

## **Friday Night Overview**

### **Meeting the Needs of Homeless People:**

#### **Background**

Housing, employment, and access to resources are interconnected. Most people who are without a stable home are in that situation because they do not have enough income or other resources to meet the high costs of market-rate rents. While there are individual factors that can contribute to an individual not having a home (such as disability, or mental health condition), homelessness is a systemic problem because policies have not supported the availability of jobs that pay a living wage or homes that are affordable for low-income people. Additionally, as a civil society we have not recognized the need to support people who are unable to earn an income because of high unemployment rates, disability or chronic illness, addiction, parenting responsibilities, or other individual difficulties such as aging out of foster care and having no family support to turn to.

The range of circumstances contributing to homelessness varies from person to person, but the effects of inadequate income and lack of access to affordable housing underlies the problem across individuals. In earlier eras (up to the 1980s) there was a robust system of HUD-funded subsidized housing across the U.S. but policy decisions to seriously reduce the amount of federal funding allocated to housing subsidies has been a major contributor to the homelessness crisis. An expectation was that state and local jurisdictions would fill the gap but local communities have lacked the resources to tackle homelessness. A result has been huge growth in the numbers of homeless individuals and families (particularly since the recession) in communities across the country, along with the criminalization of homeless by many communities.

It is notable that the cost of maintaining people in their homeless condition is more expensive than providing affordable housing and support to meet basic needs. One study reported that it costs \$40,000 per year on average to pay for emergency room admissions, law enforcement activities, criminal justice follow up, and provision of shelter beds and other emergency services.

## **Current Strategies for Addressing Homelessness**

The public sector addresses life and safety for the community at large by “managing” and controlling homeless people but the resources provided by public at large are typically not adequate and this approach raises the question of whether engaging in homeless behavior should be considered illegal.

Public strategies for dealing with homelessness are limited due to meeting legal requirements and dealing with public processes to make decisions. This can be frustrating yet the public sector has to follow democratic processes unlike private solutions whereby individuals can make decisions without being accountable to public at large, although private strategies are typically small-scale and not sustainable.

Publicly-funded strategies must be accountable for the expenditures of every dollar of taxpayer funding which tends to result in one-size fits-all approaches and also fail to address the uniqueness of individuals and their circumstances. Public solutions have also tended to locate the problem in the individuals being served rather than in the systems that have failed to meet community needs.

Many communities have created multiple but unsustainable strategies to deal with homeless individuals and families due to inadequate resources. The non-profit role has been to provide for individuals and families when market solutions and public and private sector resources have failed to meet their needs. The moral solution has been to recognize the needs of homeless people but typically individuals have limited resources and expertise to address the homeless needs in sustainable ways.

## **My Approach**

As an architect trained in England and the U.S. and at present involved in building affordable housing, I have begun to understand the difficulties in providing affordable decent homes in the current economic and political climate. I have learned that there is no single solution to reduce homeless circumstances.

I have worked with public and non-profit organizations using a public/private approach to address the needs of homeless people by combining the resources and advantages of all parties to create a win-win solution.

## **Solutions**

Any community can assist homeless population at multiple levels. To assist homeless people, we first have **to demonstrate respect and a desire to understand their perceptions of their situation** and what would be helpful to them. This is a way **to build trust to engage them in relationships that can assist them to meet their basic needs** for shelter, food, access to health care and other support services, and meaningful roles in our community.

To create compatible goals to resolve homelessness, one must move away from a belief that individuals must meet their own needs without public/private assistance. A common sense approach to assist people to transition into a sustainable situation is by providing adequate public/private support, access to jobs that pay a living wage, and access to health and mental health care in a cost effective way. Effective efforts to address homelessness must be based on public/private collaboration to build solutions.

The business community can benefit if they pay wages that allow employees to meet market rents and have adequate resources to pay for other basic needs for themselves and their families such as transportation, food, education and health care.

## **Developing Local Strategies**

Any community can take steps to meet the needs of homeless persons/families. A beginning question is to decide where you want to pitch your efforts. Do you want to engage in advocacy to press for public solutions? Do you want to partner with existing organizations to extend what they are doing or fill a gap? Do you want to start your own initiative and if so, what would be the goal and what resources are members willing and able to provide? At what stage of the homelessness cycle do you want to be involved -- to prevent homelessness by providing rent support to help a family avoid eviction, to provide short-term emergency support such as shelter or food, or to provide support to a newly housed individual or family to maintain their stable situation? What scale are you thinking about for your efforts?

Whatever you decide to do, a major issue is can you sustain it over time?

A cost/benefit analysis of any solution requires measurement of the quality of help to the homeless persons/families, the highest and best use of resources,

and timely mitigation of needs. An ideal goal is to provide support to homeless person/families to be self sustaining without public or private assistance.

### **Caveats**

It's important to get past "feel-good" solutions that are donor based and that may or may not meet the highest priority needs of any individual homeless person or family. Instead we need to partner with homeless people to learn more about what they need.

There are always circumstances where homeless person will abuse the support or services. This can be disheartening for well-intentioned people who want to help and it does not mean every homeless person is going to abuse the help.

## **Addressing Homelessness at the Local Level**

- Friday night: Introductions and outline of above issues
- Saturday:
  - 9-11: Facilitated discussion to develop multiple approaches in small groups
  - 11-12: Surfacing priorities and building consensus
  - 1-2: Developing implementation strategy
  - 2-3: Defining roles, resources, and organization
- Sunday 9-10: Forum, Q & A