

What about Tonight?

Homelessness is an extreme form of poverty, stripping individuals of safe haven, food, clothing, health and humanity. In the US context homelessness is traumatic, a condition of both real physical danger and threat to the self.

American community values most highly, individual achievement and wealth. Our social service systems – subsidized housing, food stamps, health care, and disability benefits require individual applications and proof of eligibility. Public policy vastly favors private, competitive and atomistic enterprise which minimizes our shared responsibility for one another and leaves an increasing number of people, literally outside.

A small, non profit industry of survival services has emerged over the last three decades to care for the growing number of homeless individuals in our midst. The survival service is characterized by a continuum of care institutionalized region by region across the country, most often at a city or county wide level. Outreach services, shelters, supported housing, community clinics and mental health programs, and various forms of vocational/educational efforts provide a path to stability.

Mapping the pathway from street to stability in a specific community can be challenging. Outreach services are minimal. Front doors to care can be difficult to find, and restricted in terms of hours, capacity and eligibility. The lack of housing is highlighted by debates about whether the most vulnerable or those who incur the most in emergency and criminal justice costs should be given priority. Few communities have a coherent strategy to prevent chronic homelessness, much less the comprehensive public health, housing and benefits programs necessary to insure that a person is not left isolated and alone on the streets.

Profound structural changes in US society are necessary to minimize homelessness. The continuum of care must begin with care and attention for every child and their family. Good health care, housing and education beginning in infancy are crucial. A living wage income and strong support for parents and guardians is essential. Careful attention to the transitions and support challenges faced by young adults is necessary. We must have far greater care for the continuum of human growth and development in our communities, a shared and public concern for how all of us are doing.

Effective plans to end homelessness will include a conscious reorganization of our neighborhoods. We are agreed on the importance of having as part of our community fabric schools and libraries, fire stations, community centers, police patrols, water and communications systems. (Though even here there can be great disparities in quality and quantity of services.)

Each neighborhood or cluster of neighborhoods in a community needs as well centers of hospitality and welcome, especially for the neighbor who is troubled, suffering or in distress. At the heart of caring community are a network of no wrong door centers of compassion and companionship – community meals, drop-in programs, information and referral centers – easily accessible sites where ordinary human beings offer one another the gift of companionship.

Companionship is a human relationship, responsive to suffering, supportive of healing and offered in public settings. The five practices of companionship are simple –

- Hospitality - creating safe space, treating one another with dignity and respect, sharing together a space of rest and refreshment
- Neighboring – setting aside our individual differences and status, and discovering the common ground we have as human beings
- Sharing side by side – looking out at the world together, recognizing that we are each on a journey
- Listening – simply hearing another's story, open to the movement of the spirit, the deepest sources of life, gift and well being in the other
- Accompaniment – going with another person as they identify and take next steps, or holding the individual in our thoughts and with prayer for their health and growth.

In the small and continuing moments of companionship we learn what is needed in our neighborhoods – connection to care, advocacy, a refuge for the night while other resources are put in place, a place to wash up and change into fresh clothes, a safe haven during the day where one can rest and be found.

In the small moments of companionship we learn what is not working for an individual or for a family. We see where the gaps in care are and what barriers to well being exist. We see what change and creativity is needed in our communities to be truly inclusive and proactively compassionate at the most local level.

In a shared commitment to care first hand for all, neighborhood by neighborhood, we will lay a new foundation for a public approach to homelessness. Companionship our sisters and brothers slipping or forced to the margins, we will continuously widen the circle that defines us as neighbors. Our neighborhoods will look, feel and function very differently when we declare that no one among us shall be homeless tonight.

Craig Rennebohm, chaplain
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