

Commentary...

Compromising homelessness

By Erik Dolson
Columnist

Two weeks ago, camps of the homeless, aka the houseless, aka those living in rough shelter, in squalor and despair rank in the hot July sun near the Columbia River in Portland, seemed almost apocalyptic.

After asking liberals and conservatives what they thought could be done, and reading a variety of publications, I think there may actually be some options but am not at all sure we can get there from here.

Because I had a bias against publicly funded "affordable housing" (at a social level the concept may be self-defeating in a capitalist system), I'd dismissed that housing the homeless was possible.

But last week I read a tweet from a progressive politician (I was looking for something by Cormac McCarthy, okay?) which said "housing is a human right."

This caused a shift in my thinking. I do believe there are "human rights" that a civilized society guarantees its members. In other words, an individual is guaranteed a minimal standard of living by the fact of being a member of our society and we will not accept misery under the overpass.

Now that I think about it, the label "social security" captures what I'm trying to get at: Even here in America, land of individuals, land of the free, land of "them that kills eats," we believe in social security. (No, you did not pay into your Social Security account all you are likely to receive.) I also believe in (and receive) Medicare.

What if we expand the label of "social security" to include minimal health care for all? That would certainly provide security and, if provided by society, becomes part of our "social security." We share the air.

So if Medicare, Medicaid, etc. also become part of our social security, can we include shelter for the homeless? To "cure" what the *The Economist* magazine calls "unsheltered homelessness"?

Not until we liberals become a whole lot more honest.

WHAT?!?!?

Before America will agree that housing is a human right, liberals have to put actual concepts of acceptable "housing" or "shelter" on the table. Not doing so is dishonest hedging of bets. Yes, I know the risks of being specific.

Liberals must accept that many Americans are getting through hard times by

living in the basements of relatives, or in singlewides in unregulated trailer parks, or in campers somewhere in the forest, or in a room in a house with kitchen and bathroom shared with strangers. Those Americans, and their kin, won't accept government giving away better accommodations to the unsheltered.

But if liberals have to describe what shelter they will agree is minimally acceptable, conservatives have to acknowledge that bad things happen to good people, that community well-being depends on the well-being of its most vulnerable members, and finally that we will simply not tolerate fellow Americans living and dying on the side of our freeways.

Conservatives must do more than say the program rewards the undeserving, or the addicted must suffer before recovery, or bad decisions must result in bad outcomes for the good of society, or ... just pick the most

unfair example to oppose any such program so it will die.

Consequently, such shelter must be minimal, and we must NOT remove the social stigma of such housing. Yes, that's harsh to liberal sensitivities. But community values are a primary mechanism that society uses to correct social malfunction at a macro level.

My vision includes a warm room under a roof, a bed, a way to heat food, a toilet, a shower: 200 to 300 square feet? I don't know. Small A-frames come to mind, with enough "space" around each unit for individual choices, whether a vegetable garden or daffodils or a hammock between poles.

Arranged in a close hexagon? The hexagons themselves arranged in a pattern of hexagons? With a common area for visits by medical personnel or community conference? A pickup point for public transport to employment?

A professional told me

once that a "community" can't be larger than about 200 people. Could we prevent warfare between adjacent communities? I don't know, I'm just throwing out ideas.

My ideas may be inane or impossible. Offer your own. But don't retreat behind "It's not my problem." Yes, it is.

As Americans, we must look for the trade-offs while we create innovative solutions. It's cheaper to shelter the homeless in minimal accommodations than in hospitals or jails. It also becomes simpler to address individual problems such as addiction, mental health, lack of skills, etc. There may be real savings on a social level.

Then, maybe we can confront the absurdity that monthly rent for a basic apartment in many places is about half of a good monthly wage.

Erik Dolson is a Sisters resident and writer. His work can be found at <https://erikdolson.substack.com>.

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