

April 18, 2017

Homelessness: the paralysis of principles

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The homeless problem in Los Angeles is out of control. But asserting that we have the solution to homelessness is unrealistic and breeds a mixture of defeatism and false hope. A better path forward is to acknowledge we will never fully eliminate homelessness and ask how we can improve conditions

not just for the homeless, but for all of us who share the city.

That realization is difficult to accept. But it is part of a change in understanding that can help our homeless: We should admit that first principles on the subject need to see compromise. The aggregate of our strong advocacies is blocking meaningful change.

We will make progress if we can bring ourselves to conclude that our positions are secondary to the needs of the people we are trying to serve.

This reorientation applies to us all.

Those who insist that more housing makes for more affordable housing should accept some refinement on their analysis: that is so only if more building includes mandates that some new construction is affordable to people with limited income.

Activists who hold civil liberties of the homeless as the major concern and work to promote "agency" of those living on the streets must realize that homeless people are dying in our city. New understandings of competence and mental capacity are available. Related, civil rights may include panhandling and sleeping in public places; but to achieve the greater good of voter acceptance of homeless programs, we are not compelled to interpret these acts as constitutionally protected.

Residents who prioritize promotion of public health and safety of neighborhoods where the homeless congregate should concede that the police power does not protect us from all insults to our aesthetics, to a particular sense of how our neighborhood should be. We can live full and healthy lives without being in Pleasantville. (Given the chance to move to what we consider better situations, some of the homeless will choose to live outside; we have to accept that.)

We should reconsider the principle that supporting government actions means refraining from helping the homeless individually. A personal response (giving some food here, a hand there) will not undermine centralized service programs. Saying "hello" and offering some cash is not enabling addiction and self-injury. These gestures are simply ways of recognizing the humanity in a person on the street.

The homeless must compromise. Not everything they have collected in life needs saving. Some things cannot be stored: We do not have the space and some items are unhealthy.

In building places to live, places to stay in the night, agencies ought to act now. They need not design and program architectural gems. Shelters and lockers may not look like what we would demand if excellent urban design were the aim, but additional modest places put a dent in the homeless problem.

Finally, city leaders who feel that they will not achieve their next level of power unless they carefully balance all interests must act for the thousands of people without shelter. Lives and dignity of the poor trump reelection or political advancement.

Los Angeles now has ample funds dedicated to the homeless and several groups assisting them. If we all compromise, we can more quickly use these resources to see more people safe every night.

Daily Journal

Established 1888

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