution. Clean streets, but not mean streets. Clean our streets and also provide a shelter bed for every homeless person in the city. It's a balanced and fair approach that allows our whole city to live in a safe and secure world.

Los Angeles Times

The Homeless and the Numbers Game

Without new leadership, we all lose.

By Joel John Roberts
Published July 2, 2005

The headlines said it all: 90,000 homeless in Los Angeles County.

For most of us, we don't need a slide rule to figure out that homelessness has increased. Anyone who exits a freeway off-ramp, who travels through our downtown neighborhoods or even visits our world-famous beaches knows that there are too many people in our community without homes.

The counting of homelessness has always been hotly debated. Some want to exaggerate the number to encourage more funding for services; others want to diminish the number to deny that there really is a problem. For a decade we've argued over this number, as if it was some statistical problem rather than a human dilemma.

So now we have a number, an official count. But in this homeless numbers game, there are other numbers. There is the dollars game. It is big business. In fact, this homeless count was a result of the dollars game. The federal government mandated that all communities, including ours, count the number of homeless or else their much-needed federal funding would be cut. In Los Angeles County that means nearly \$50 million per year.

Private fundraising for homeless services is also a high-stakes game of risk. If you don't convince supporters that your charity is important, you risk closing your doors to people in need. I would estimate that private support of homeless services is many times greater than federal funding in our community.

Then there is the affordable-housing game. It's a sad

game of musical chairs in which there are too many players and not enough chairs. Round and round the people go, hoping for an empty home to buy or rent. But when the music stops, there are always people left out with no place to call home.

This all reminds me of the game of Monopoly. The urgency of gathering dollars, collecting property and staying out of jail. At the expense of other players, we hoard these resources in order to win. In the game, there's one winner and the losers are only the other players. In the real world, the homeless "" and ultimately, all of us "" lose.

So now we have this large number: 90,000 homeless people. What does it mean?

Well, we obviously have a huge problem. If we wanted to build simple apartments for each person, it would cost our community billions of dollars.

We also know that the existing system of care is not solving the problem. Whether because of lack of funding or lack of coordinated services, our efforts over the last two decades to help the homeless have not improved the situation.

Clearly, this number defines Los Angeles County as the homeless capital of America, and shows that we need galvanized new leadership to end homelessness on our streets. Our new mayor is tackling crucial community issues head-on "" education, crime and traffic. I would hope that he and his new team also provide the same visionary leadership in working toward ending homelessness.

Los Angeles Times

VOICES / A FORUM FOR COMMUNITY ISSUES

THE HOMELESS NEED SOLUTIONS

Compassion isn't missing, but programs are.

By Joel John Roberts

Joel John Roberts is executive director of People Assisting the Homeless, a regional nonprofit agency.

Published October 26 2002

The new—and some say punitive—homeless ordinances in Santa Monica almost certainly reflect what much of Southern California feels. But it is not so much “compassion fatigue” as a desire to see better solutions.

The Santa Monica City Council banned programs that served meals to the homeless living in public parks and outlawed sleeping in doorways of downtown businesses.

Clearly, the law is a response to aggressive panhandling at freeway offramps and in busy shopping districts. People are reacting to trash tossed about, sidewalks smelling of urine and having to step around homeless people on the ground. Businesses are worried about the loss of tourism and customers. The Los Angeles City Council has already instructed the city attorney to draft comparable ordinances.

There is no less compassion now than years ago. People are still willing to respond, and generously give, to the hurting and needy -- look at the outpouring after Sept. 11, 2001, for the families of victims and people who lost their jobs. However, people are tired of the lack of solutions to the growing blight of so many people living on the streets, subsisting on handouts. Food programs that are not linked to services to help get people off the streets and into drug or alcohol treatment, mental health assistance, housing and even jobs do not solve anything.

Good solutions mean investing significant resources, but the social payoff would be substantial. Here are four pragmatic proposals that, if implemented, would dramatically alter the landscape:

* Clean streets, not mean streets. Provide a shelter bed linked with support services for

every person on the streets. If we want to ban people from sleeping on sidewalks and streets, we first need to provide them with a safe and secure place to go. We are not criminalizing homelessness if we provide shelter linked with services. Feeding programs would not be needed if people were guaranteed a bed and meals.

* Integrate existing homeless services. Services scattered across the county force people to travel discouraging distances by bus and on foot to find help. Services such as health care, mental health and substance abuse assistance, job programs, education and even haircuts should be under one roof. This would help not just clients but the community by reducing street people's presence while increasing the likelihood that they would find a permanent way off the streets. My homeless organization takes this approach. We have 19 government and private service agencies housed in one mall location, just off the 101 Freeway near Vermont Avenue. We hope others will follow the same approach.

* Prevent homelessness through better discharge planning. Los Angeles County releases a stream of people onto the streets every day. Foster youth who turn 18 are forced to leave their homes, adults are released from jail, patients are discharged from mental health and substance abuse facilities with no place to go. They end up on the streets. These people need help finding permanent places to live.

* Build more affordable housing. The working poor and already homeless are all but locked out of the costly local apartment market. Proposition 46, a housing bond on the Nov. 5 ballot, would provide a big boost. So will the city of Los Angeles' new housing trust fund, which is about to issue a plan for spending the \$100 million that the city has promised.

