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LETTERS

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



CUCKOO'S NEST OPTION

Eugene is a fine city. Many volunteer organizations take care of the homeless population in fair and foul weather. But too few citizens have direct contact. In spite of best intentions, I read that many volunteers cannot work with mentally disturbed people, especially when police presence is inadequate. If a substantial fraction of homeless people are mentally disturbed, this makes it difficult to accommodate all homeless in the same program.

A way to handle this is to have a distribution center (as in New York). For example, people coming in to St. Vincent de Paul can be filtered. Families with children are sent to various church locations that provide shelter. We do not know what happens to the mentally ill. Retention in a mental hospital might be an option, and then the solution to the problem of Kesey Square might appear to be a "cuckoo's nest."

But consider the alternative that we adopt. Mentally ill people are turned back onto the streets to possibly suffer the same fate as Thomas Egan. This name usage avoids the observation that maybe Egan was doing exactly what he wanted to do, as the record suggests. At any rate it must be better to abstain from drinking alcohol in a mental hospital than to freeze to death.

Oregon state is building a new mental hospital just south of Junction City, to open in 2015 and embody the most modern and up-to-date knowledge of treating mental illness. If we could send our mentally ill population to Oregon State Hospital (OSH), this would enable the other homeless programs in Eugene to work a lot better.

I have been in contact with OSH regarding requirements for admission. For each person admitted, it is necessary that a judge sign a form that the treatment provided by OSH is needed. Eugene would have to organize to make use of this service, perhaps through CAHOOTS and/or a mental health specialty court. There is no financial barrier, as we are already paying taxes for OSH.

The barriers to the solution of the Kesey Square problem and the Downtown Exclusion Zone are not legal or financial. We just have to want to do it. It would help if we paid more attention to professional opinion. In my observation, the City Council has twice rejected the advice of the city manager and police chief regarding Occupy Eugene and the Downtown Exclusion Zone. Yes, Eugene can be different, but at what cost?

J.C. Helmer
Eugene

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