

Homeless Challenges: Magnanimity and Responsibility increases Effective Engagement

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According to the Continuum of Care Report (2015), there are 1,220 homeless, sheltered, and chronically homeless individuals residing in Cumberland County, North Carolina. Further, the statistics are broken down into every demographic you can dream up. In 2014, there were 1,229, so in a year the numbers have decreased only by 9. Thousands of dollars are poured into the homelessness issue in Cumberland County annually, without making a much of an impact. This begs the question, how can we as a society bring about meaningful, lasting social change?

The programs in Cumberland County, NC are too numerous to list. One of which is Family Endeavors, a Texas based organization funded by Veteran's Affairs (VA). The organization seeks out veterans who are in need and have not been dishonorably discharged from the military. There are also various church based programs. Some believe that the only way to effectively rehabilitate the homeless and struggling is to lead them to religion and use religion to instill hope. The definition

of effective outreach differs greatly in these programs and has yet to become impactful.

As this problem is spreading in Cumberland County, many seem content to throw funding at various programs. I have spent a significant amount of time digging into this issue by attending various meetings, interviewing directors, and observing programs being conducted. I have observed successful food services, empty computer literacy classrooms, and a practically barren shelter. They all seem to be missing something. Providing basic essentials to those in need are not enough. While the public is happy to give money to such causes, it is unlikely that they establish relationships, build human capital, and supply someone with positive social interactions and a sense of community.

Resources

Every morning Fayetteville Area Operation Inasmuch opens its doors to feed breakfast for the homeless and struggling. A new group of volunteers arrive at 7:00 am to serve breakfast. Words of encouragement, devotions, prayers, and music are shared. This time also presents an opportunity for those in need to take a shower and do their laundry. Having sat through breakfast several times observing, there is hardly ever an empty seat. I sit and I listen to everything happening around me. They do not know I am not one of them, so I take mental notes and watch carefully. An enthusiastic group of volunteers introduce themselves. No one is listening. A staff member prays and speaks of hope on the loud speaker. No one cares. The young lady announces that there are shoes available in a men's size. The man next to me complains that they are not his size and remarks to his friend about how he asked for a pair of shoes months ago. The young lady asks if there are any birthdays this month. Several people raise their hands eagerly to receive a present. When they receive their present they complain about what is inside the bag. Completely unfazed, the young lady continues by announcing the classes, opportunities, and jobs that are available. She is completely ignored and just as they came in, they depart gaining nothing but calories headed back to the streets.

Every morning they walk past the open door to the other side of the building which offers various classes. The Skills Training Program offers computer training in basic keyboarding, Windows 7, and Microsoft Office 10. The goal of this class is to offer the homeless and struggling an opportunity to learn the fundamental skills to complete a new resume and to search the internet with the hopes of attaining gainful employment. There are instructors that donate their time to offer programs for GED classes and to learn a trade. The lists for these classes are filled with various

names like 'Dolly Parton' and 'Elvis Presley' and yet, the instructors often sit alone in the rooms without a single student.

It's noon and the Salvation Army is opening its doors for lunch. An armed guard stands in front of the door checking bags and maintaining order. Once you have gained entry, you follow the lunch line through the kitchen, where a volunteer slaps a spoonful of warm mush on your plate without ever making eye contact with you. You then sit in the cafeteria where representatives from local charities pass out their cards and attempt to engage you in conversation. This experience is much different from the breakfast received at Inasmuch. It feels more like a prison and you are surrounded by people that secretly despise you. There I witnessed a lot of cutting up, loud cursing, and an utter disregard for anything that resembled authority. Just as quickly as you were filed in, you are shoved out, back to the streets.

All throughout the day there are various people from local churches that pull up into a parking lot and open their trunk filled with donated food and toiletry items. The same toiletry items that were handed out earlier that day at Inasmuch. They take what is given to them and sell the donated items to local stores so that the store owner can in turn sell it to the public. Many homeless and struggling individuals receive food stamps that they sell for cash. They don't need to go buy food with them since the streets are flooded with food. Long story short, they are not hungry.

