

Housing report says U.S. is “barely passing”

The U.S. has a long way to go to protect the human rights of homeless Americans, claims a report from the National Law Center on Homelessness.

BY CHRIS CAESAR
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The U.S. has a long way to go to protect the human rights of homeless Americans, particularly in terms of access to housing, claims a recent report.

Advocacy group National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP) slapped the country's with a dismal D+ grade in its annual Human Right to Housing Report card.

While it conceded that some progress had been made, it warns that current government policy aimed at access to housing remains dangerously inadequate.

While the NLCHP Human Right to Housing Report states efforts to decriminalize homelessness in the U.S. had improved, it states that too many local governments continue to enforce laws that simply harass the homeless.

The report was issued in the same year that Street Roots sister paper The Curbside Chronicle had its future of helping homeless and socially vulnerable people in Oklahoma City threatened by a city ordinance.

That decision, passed in December 2015, made it illegal for anyone to stand, sit or walk on a median (the area that separates opposing lanes of traffic on divided roadways) in Oklahoma City. These were previously areas where the majority of vendors would sell The Curbside Chronicle to motorists.

Despite petitioning the ordinance – and gaining support from INSP and street papers around the world – The Curbside Chronicle has had to find alternative pitches for its vendors.

There are now grave concerns that this will have a detrimental effect on vendors'

sales because there is not enough foot traffic in Oklahoma City to employ the growing number of vendors reliant on the paper for their financial needs.

“The United States is passing, but barely,” the report states, adding there were “both exciting developments and disappointments regarding the human right to housing” last year.

The analysis takes into account the federal government's approach to various issues surrounding access to housing.

This includes:

- Existing laws to protect that right were actually implemented and enforced.
- Any new laws, or the enforcement of existing laws, that undermined the right to housing.

- Resources to protect these rights increased or decreased over the past year.

But there is positive news. A few key U.S. Supreme Court cases expanded rights for the homeless, including a ruling that made it harder for local governments to pass laws against panhandling and triking down of an anti-camping ordinance in Boise, Idaho.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development also strengthened requirements for local governments to secure affordable housing and promote inclusive communities, along with additional incentives offered to local governments to decriminalize homelessness.

Increased efforts to decriminalize homelessness is one of just two subcategories to improve on the report card this year. Others dropped or stayed notably low, including a grade for affordability (from a D in 2014 to an F in 2015), domestic violence (a B to a C) and renters rights (which retained its disappointing F grade).

Unsurprisingly, the report concludes that much work remains to be done. Too many local governments continue to enforce laws that simply harass the homeless, exacerbating the plight of the vulnerable population while wasting money that could be better spent on proactive efforts that succeed.

To address the issue, the NLCHP suggested the following steps.

- Increasing funding for homeless prevention programs, as well as expanding the federal definition of “homeless.”

- Strengthening Title V of the McKinney-Vento Act, which requires vacant or underutilized federal properties be made available to homeless service providers.

- Ensuring no one loses access to water or sanitation services because of an inability to pay.

- Increasing the minimum wage and social security benefits to help ensure no one is paying more than 30 percent of their income for housing.

Eric Tar, senior attorney at NLCHP, encouraged advocates to issue Freedom of Information requests to local police to determine the hidden costs of criminalization in their community.

“See how many people are being ticketed and brought in on warrants, what the average pre-trial length of stay in jail is for those charged with these violations, and what the average cost of a night in jail is,” he said.

“Give citizens the information to call out their elected officials: ‘You’ve been spending all this money to harass and incarcerate homeless people, but you’re no closer to ending homelessness.’”

Courtesy of INSP.ngo / Spare Change News

Just a man who was, is and forever will be every bit the man I am becoming

by Kenneth T. Nickell

In reflection I can see now how life has built me into the man I've become. My life in effect is an incomplete mission, a series of tiny dangerous missions that have never led to a destination.

All destinations have been bumps along the Road to Nowhere. (that's where I live.) Where am I headed? When will I stop? I don't know the answers. I suppose that will be revealed when the time comes.

I've been challenged to write without words, to tell a magnificent story without dialogue, or exposition. I've suffered and celebrated, I've lived and lost. I am built of oak or yew, so much so, that the broken men and women I came across lean against me when weary. They know I may bend but cannot break.

That's my secret. I'm built of sorrow and spice. Sharp, tangy, but ultimately nice, I will do my best to hurt you inside, if I believe it will bring you across the bridge you fear crossing.

In the end you will thank me.



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