

A Fresh Approach

Serving our homeless

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Preface

At preliminary stages of completion, I shared this writing with several people at different levels of authority in dealing with the homeless. Their normal reaction was to explain why changes can't be made, or to say about one idea or another, "That's the county's responsibility, not the city's." It then occurred to me that if this writing is to be effective, it will have to reach people who don't yet "know" that common-sense changes are "impossible."

When I refer to "city" in this writing, often, I am using the word as a population, a society as a whole in a particular area, and not necessarily just the government that is hired to serve this population.

Homelessness is not going away. Trying to control an afflicted population, without addressing the afflictions will not solve anything in the long run. I'm not casting blame; I'm not trying to explain how homelessness became the problem that it is. (If you want to learn more about that, start with Chris Arnade's book *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*.) I'm asking your help in looking at it from a fresh perspective and coming up with new strategies to relieve and solve homelessness.

Getting started

For the past four winters, I've had the privilege of serving the people who sleep on the streets of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a historic small town (pop. 60,000) in southeast Pennsylvania about 75 miles west of Philadelphia. I go out a few times a week at 9:30 p.m., after everyone who is heading to the shelter to sleep has left for the night.

I started without any intention of changing anything or anyone, but only to provide the essentials to keep my brothers and sisters strong enough to walk whatever path that they've been given. I had no intention of a long term commitment, but apparently this has been the path that I've been given.

During these years, I've looked at the plight of the homeless from every angle. I'll tell you up front, I don't have all the answers. I believe we're doing a lot of things wrong. That doesn't necessarily mean I know what's right. But I do think there are a lot of questions we need to be asking.

This booklet is a working thought process for anyone touching the homeless situation in any way, shape or form. Whether, you are on a board, doing hands-on outreach work, case work, volunteering with community services, or anything in between, this is for you.

First of all, thank you for putting your time, skills and compassion into the very uphill battle of solving or relieving homelessness!

Second, by reading this and immersing yourself in the scenarios, observations and questions, I hope you will glimpse the reality of living on the streets and dealing with the issues presented. With this perspective, hopefully we can better serve our fellow human beings with more compassion, honesty, urgency and effectiveness.

With homelessness, dealing with numbers and statistics is important, but it's essential to remember that every one of those numbers is a human being. Each one is someone's father, mother, brother, sister, son or daughter. Someday, you or I could be one of them. No one ever aspires to live on the streets. We are all potentially just one misfortune away from joining them. This is not to make you depressed or scared, or fill you with pity, but to help you understand that they are us.

Becoming homeless

There are almost as many reasons for homelessness as there are homeless individuals. Here are just a couple:

- *You are injured, sick or mentally ill and cannot work. Your disability claim is pending but you've had no income for months.*
- *Your drug-addicted child or partner cleaned out all of your savings and maxed out your credit cards before going to jail, leaving you with nothing but debt.*

Both of these scenarios are common and can be devastating and mentally paralyzing. Your thoughts can go quickly from “This can’t be happening to me” to “This really just happened to me?!”

To help you understand how complex the challenges are for someone newly homeless, I’d like you to think about the following scenarios. Try to think through them and react exactly as if you were being confronted with them in real life.

Scenario 1

You just found out that you are indefinitely homeless. You have no car, no credit cards, and just \$50 in your pocket. You have no children and no partner and are on your own. You are being allowed to enter your property one last time to take what you want. What do you take?

As you visualize all of the possessions that you’ve acquired throughout your life, remember that you’ll have to carry and protect whatever you take, while living on the streets. (Hint – 1. Your family photo album is too big and bulky. 2. It gets cold and wet out there.)

Write down what you think you’d take:

Scenario 2

You've been on the streets for a while now. You know where to get meals, where to set up camp, and so on. Congratulations!

More good news: You've just been approved for disability benefits. (Your qualifying condition could be mental or physical. It's probably the reason you are on the street in the first place.) That means you'll be receiving a monthly check for \$700. The only available housing close to your price range is a rooming house. It offers an 8-foot-by-12-foot room for \$125 a week. There's a shared bathroom, but no kitchen access.

The thought of having a room of your own with a door that you can lock, the comfort of your very own bed and the opportunity to shower every day is very appealing. But, without the use of a kitchen or a food storage area, the cost of purchasing prepared meals on a daily basis can quickly use up the remainder of your income.

Do you take it, or stay on the streets? Why?

