

Two Approaches to Ending Homelessness

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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.



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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...**

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.



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