Shelter

Every night the Salvation Army opens its doors to provide shelter to people in need. Before you can enter you must go down to the police station and get a warrant check. Because the Salvation Army has housing for families and children they will not accept individuals with specific criminal histories and they will not accept anyone who is currently a fugitive from the law. Understandable. The 70 bed facility that sequesters men, women, and families into different wards, does not fill up on any given night. The only exception to these rules is when there is inclement weather. When the temperature is below a certain threshold the shelter has what they call 'white flag days'. They allow individuals to come in out of the elements into a separate room, without question, for a short period of time.

How could it be that the only functioning shelter in town, that has 70 beds, does not fill up? Having interviewed Mary Webster, the shelter director, and spoken with various people who have tried to seek shelter there, the answer is clear. The Salvation Army will allow individuals that pass their legal threshold to stay in the shelter for one week for free. After that one week they are required to pay \$7 a day. If they can't pay, they must leave. If the individual owes the Salvation Army any money, they must leave. If the individual has had any altercations with staff or other shelter mates, they must leave. If a person can pay the \$7 a day, they have 60 days before they must leave. After 6 months, they can come back and stay for another 60 day period and the cycle continues. So, many people don't bother and stay outside in tent city where they can do as they please.

The rules and qualifications for admission into the shelter are overly bureaucratic. Imagine with me for a second that you were a person who made a series of bad decisions that leave you homeless and unsheltered. You are not a veteran, and not entitled to any benefits that many Fayetteville programs might provide. It is likely that you didn't become homeless in 60 days, but you'd better figure a way out of it in 60 days. You are alone, likely jobless, in a shelter in which you will have to start accumulating income or it is under the bridge, or tent city for you. In those 60 days you will pay the Salvation Army a total of \$371. That may not seem like much to those of us who are gainfully employed, but that would be a terrifying proposition to the unemployed.

Panhandling and Self Worth

On any given day, if you know what you are looking for, you can spot 5-10 homeless people walking downtown on Hay Street. Despite the fact that panhandling is illegal, you can find people with signs at various intersections across town asking for money. The same people day in and day out, some of which I have learned by name. Many are not out there to find money to turn their life around, many are not truly in need. Food, shelter, and education are readily available but go unused. Some are perfectly content to continue to do what they are doing because it is easy. Far easier than walking into a room and challenging themselves to learn something new. At this point, I have watched hundreds of people stop and give them money, which by and large is deepening the problem. Not all panhandlers are homeless and not all homeless are panhandlers. Sometimes drivers are continuing someone's ability to live in the now and have no thoughts for the future. Every day I drive by the same man, he says his name is Earl. Earl stands at the intersection of Bragg Boulevard and Sante Fe Drive. He can be observed there every day from about 10 am till sometime around 7 pm. As soon as the light changes to red he stands along the center line and walks up and down until the light turns green. Over and over and over and over. This is how Earl spends his waking hours, asking for money from motorists. Why? Is there nothing else he could be

doing? Is his self worth so non-existent that puts himself at the mercy of others day in and day out?

Magnanimity

Where does this leave us? Truly with more questions than answers. But imagine that instead of handing money to the man on the corner with the sign, you stop and talk to him. What could happen? The term magnanimity comes to mind. In Latin, 'magnanimity' literally means 'great souled', we use it today to refer to generosity and forgiving.

A magnanimous person seeks to do great acts in proportion to their ability. Not everyone has the ability to take time out of their day to stop and have a conversation with a stranger, not everyone has the ability to volunteer at a soup kitchen or actually put in work serving others. What if instead, you simply tell someone on the street that their life matters? What kind of impact could that have? It can help someone to realize their worth and change their life, or it could do nothing at all. Maybe a shred of magnanimity would give them the confidence to move someone to make changes in the life or maybe they will blow you off and go back to the life they are leading. We won't know until we try something new, the only thing that is clear is that what we are doing now isn't eliminating the problem of homelessness in Cumberland County, North Carolina.