Scenario 3

You have accumulated everything that you need to survive on the streets. You have a sleeping bag, a backpack, a change of clothes, toiletries, ID and personal documents. You may even have an extra blanket. Unfortunately, you have no place to keep them. It's not practical to carry everything with you all day long, and some establishments won't let you carry them in.

Think about areas that you pass every day that you may be able to stash your possessions, and come back to retrieve them daily as needed.

Realize that other homeless people may steal them. Property owners will throw your things out if you don't have permission to store them there, and the city will throw out anything that is unattended.

Where do you put your things?

Policy choices

Now that you have navigated your way through a few scenarios from a homeless person’s point of view, I’d like you to think about what we could invent, implement or reform to better achieve the goal of ending homelessness.

As I said, I don’t have all the answers. You’ll see a few suggestions in what follows, but mostly you’ll see questions. As you reflect on them, think about the scenarios I described.

Communication

There is a chronic lack of communication between agencies that work with the homeless, the mayor’s office, the city police, the local sheriff’s office and homeless people themselves. What can we do better? How can we keep everyone on the same page?

Storage

Finding a secure storage area is a huge challenge for a homeless person. (Remember Scenario 3.) Is there a way and a place for our city to provide storage areas or lockers for our homeless citizens to relieve this situation?

Jobs programs

In 2015 the city of Albuquerque joined forces with a homeless advocacy nonprofit to launch a program called “[There’s A Better Way.](#)”

It invited homeless people to work several hours a day, cleaning up litter and performing landscape work around the city. The program supplied tools and transportation and paid the participants \$9 per hour in cash at the completion of each shift.

Realizing that many street people don't have the capacity to work a full-time job due to mental and physical illnesses and addictions, organizers limited shifts to five hours, and let participants choose how many days they wanted to come.

The results were positive: Participants reported feelings of improved self-worth and accomplishment, they earned spending money, and the city looked better.

Could this model be implemented here? What other jobs could be made available through this type of model?

Self-help and self-advocacy

Local nonprofits have done a wonderful job at providing meals and other services to the homeless community. My question is: Could we promote self-sufficiency and personal responsibility by making the homeless themselves part of those efforts?

Many individuals in the homeless community are smart, capable and willing to be of use. They understand the homelessness population better than many of those in charge. On a daily basis, the majority of the homeless rarely have a meaningful conversation with anyone from the non-homeless population. They eventually lose sight of the possibility of getting off the streets and settle for the streets as their permanent way of life.

Could we include them in the preparation and dispensing of the free meals provided by the Council of Churches and other groups? Could they be useful in other situations and in providing other services?

By doing so, they would be helping each other and helping themselves. They would gain self-esteem, network with positive role models and have the satisfaction of putting in a productive day.

Publicity; crowdsourcing solutions

Too often, we treat the homeless as if they are subhuman. We try to hide them from the public, and prevent the public from trying to help them.

Homelessness isn't pretty, but it is the reality of our community. If we were willing to engage the citizens of our community, we might discover large numbers of them are capable, compassionate, and willing to pitch in and help.

While doing my outreach work serving the homeless, I discovered that sharing their needs on social media always resulted in my obtaining the needed resources, whether it was food, clothing, sleeping bags or money. I used social media successfully to find professional services and for advice to solve specific problems.

Our community has such a vast network of experts in so many fields. We have entrepreneurs who know how to make things happen. We have compassionate people who are thrilled to give their time and effort for the betterment of their community. We have philanthropists who are eager to invest when someone has a well-thought-out plan to solve a problem.

Instead of trying to hide the homeless, how can we embrace our city as one community of citizens? How can we educate the public at large in the needs of the homeless, in the goals that we are striving for, and often failing to reach? How can we invite and organize their help in solving these problems?

Housing: The root of the problem

As the city enjoys growth and development, rents have increased over 40% in the last ten years. Wage rates and living-wage jobs have not. Is it any wonder we have a homelessness problem?

For years, the knee-jerk reaction of city officials and law enforcement has been to chase the homeless away from commercial corridors and high-visibility areas. Some have retreated to the

outskirts of the city, where they live in encampments or alone in wooded areas. Others just let themselves be chased from one spot in the city to the next, day after day.

We, as a people, have to understand that we are all part of one city and one society. Picture it as a snake. (Relax, it's a beautiful, happy, friendly snake named Sam.) The head is our revitalized downtown, with all the new shops and restaurants that get featured in the media. The rest of the city is the body, with the economic level tapering down as it goes by, and the homeless are the tail. We are celebrating the head and taking a cleaver to the tail. It's not a healthy treatment and we won't prosper very long that way.