By concentrating on effective ways to keep people off the streets to begin with, cities would not need ordinances that seem to criminalize homelessness.

Two Approaches to Ending Homelessness

March 17, 2003

Enforce Vagrancy Laws Stiffly

By Hans Hansson

As a commercial real estate broker responsible for leasing commercial properties in San Francisco, I have first-hand knowledge of the effect that the expanding homeless problem is having on the real estate market and the standard of living for residents.

With high vacancies come vacant buildings. Vacant buildings lead to homeless encampments that develop in front of doorways. This leads to security concerns that, in turn, drive business away from remaining retailers in these neighborhoods.

In turn, retailers go out of business, and more vacancy occurs on ground floors, which creates security concerns and results in a lack of services to support office tenants. In turn, they move out in search of better neighborhoods.

This cycle cannot be broken easily. Homelessness, as we all know, is a complex issue. It involves a number of people with a wide variety of problems that have led them into homelessness. There certainly is no cure for all of the factors that create homelessness.

Our homeless program and services over the past 25 years has expanded tenfold, yet the problem continues to grow.

I recently attended a retirement party for a social services director who was in charge of a program that dealt directly with homeless people every day. His statement to his employees was that each and every one of them worked hard every day to make a difference in helping solve the homelessness problem. He went on to say that in his 30 years of service, he could not name one person he was sure was no longer homeless because of their efforts.

This statement, in my mind, is the root of the problem. Throwing money at the homeless, creating large service infrastructures to service the community and having a "hands-off" policy to enforce vagrancy laws is simply not working.

The "Care Not Cash" program voted in by San Francisco in November is a start. However, without other fundamental changes the program will be dead on arrival.

First, we must enforce vagrancy laws to stop panhandling on the streets and encampments from forming in front of our businesses. Everybody breaking these laws should be given a choice: take services or risk jail.

If they choose jail, they must attend mandatory counseling, where service providers can help these people into programs. If they still choose not to attend them, they should be asked to leave the city.

This is harsh to some, but this is also nothing new. Cities throughout the United States have had similar programs in place for years. The common joke heard for years was that other U.S. cities were buying one-way bus tickets to San Francisco for their homeless.

Homeless advocates will call this harsh and inhumane. What is harsh and inhumane is to allow people to live on the street in their own filth while harming the fabric for the rest of us.



Hans Hansson is president of Starboard TCN Worldwide Real Estate Services and western regional vice president for TCN Worldwide Real Estate.

Help Through Better Planning

By Joel John Roberts

Yes, as Mr. Hansson suggests, empty storefronts and buildings attract the homeless to downtown streets, just as to other abandoned and neglected areas. The answer is not to blame the homeless for trying to find shelter where none exists, however, but for the real estate industry to marshal its considerable resources and insights to develop creative alternatives to the lack of appropriate housing for those in need.

We all know that the sad state of homelessness affects every sector of our society—especially those who fall through the cracks of life's mainstream and land on terribly harsh and dangerous streets.

This blight affects residential neighborhoods, local schools, parks, beaches and, yes, the business community, often resulting in aggressive panhandling, sidewalks reeking of urine, trash tossed about and people sprawled on bus benches and sidewalks, which gives a new meaning to the term "bedroom communities."

So what is the solution to this cycle of homelessness that outrages communities and ignores the pleas of homeless people?

On the one hand, advocates demand their rights to camp on the streets, live in cars, and eat at outdoor public feeding sites. The other is the leaf blower mentality where the community demands the right to sweep homeless people off the streets through anti-homeless ordinances.

Neither answer resolves the underlying problem. Giving people the right to sleep on unsafe streets is not just. And sweeping people off the streets simply moves the problem to another neighborhood.

In reality, homeless people need to move into safe shelters and, ultimately, into affordable housing.

Instead of arguing from the extremes, we need to propose common-sense solutions to a complex problem. Here are four proposals that, if implemented, would dramatically alter the crisis of homelessness:

Clean streets, not mean streets. Provide a safe bed linked to support services for everyone living on the streets. If there is a guaranteed option for a person to sleep in a shelter bed, then banning people from sleeping on the streets is not unjust. The result is a clean street but not a mean policy against homeless people. The need in Los Angeles is a good example of the problem's magnitude—there are 84,000 homeless people and only 14,000 beds.

Integrate existing homeless services. Scattered services force people to travel discouraging distances by bus or foot from one service to another in search of housing, health care, employment and education. Services should be under one roof, similar to what my agency, P.A.T.H., has done, where we have 19 government and private agencies housed in one mall location and serve 17,000 homeless people each year. Every community should house their services together to provide easy access.

Prevent homelessness through better discharge planning. Every day, counties release a stream of people onto the streets—foster youth turning 18, adults released from jail, patients discharged from mental health and substance abuse facilities with no place to go. We need to provide permanent places for these people before they are released onto the streets.

Build more affordable housing. The homeless and working poor literally are locked out of the costly apartment market. We need to build more housing that is affordable to all. The real estate industry can be a force for positive change in this perplexing equation.



Joel John Roberts is Executive Director of P.A.T.H.—People Assisting The Homeless—a regional homeless agency based in Los Angeles. Roberts also is the Chairman of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.