

Transient/ homelessness is a systemic American problem that has been building for many years. I've watched it grow in Humboldt County for at least 25. As I'm sure all of us are aware, it seems to have reached critical mass in our community, requiring serious discussion and subsequent action. It is a chronic condition, not an acute one, and should be approached from that perspective.

So what do we do? From what I can tell our transient/homeless population is composed of several categories, among them the mentally ill, young people just bumming around, folks who have been kicked to the curb due to the economic meltdown and drug addicts. How can we be compassionate without enabling bad behavior? Certainly, we should care for the mentally ill but from what I can tell, a large number of folks on the street have made many bad choices over their lifetimes. I remember very clearly a meeting I attended several years ago where we were asked to offer a moment of silence for a street person who had recently died of an overdose after attending yet another rehab detoxification program. When I asked how many times he had been in rehab, the answer was "more than 20." That's not rehabilitation, that's a way of life.

I recently stumbled upon a 37-year-old heroine addict from New Jersey shooting up on my property. While escorting him off my place, I discovered he was a high school dropout with a juvenile record, had done some prison time, had been a junkie for 17 years and was physically a basket case. Before we parted I asked him why he came to Humboldt County. I'm sure you can guess his answer. I didn't feel very optimistic about his future survival but on the positive side he thought all the meth addicts were crazy and he did pick up all his drug paraphernalia.

There is a tendency to think that what we see in the present moment will continue. We forget how often we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions, by

extraordinary changes in people's thoughts, by the quick collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible. What leaps out from the history of the past hundred years is its utter unpredictability.

I think it is imperative that we look for solutions to our local problem with optimism rather than letting pessimism engulf us. An optimist isn't necessarily a blithe, slightly sappy whistler in the dark. To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage and kindness but let's not confuse enabling with kindness.