

## **Housing First**

This is Lieutenant Roger McCort of The Salvation Army for today's Community Comment.

The statement that insanity is doing the same things over and over again and expecting a different result is a vastly overused cliché. It's also a tremendously appropriate one in the discussion of how our communities deal with the problem of homelessness.

By and large, solutions to the problem of people being without homes use the same three pronged solution: Offer treatment for mental illness, including addiction recovery; offer employment referral services; and offer subsidized housing for those who maintain their recovery and job. The stick behind those carrots has always been the criminalization of behaviors which people who are homeless are prone to, such as panhandling, camping in public areas, and using outdoor spaces for toilet practices. The hope, then, is that people will quickly get with the program or be locked away.

There are some obvious problems with these solutions, ranging from a lack of reasonable and affordable treatment options; a lack of jobs which will hire the unhomed at wages which allow them to become homed; and a shortage of affordable housing options. That includes the ultimate in subsidized housing: jail or prison for people who become chronic offenders due to their continuing desperation to escape from the pit into which their poverty has thrust them. We simply don't have the space or other resources to incarcerate everyone who breaks the law, so lesser offenders and the only-mildly violent are often released without their circumstances changing at all.

This approach has been largely the same since it appeared in the 1920s. And for 80 years the number of people who were homeless continued to increase, a creeping demonstration of the inadequacy of that model. But ten years ago our country tried something different. An initiative which provided housing first.

The housing first plan argues that having a safe place to live, a place one can call their own, is the most important first step of bringing the chronically homeless back towards normalcy. From 744,000 people homeless across America in 2005 to 565,000 last year, the numbers show that doing something different is working to end the insanity that allows our brothers and sisters to remain trapped in their cycle of poverty. Even during a period which included unprecedented increases in unemployment and foreclosures, traditionally indicators of a jump in the number of people with nowhere to go. We now have ten years of proof that housing

first reduces homelessness, lowers the associated per-person cost, and aids more people in becoming stable and productive members in their communities.

So why not give up the insanity in favor of trying something different? The City of Eureka is working with Humboldt County to establish a small housing first program, looking to provide 30 homeless individuals with apartments and case management to help them succeed in getting and staying off the street. Other local cities may follow suit. The downside is that this is not a fast solution to the overall problems being faced by potential clients. It will take time, probably years, for each individual to journey back to a place of health and wholeness. Some may never reach it.

That is a bitter pill for those who hope for a quick end to homelessness, but this solution seems to work for far more people than previous efforts have.

This has been Lt. Roger McCort for KINS Community Comment.