Solutions For Homelessness Essay, Research Paper

Solutions for Homelessness

This great nation of awesome power and abundant resources is losing the battle against homelessness. The casualties can be seen on the street corners of every city in American holding an ?I will work for food? sign. Homeless shelters and rescue missions are at full capacity. There is no room at the inn for the nation?s indigent. Anyone who has studied this issue understands that homelessness is a complex problem. Communities continue to struggle with this socio-economic problem while attempting to understand its causes and implement solutions. The public and private sectors of this country are making a difference in the lives of the homeless by addressing the issues of housing, poverty and education.

Many believe that a common thread among the homeless is a lack of permanent and stable housing. But beyond that, the factors leading to homelessness and the services that are needed are unique according to the individual. To put them into one general category ? the homeless- suggests that people are homeless for similar reasons and therefore a single solution is the answer. Every homeless person shares the basic needs of affordable housing, adequate incomes and attainable healthcare. But a wide range of other unmet needs cause some people to become or remain homeless which include drug treatment, employment training, transportation, childcare and mental health services (Center 8.)

Presently, one of the main causes of homelessness in American is the lack of affordable housing. New York researchers claim that affordable housing is the answer to homelessness. Researcher, Mary Beth Shinn, states, ?homelessness is first and foremost a housing problem not a psychological one? (qtd. in Franklin 15.) Nearly all the families in their study became stably housed regardless of substance abuse, mental illness, physical illness or incarceration. This study indicates that homelessness is not a permanent condition. People do get themselves out of the problem when an intervention occurs to provide them with access to the housing market (NYU 2.) Without permanent housing, people are unable to keep jobs and are more likely to become ill. Permanent housing provides stability that enables them to find and retain employment with health benefits.

Housing assistance can make the difference between stable housing, unstable housing or no housing at all. However, the demand for assisted housing exceeds the supply. Between 1993 and 1995, the number of rental units available to very-low-income families dropped by nine percent which translates into a loss of 900,000 units nationally (Hess 3.) Most poor families and individuals seeking housing assistance are placed on a waiting list for three years or more. Today, much of the nation?s affordable housing stock is being converted into condo complexes or commercial property. Even when disabling conditions such as addiction or mental illness are treated, the homeless must compete with other poor people for a dwindling supply of low-income housing. Homelessness is like a perverse game of musical chairs in which the loss of chairs (housing) forces some to be left standing (homeless).

Equally important, poverty is largely responsible for the rise in homelessness during the past decade. A popular misconception is that the homeless are lazy and do not want to work. Twenty percent of the homeless population work full-time but do not earn enough money to meet their basic needs. Robert Hess, president and CEO of the Center for Poverty Solutions states, ?policies must be put into place to guarantee a living wage–the minimum income needed for an individual or family to meet basic needs: housing, food, health care, transportation and clothing (18.) Employment opportunities for the poorly educated continue to be in the service industry, which pays significantly less and provides little stability. Furthermore, few homeless people own cars so the jobs that are available may not be accessible. Also, affordable childcare is an issue for all Americans, especially so for the homeless parent. For many Americans, work provides no escape from poverty and homelessness. Poor people are unable to pay for housing, food, childcare, health care and education. Difficult choices must be made when a limited budget must cover all these expenses. As a result, it is housing that is often dropped.

Yet, others feel strongly that educational programs are an important component in reducing the homeless population. In order to eliminate homelessness, federally funded adult education programs in reading skills, life skills and job training should be available and accessible to those in need. This education teaches the fundamentals needed to read the want ads, prepare resumes and complete job applications. Many former students have commented that living in shelters has caused them to feel like they were as low as they could go. The opportunity to learn about decision making, conflict resolution, interviewing techniques and communication skills has empowered the homeless students by boosting their self-esteem (Karinshak 28.) Most of the homeless population is hindered by limited employment opportunities and trapped by inadequate wages. Accordingly, The Homeless Education and Resource Organization started by former Miss America, Kimberly Aiken, set up a computer lab enabling the homeless to develop computer skills that would help them move beyond minimum wage jobs (Aiken 152.)

