

Community Comment
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The homeless issue

The homeless issue in Humboldt County is coming to a head. And, before I continue, let me define homeless. We use this term to cover a number of types of people who don't seem to have a physical place to stay in our communities. I want to be clear about what I mean when I try to think of solutions. Homeless, to me, means people who have lost their homes and the means to support a home. This group of people would like to work, are looking for work, and generally contribute to their community when they can. For these people, we have a number of federal, state, and local agencies and non-profit groups that can assist. We should be supportive of these programs and encourage those we know to be in this situation to seek help because help is there.

Then there are those we also call homeless that are there by choice. There are a number of reasons why these people have no physical place to live. They are there because they choose to be or have made a series of choices that have led to their condition. The easy group to identify is that group that simply choose a lifestyle of being free and without material things. Some have moved to our communities from somewhere else because of what? Is it the weather? Is it to get away from a controlling family? Is it due to a limited education and skill set that makes them think this is the best they can do? Do some pick up a little black market work, like trimming marijuana, and begging the rest of the time? Are we just too tolerant and turn our backs to the constant begging and squatting on public or private property? Maybe it's all of the above.

And then there are those that are on the streets because of addictions or mental issues. If they are adults, their families can only do so much for them. They have legal rights to make their own choices. But, two things are important to note. One is that the family must be the first level of responsibility. They may not have legal responsibility but they have the moral responsibility. Two; they have no right to camp on public or private land that the rest of the community has not designated as suitable for campground use. As a community, we all have a right and a responsibility to be fair to all. When people set up camp, in the Arcata Community Forest or on the edge of the bay near Bayshore mall, these lands are damaged. With out proper facilities, there is soil erosion and compaction, there is damage to plants and habitat, and there is a problem with water pollution. We have turned our back on the problem with environmental damage due to illegal grows and we have done the same with respect to illegal squatting. In the community forest, I guess a fire we can't control will have to happen before we get serious about this precious resource.

The family may be the first level of responsibility but the individual, when at all competent, must take the first step towards helping themselves.

Off this topic; a farewell to a man who made a difference. Former Arcata Police Chief Mel Brown passed away a few days ago. He contributed greatly to the City and to the greater Humboldt community. He held a difficult position and made it look easy. He was missed when he retired, but now we will miss his presence in our community. Like his son said, I too think he was extra special.

This has been Sam Pennisi for community comment.