Or look at it this way: We've built a beautiful penthouse with a spectacular view, but it sits atop a building with a crumbling foundation and a broken sewer system. No matter how nice the view, no one will want to stay there in the long run.

How do we fix it? This is not a simple supply-and-demand problem: There is more of a demand for affordable housing than for high-end housing. But developers say they can't make money on affordable housing. How can we address this issue?

Some communities impose affordable housing mandates on developers. To be sure, there are potential problems with that approach, but could it be one option? What else could we do?

For now, we lack the affordable housing we need. Nor do we have the financing to build it. So what if we thought way out of the box?

In some agricultural communities, farms provide housing for immigrant workers. It enables the workers to live on what they earn, while keeping costs low enough for the farms to earn a profit on their produce. On a different level, in 2017 Google and Facebook built affordable housing for their workers in Silicon Valley.

How can we use this idea as a basis for housing our homeless? For providing them a job so they can eventually afford their own housing, while teaching them skills in business management, marketing, manufacturing and production, maintenance and labor? What are some products or services that could be manufactured or supplied by a facility of this order? Think in terms of both small business and large.

The Covid-19 pandemic

In the spring of 2020, Lancaster County was put on lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. In a significant policy shift, Lancaster city began allowing the homeless to have encampments downtown without being chased away. In addition, the city installed portable toilets and hand washing stations in strategic locations.

Binns Park had always been a gathering spot for the homeless. There are overhangs that provide shelter from precipitation on both the Chestnut Street side of the Lancaster County Government Center and around the park perimeter on the Queen Street side. A few grates provide residual heat. The central park receives the warmth of the sunlight during the day, which naturally made it the area most populated by the homeless.

More than 40 homeless individuals congregated in Binns Park on a daily basis, providing a wealth of information and insight into the possibility of future large encampments as a temporary homeless relief measure.

Here are some of the observations, thoughts and questions I walked away with from the limited outreach work that I was involved in during this time.

First of all, I should say I am always amazed at the amount of kindness, sharing and looking out for each other you encounter among the people on the street.

The demographics were a true melting pot, with every color, creed and age group represented. There was a family of three generations, whose ages ranged from late teens to 70-something. There were the regular pros (people who have been out on the street for years), elderly individuals experiencing temporary homelessness, and drug addicts, whose numbers rose as time went on.

You could see a natural separation take place. The majority of the pros, who tend to mind their own business and clean up after themselves, settled on the Chestnut Street side. On the Queen Street side, there was a wild mix of everyone else.

Early on I noticed a new level of calmness in the highly delusional mentally ill. Being able to get an uninterrupted full night's sleep without being chased away or the fear of being chased away brought about major improvements in their moods. It lessened their paranoia, and allowed more rational conversations to take place with them to better facilitate their needs. Is there a way to offer them nights of uninterrupted sleep on a regular basis?

The disability-check effect

When disability checks came out at the end of March, the homeless population at the park dropped by about 40%. It stayed more or less at that level until the middle of April, then started rising and was back to its maximum by April 20. The pattern repeated again when checks came out at the end of April.

To be sure, observing a single cycle over a few weeks isn't enough to say for certain if this is the normal pattern or not, but I think it raises a few questions about what might help. According to the information that I could gather, those who left and came back, mostly booked hotel rooms or rented space with friends or family until the money ran out.

I've read that a single chronic homeless person costs taxpayers \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year. But the behavior I saw suggests that an additional mid-month check of \$600 to \$700 per month, about \$8,000 a year, could enable about 40% of Lancaster city's homeless population to house themselves without any additional public help.

Where could the money come from? Well, where is the \$20,000 to \$30,000 already coming from? It would certainly free up money if we didn't have to provide services to 40% of our homeless. Moreover, it would give providers more time and energy to help the remaining 60%. I'm not sure there's any more to it than that. Could this work? Why or why not.

Bored and restless

As the encampment continued day in and day out, it occurred to me that it was like an endless ninth grade field trip without an itinerary.

You saw all the same problems: Hormones, stupid he-said/she-said arguments, acting out. Further complicating things were drugs, alcohol, boredom, lack of direction, and the desire of some individuals to push the envelope as far as they could.

This is not a complaint nor an insult but an accurate observation. I think it's also a standpoint we can use to start thinking about how to manage a long-term homeless relief encampment.

You have your partiers who will stay up all night and sleep all day. You have people who will just hang out all day long and do nothing if they aren't shown what to do and how and when to do it. You have people who make most of the messes and people who clean them up. You have a segment of people (the pros, mostly) who stay focused and go about their business and are irritated by the others' lack of motivation.

