

They are not forgotten
By RICK BAKER
St. Petersburg Times
Published January 10, 2007

Homelessness is a serious challenge in America today. A few years ago, in Toronto, I attended a conference of downtown development agencies from throughout North America. The largest meeting focused on the homeless population. By the end of the conference, it was clear that all major cities struggle to find solutions and nobody has yet "solved" the problem.

The difficult balance is to satisfy our societal and moral obligation to help those in our community who are in need and who are willing to work toward independence, but not open the door to make us a magnet for people to come from other places, or for those who simply want our taxpayers to support a lifestyle that should not be tax-subsidized.

To satisfy that moral obligation, millions of dollars have been spent in our community to construct and support a network that provides substantial services to those in need. The common theme of these programs - and the philosophy of our city - has been to always help children, and to provide services to those adults who are willing to work toward independence from drug or alcohol addiction and who are willing to work at a job so they can become independent.

To that end, there are existing programs in our community supported by city, state, federal and private dollars that provide services and hundreds of shelter beds for children, people who have mental illness, people who are addicted to drugs and alcohol, and people who simply need some help to get back on their feet. The city's financial share of these expenses last year alone exceeded \$2.5-million.

In the past few years, using taxpayer dollars, we have added: the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Center of Hope, providing food downtown for anyone who is hungry, along with 128 shelter beds; the Davis Bradley Substance Abuse Center in Midtown, offering 100 beds for drug-offender alternative placement, along with an "access to recovery" program serving up to 1,000 people annually; the Johnny Ruth Clark medical clinic facility, providing medical and dental services based on need; the Salvation Army one-stop center downtown, which provides a vehicle for those in need to access the many programs described above, along with their 105 shelter beds; many residential facilities operated by Boley Center for the mentally ill; many affordable housing residences subsidized by city-allocated state-housing funds; Florida's second (after Fort Lauderdale) homeless outreach team, which searches out the homeless and attempts to connect them (if they are willing) to the one-stop or other services described above; and others. As mayor, I have developed, supported or sought funding for these programs, and I will continue to work for people in our community who are in need.

To the extent that there remain unmet needs, the city is supportive of Pinellas County's county-wide homeless plan. Under this initiative, our county is actively working toward identifying a mid-county shelter facility that could serve, among other purposes, as an overflow shelter when we experience our seasonal increase of people in need each winter.

I do not support the concept of "drop-in shelters" that provide no structured programs geared toward independence and continue for an indefinite period of time. These facilities become attracters of people from other places because of the free shelter - a no-responsibility opportunity.

In the two weeks after the illegal tent city opened downtown, our overall downtown homeless count saw a 30 percent increase, and the prospects for it growing were significant. This week, city and county officials, along with social workers, are meeting with the remaining individuals at the tent city to identify alternative arrangements for those who are willing to work toward independence.

We should, and we do, provide services for those in our community who need help getting back on their feet. To the extent that there are unmet needs, we will continue to work with Pinellas County and others to seek out solutions.

But the government cannot solve all problems. The community, including our businesses and churches, must be engaged in constructive ways to help our neighbors who are in need.

It may seem like an easy way to make yourself feel better when you provide food in Williams Park, give a dollar to a panhandler or toss a tent out your window, but the reality is that these acts do nothing to move someone toward independence. Instead, become a volunteer, or give money, to one of the many charities described above. They are truly changing lives daily. Better yet, get your business or church to sponsor one person (through these agencies) to help them become an independent member of our community.

St. Petersburg and Pinellas County are, and will continue to be caring places where people of good will seek the best approach to help those in need. If the entire community works together, we can and will expand our ability to help our neighbors lead more independent and enjoyable lives.

Rick Baker is mayor of St. Petersburg.

Source: Mayor Rick Baker

Help for the homeless - A sample of local providers includes:

- ASAP Homeless Services (women and children)
- CASA (woman and children of domestic violence)
- Family Resources (runaway youth)
- Salvation Army (men, women, families)
- YWCA Family Village (women with children)
- Alpha, A Beginning (women with children)
- Brookwood (female youth)
- Resurrection House (women with children)
- St. Petersburg Free Clinic Beacon House (single men)
- Westcare Turning Point (men and women)
- St. Petersburg Free Clinic Women's Residence (single women)
- Operation PAR Detox (men and women)
- Personal Enrichment Through Mental Health Services (men and women)
- ACTS (men and women)
- Christian Recovery Centers (men and women)
- Mustard Seed Inn (men and women)
- Our Brother's Keeper (men)
- Boley Center for Behavioral Healthcare (men and women)

-Benedict Haven (men)

-Suncoast Center for Community Mental Health (homeless outreach program)

© Copyright 2002-2007, St. Petersburg Times