



Stick to the plan

Don't let fear derail the mayor's effort to end homelessness in Baltimore

By Kevin Lindamood and Jeff Singer

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Just three months ago, Mayor Sheila Dixon announced Baltimore's appropriately ambitious "Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness." The plan has given rise to the best of human nature, fostering creativity, compassion and a constructive dialogue about how to make homelessness "rare and brief." Unsurprisingly, the mayor's initiative has also unleashed no small measure of bigotry and fear toward our homeless neighbors.

First, the good news. To its credit, the city has advanced the Ten Year Plan's underlying "Housing First" philosophy while expending significant political capital to ensure the availability of emergency care and supportive services (such as medical care and addiction treatment). And recently, Baltimore officials rightly have resisted the temptation to try to arrest their way out of the problem. Instead of issuing citations and making arrests, they've worked in recent months with service providers to house dozens of our most vulnerable neighbors; dozens more are to be housed in the coming months.

Given that similar programs nationally (including pilot initiatives in Baltimore) demonstrate that 85 percent of program participants remain housed after as many as five years, the Housing First model is the best documented approach to getting people off the streets and back into the mainstream.

Now for the bad news. Unfortunately, the renewed focus on ending homelessness has been accompanied by two responses that would undermine the Ten Year Plan's noble intent. First is the all-too-familiar "not in my backyard" phenomenon. Recent attempts to establish an effective shelter in Baltimore have met with fierce opposition and shameful mischaracterizations of the homeless as criminals, addicts and even sex offenders.

Our two decades of experience confirm that people living on the streets are much more often the victims of crime than the perpetrators. Opponents should understand that the city's temporary 24-hour shelter not only will assist those who use it, but also will reduce the number of people who live on the streets in their neighborhoods.

Second, a behind-the-scenes movement seems to be afoot that would tie new private-sector resources necessary to implement the plan to a commitment from the city to crack down on begging. Even though it's already illegal to solicit aggressively, to beg for money near an ATM, to point a sign toward traffic, or to panhandle verbally between dusk and dawn, some favor additional restrictions including the establishment of "begging-free" zones in certain areas.

Local leaders would do well to reject this fool's bargain as a self-defeating exchange that would compromise the Ten Year Plan's fundamental goal of ending homelessness. Saddling vulnerable Baltimoreans with criminal records would only prolong homelessness by complicating eligibility for housing, employment and public assistance - the resources necessary to end homelessness.

The city's experience with the Housing First model bears this out. People with records relating to "nuisance crime" citations and arrests - including begging - wait the longest for permanent housing.

Let's all agree on this: No one wants men and women camped out on street corners, aimlessly wandering residential streets, or huddled in the doorways of downtown establishments. This doesn't serve anyone's interests, and the city is pursuing effective strategies to stop it. The Ten Year Plan, Housing First, and the combination of 24-hour shelter and intensive services represent promising new models of addressing this old and seemingly intractable problem.

Arresting those who are forced to live their private lives in public spaces, and preventing the location of emergency services, are long-standing responses to homelessness. Their effect has been to exacerbate the problem. Baltimore no longer can afford these approaches. Let's all agree on this, too.

As a looming national recession threatens to strain existing services and send more people into the streets, blocking emergency services and further criminalizing public begging will serve only to keep people there.

Baltimore has a promising way to end homelessness. Let's not endanger the plan.

Kevin Lindamood (klindamood@hchmd.org) is vice president of external affairs and Jeff Singer is president and CEO of Health Care for the Homeless.

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