

## Aggressive housing plan is the answer

BY JOHN N. LOZIER • APRIL 11, 2008

The solution to homelessness in Nashville is as simple as building modest homes and as difficult as living out our most deeply held values.

The housing crisis for low-income renters is nothing new. Mass homelessness emerged in Nashville and nationally in the early 1980s, a predictable result of devastating cuts to the federal housing budget, initiated under Jimmy Carter and pursued with a vengeance by Ronald Reagan.

The only major federal housing initiative in recent years is the Hope VI program, which has replaced many wretched, publicly owned apartments with far fewer, mostly duplex units. Improving housing conditions was necessary and proper, but the net loss of units continues a 30-year retreat from public responsibility to ensure that the populace is housed.

### Incentive to build is lacking

In the private rental market, there is little incentive to create and operate housing for the poorest of our neighbors. In the current mortgage crisis, the unregulated marketplace now savages the lives of many of our better-off neighbors.

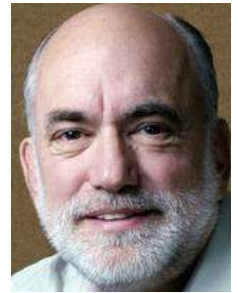
Lack of public or private housing is a guarantee of homelessness, but this is a situation that we could actually build our way out of. The Mayor's Commission on Homelessness is charged to create 1,800 new units of affordable housing by 2015. However, in the first three years of this 10-year plan, public funding was obtained for only 84 units. Mayor Karl Dean's 2009 budget proposal very helpfully seeks to accelerate the pace with increased funds.

A broader and more aggressive campaign is required to build sufficient affordable rental housing with supportive services available for the residents. Recognizing the limits of the Metro budget, the Homelessness Commission seeks private and philanthropic funding for the new housing efforts. Recognizing the limits of private funding, it is also time for the federal government to reassert its historic role in addressing mass homelessness. A good first step would be passage of the National Affordable Housing Trust Fund (SB 2523), which would pay for 1.5 million new units over 10 years, and which Sens. Lamar Alexander and Bob Corker have not yet co-sponsored. Our senators should endorse this crucial legislation and the Metro Council should encourage them with a formal resolution.

While shelters and temporary accommodations are not the answer to homelessness, they will remain necessary for years to come. Nashville should adopt shelter standards that ensure the health, safety and dignity of our homeless neighbors. We should also provide safe, medically supervised respite care for homeless people who are too ill to be on the streets, but not sick enough to be hospitalized. And we should push for the universal health insurance that is needed to break the tragic links between poor health and homelessness.

Our common humanity should make us recoil at the sight of our neighbors suffering and dying on our streets. It is time to reach a consensus that it must end. When we do, we will finally build the housing and provide the services that everyone needs to be healthy and housed.

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