Drugs

In any project that you undertake with the homeless, there will be a segment of drug users, drug addicts, and drug dealers. Drugs may be more prevalent on the streets and they're certainly more visible. Count on it. Be prepared to manage it and minimize it without emotion. It's a fact of life everywhere: They can't even keep drugs out of prisons.

I was surprised by how well the encampment took care of itself for the first couple of weeks. There was a sense of calmness, and any drug use that was being done was very low key and didn't affect those around the users.

But without structure or supervision, some non-homeless individuals started joining the encampment during the day. That led to drug-dealing, theft and a party atmosphere. Again think of this as a group of ninth-graders without supervision.

Eventually, the drug dealing and party atmosphere sporadically spilled over into the night. Toward the end of the month the drug dealers were fronting their products, so that when the checks came out everyone would owe them.

That is the nature of their business and they did their job. Luckily, when the checks came out the majority of the users headed to hotels or their friends and families' houses. This brought calmness to the area again, until the pattern started repeating a few weeks later.

Could something have been done? Keep in mind that most of the city employees, and people in agencies that work with the homeless, were on lock down and working from home and in no position to manage this.

I suggested several times to both the city and the homeless coalition to hire a security guard to maintain some structure and to be available in case the people in the encampment had any major needs or any emergency arose. Given that there were forty-some people there, it seemed like a cost-effective idea, though it was never acted on.

Toward the end, the police had to break up a few fights. Overall, however, I was pleasantly surprised that it went as well as it did for as long as it did. I'd mark it as a success and a place to start.

Eventually, as businesses started to reopen, the encampment around the interior of Binns Park was broken up and the residents told not to sleep there.

Possible lessons

For me, the encampment raises all sorts of questions about homelessness policy.

Could a large encampment be a temporary solution for the people on the streets until housing is available?

If so, what kind of supervision and daily structure would be needed to make it successful? As I said, the unsupervised encampment was like a ninth grade field trip. However, most people on the streets are malleable, and will behave given the right approach.

An encampment would need bathrooms and shelter from the elements. Are there any areas of the city that would be suitable? It should be somewhere central, so people can walk to the meals that organizations provide, and so they can get to the other agencies that help them.

What services could be offered in an encampment?

Would you want to hide an encampment from public view, or allow the rest of their community to see it, come to understand the situation and possibly be a part of the solution?

Conclusion

Thank you so much for lending this handbook your time, thought and imagination.

In my own homelessness outreach efforts, I'm not trying to solve anything long-term. I just try to fix the immediate issues that I'm capable of fixing, such as making sure people are fed, clothed, and warm enough to get through the week. Plus, I want to make sure they know someone cares about them.

During the four years I've been doing this, I've served people that I grew up with. I've served several friends' adult children and the parents of people I know. I've made some very deep friendships, and have experienced and witnessed kindness from all directions.

I've learned that if your intentions are honest and your commitment is true, people will line up to help you with whatever you need. I've learned when I can get people in authority to meet some of the people that I serve; things get handled in a more caring way, because the authorities realize that their policies and decisions affect genuine, lovely, human beings. That is basically what I'm trying to accomplish with this writing: For you to realize that there are genuine, lovely, human beings whom we are trying to help.

There are so many things that aren't working effectively. I've tried to help walk people through the system, only for both of us to give up after months of little or no progress. I know that there are successes and things that are working. Keep them! But let's change whatever isn't working. Let's rethink it and implement something new.

Don't be afraid of failure: We are already there, continuing a failed system is very scary. These are our brothers and sisters living on the street. Reform needs to be done with urgency but not haste. Remember, if you do this with honest intentions and your commitment is true, you'll have all the help that you need.

Final assignment

I began by asking you to think through several scenarios you would experience if you were homeless. Now, I'll invite you to use your imagination one more time.

Everything that you do this week, please imagine how and where you would be doing it if you were living on the streets. Think about this from the time that you wake up to the time that you go to bed.

Where would you go to the bathroom or take a shower? Where would you be standing in line to get lunch or dinner? Is it raining, snowing, or a “pleasantly kind” day? Where will you sleep tonight, and will your belongings be there when you go for them? How many changes of clothes have you gone through? How would you clean them?

Do this as an exercise to better understand the human beings we are serving and use it as an exercise in gratitude for all that we have.

Thanks and so much love!!! – DC

Many thanks to Tim Stuhldreher, for his skills and patience in editing and organizing this booklet, and for the mind-searching conversations that allowed me to articulate these thoughts to you.