

WVC spat highlights need to understand homelessness

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I have been following the discussion in the press regarding the Kelly Benson Apartment complex for elderly homeless people in West Valley City with great concern.

I both sympathize with the neighbors in the affected area and express my strong confidence in the success of the Salt Lake County Housing Authority to safely manage the property.

We all want secure places for our children to play, and we all want them to be able to walk to and from school without fearing for their safety. Changes in the neighborhood, through development of any kind, bring fear of the unknown.

But fears, in this case, are unfounded. The housing authority is a professional organization that will once again demonstrate it can be trusted to manage the Kelly Benson Apartments. It conducts criminal background checks and carefully screens those admitted into the housing units.

Numerous studies show criminal behavior drops off markedly as people reach their 50s. Further, it is unfortunate that we associate criminal behavior with homelessness. Many of the homeless people in our community only have criminal records because they have been cited for minor infractions, such as jaywalking.

My agency, the Fourth Street Clinic, partnered with the Housing Authority of Salt Lake County years ago to build the Gregson Apartments in South Salt Lake. These apartments have been managed so successfully that South Salt Lake recently embraced a new and larger complex known as Grace Mary Manor, serving the needs of 84 additional chronically homeless people.

The housing authority's strong management track record spoke for itself as this city made its decision to do its part to end homelessness.

I encourage the good people of West Valley City to think carefully about their own families, their neighbors and their friends and acquaintances before they, too, quickly label all homeless people as potential threats.

I wonder how many of their loved ones have had periods in which they needed financial and emotional support to survive. Have they never had a family member or friend who needed drug or alcohol treatment? Have they never experienced the agony of seeing a loved one spiral down from an untreated mental illness?

For 20 years, I have worked as the executive director of Fourth Street Clinic, which provides primary and specialty health services to homeless people. During this period of time our health center has operated in the Pioneer Park area west of downtown Salt Lake City.

I have seen our neighborhood change from a decrepit warehouse district to one of the most desirable areas in which to build new housing. One only has to tour the Gateway shopping area to see that this is an up-and-coming place to live.

The transition from warehouse to hip downtown living has happened right in the middle of an area that also serves the emergency housing, health care and other needs of homeless people.

Through my interaction with homeless people, I have learned a great deal about who they are and where they come from. I have read countless research papers and visited dozens of other cities to see how they are resolving their homeless issues. The supportive housing approach adopted by Salt Lake County is one of the most enlightened in the country.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Catholic Archdiocese, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church and countless other religious organizations have played vital roles alongside not-for-profit agencies, private donors, local foundations and state, county and local governments to ensure that we do not exclude any segment of our population from access to safe and secure housing.

Men and women who experience chronic homelessness tend to die much earlier than those of us who are safely housed. The average age at death while homeless in Salt Lake County is a startling 48 years, based on data from the past four years.

I believe we owe it to ourselves and our community to provide the safest, most secure and supportive housing that we possibly can to those homeless people who survive into their 50s and beyond. These people have experienced amazing hardships, and they deserve a little security as they age.

The goal is to lease these units only to elderly people, and not provide mixed-age housing. The authority can be counted on to keep its word.

I ask those residents of West Valley City who are concerned about this housing to reconsider their position and open their hearts and community to this needy population.

Homelessness affects our entire state, and all communities must help to house this segment of our population if we are to succeed in solving this crisis.

*** ALLAN AINSWORTH is executive director of the Fourth Street Clinic, a not-for-profit organization located in west downtown that provides primary health care to area homeless people.**