Contrary to popular opinions, homelessness is more than being poor and without a home. Homelessness is a condition of disengagement from ordinary society which includes family, friends, neighborhood, church and community (Baum 8.) Perhaps most importantly, it is a loss of self. Homelessness means being disconnected from all of the support systems that usually provide help in a time of crisis. It means being without structure. It means being alone. The basic truth Americans must realize is that 85% of all homeless adults suffer from chronic alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness or some combination of the three which directly leads to this condition of isolation (Burger.) While millions of dollars may be spent on education, housing and employment for the homeless, these efforts do little to improve their lives if they are unable to stay sober. The majority of our nation?s homeless need guidance in making major life changes to enable them to find sobriety and stability.

Unable to will themselves not to drink or use drugs, the chemically dependent homeless have lost the power of choice in their lives. Just as someone could not take four Exlax and will themselves not to use the bathroom, so be it with the addict and alcoholic. Physically and mentally they have no control; the problem is greater than themselves. Dr. Silkworth, trusted friend of Alcoholics Anonymous, described this hopeless state of mind and body with simplicity when he wrote:

Men and women drink essentially because they like the effect produced by alcohol. The sensation is so elusive that, while they admit it is injurious, they cannot after a time differentiate the true from the false. To them their alcoholic life seems like the only normal one?.This is repeated over and over again and unless this person can experience an entire psychic change there is very little hope of his recovery (AA xxvi.)

The total existence of the chemically dependent homeless is consumed with alcohol and drugs which makes it difficult or impossible for them to work, relationships with family and friends disintegrate, money is hard to manage as are other aspects of daily living. They are incapable of sustaining what most people take for granted. Trapped in a degrading cycle, they are shuttled between jails, mental hospitals and detoxification units. In short, the addiction cycle will repeat itself over and over unless the person can experience an entire psychic change. This change only comes to those who yield to a power greater than themselves. Homeless men and women need guidance on how to find this life changing power while their basic needs for food and shelter are being met.

Because of the scarcity of traditional treatment programs available to the homeless population, rescue missions across the nation have responded to the needs of the chemically dependent homeless by implementing effective recovery oriented programs. Breaking the stereotype of only providing three hots and a cot, missions are now using the twelve steps and other treatment strategies to help the homeless lead stable lives. An SRI Gallup study identified six critical life themes present in lives of people who were able to recover from homelessness. These six life themes clearly reverberate through the twelve steps used by Alcoholics Anonymous. Listed according to their degree of importance are spiritual, self-insight, security, self-awareness, people support and suppression (Christiansen.) Implementing these themes into their daily lives, homeless people everywhere were able to reconcile themselves to God, to themselves and to others around them. Through practicing these themes, they were able to learn how to make good decisions again and take responsibility for their actions and lives. Their fears fell from them as they learned to walk hand and hand with the Spirit of the Universe. They developed friendships with others who gave them praise, recognition and encouragement. Most of all, with a restored sense of purpose, they can look in the mirror and say I love you. The homeless individuals who were able to recover experienced a psychic change. As a result, these individuals are sober, employed and maintain their own residence.

In conclusion, homeless people can be helped to return to lives of promise. The physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of the homeless must be addressed if they are to recover from homelessness. The work of homeless advocates to improve availability of affordable housing, adequate education and increased wages is certainly beneficial to this population. However, the real issue is how long the homeless problem would be solved if the person were unable to maintain sobriety. Education would be wasted on the jobs that would be lost if they returned to active addiction. Unless the root problems of addiction are adequately addressed, any other help will not be effective. Those who stay on the streets or live in shelters deserve the same opportunity to recover and maintain sobriety that is available to middle-class Americans. Despite so many public and private efforts to help, homelessness has not been eliminated or even decreased. Unfortunately, homelessness will continue to be one of the greatest unsolved social problems of this era as long as there are limited resources to drug and alcohol treatment for this population.

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