



No place like home

As winter approaches, Reno continues to struggle with an expanding and inexorable homeless population camping out in city parks and along the river, hidden away in culverts, abandoned buildings or any available nook and cranny. When a local group recently threatened to attempt citizen's arrests of homeless residents at Pickett Park, a potential confrontation was defused by Reno Police Officer Keith Pleich, who strongly encouraged the movement of people and their possessions to other places and then organized a clean-up of discarded items left behind, as many volunteers who were appalled at the situation distributed food and clothing resources.

It was a short-term response to an intractable and complicated problem. There's no one reason people are living in the park. Some are there because their fixed income isn't enough to afford housing now that many "last-resort" motels have been razed or gentrified for higher-income uses. Others are chronically

homeless due to substance use or mental illness. Still others living in Pickett Park were discharged from Renown Hospital, directly across the street from the park, with no realistic housing plan.

Solutions to the problem are also complicated. Local homeless shelters can be crowded and dangerous places for vulnerable people who are often preyed upon. Many cannot tolerate the noise and close quarters or the drug-induced violent behavior and unbending rules. Social workers do the best they can to work on an exit plan for clients with little money and nowhere to go. But they can't conjure housing out of thin air. Even new housing resources such as the Sage Street dorms are out of reach financially for those who get about \$800 a month in disability payments, since that program requires applicants to have at least \$1,320 in monthly income. Pause for a moment and think about where you would live on a monthly income of \$800.

Criminalizing the homeless won't work either, and it'll cost the taxpayers far more in police, court and jail costs than actually providing housing. And what will you do with homeless people unable to pay their fines or fees? Punish them by putting them back in jail and pay for their housing there? It makes no moral or financial sense.

Reno isn't the only city struggling with this issue. In Las Vegas, the homeless are pushed to one part of downtown, which looks like a scene out of a dystopian novel. People live in shabby tents on the sidewalk, and water trucks come in regularly to wash urine and feces out of the gutters. Now Mayor Carolyn Goodman wants to move the mentally ill homeless to the state prison's Conservation Camp at Jean, 30 miles south of Las Vegas—out of sight, out of mind.

The key to ending homelessness isn't more camps. We must provide access to homes along with the resources needed to be successful. We could start by targeting

the severely mentally ill and addicted populations and providing meaningful housing resources to help them get off the streets. We need long-term housing arrangements that provide quality supportive housing, not the hovels run by for-profit schemers interested only in snatching disability checks.

That means our community is going to have to step up. We're going to need a substantial investment from state and local governments and leaders willing to stop pointing fingers of blame and shame. We need a commitment to provide a variety of housing options, such as group homes with wrap-around services and apartments with social workers who drop by regularly to check up on people's medication and treatment. We'll also need landlords and neighbors who are willing to embrace this clientele and tolerate the occasional misstep on the road to recovery.

Or we can go back to complaining about people living in the parks. □

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