

Homeless in America

By JULIA VITULLO-MARTIN

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Can urban street homelessness be ended? In a sort of Nixon-goes-to-China reversal of expectations, the Bush White House argues that the answer is yes -- and is putting substantial effort and resources (over \$4 billion annually) into proving it. "We're setting a new marker in front of the country," says Philip Mangano, executive director of the White House's U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. "After 20 years of seeing the problem get worse, we're no longer 'managing' the homeless crisis. We're ending the disgrace." He cites impressive declines in street counts since the White House started their big push in 2003: 50% in Philadelphia, 30% in Miami, 28% in San Francisco, 26% in Dallas, 21% in Nashville. New York City has seen a 13% decrease since 2005, the first year in which a citywide street census was taken.

Usually male and enduring some impairment -- mental illness, drug or alcohol addiction, disease -- those who've lived on the streets for more than a year ("the chronics") make up about 10% of the two million or so Americans regarded as homeless. They regularly consume a disproportionate amount of public resources -- sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars per person. They also often wreak disproportionate havoc on both commercial areas and residential neighborhoods -- inducing compassion fatigue even in usually tolerant cities like New York and San Francisco.

Traditional homeless advocates have seldom paid attention to the destructive effects some street people had on neighborhoods. That's been changing, in part at the insistence of mayors, who fund most homeless services, and corporate leaders. New York's Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who calls street homelessness "intolerable" on both humanitarian and economic grounds, says, "I was elected to take on the tough issues, the ones people said you couldn't do anything about -- and that some people pander on." Not one to shy from a fight, he gave a speech in July calling on mayors and communities to free themselves from the tyranny of the advocates.

"How well a city takes care of the least of its people says a great deal about it from a business recruitment point of view," says Horace Sibley, chairman of Atlanta's Regional Commission on Homelessness. In 2001 Mayor Shirley Franklin appointed Mr. Sibley to head a commission on homelessness, organized with the United Way. After the commission issued a report in 2002, the mayor asked members to stay on, implementing their recommendations, which combined permanent housing with medical care, mental health and substance abuse counseling, job training and placement to help people move toward living independently. "It's much less expensive to put chronically homeless folks in safe and decent housing, giving them the support system they need," says Mr. Sibley, "than it is to have them perpetually rotating in and out of hospitals, jails, ambulances and psychiatric hospitals." Over the last year the number of street people in Atlanta has declined 8.5%. The plan seems to be working, says A.J. Robinson, executive director of

Central Atlanta Progress. "The business community will rally around strong political leadership that offers solutions on this thorny issue."

Atlanta and other cities have been building on the findings of University of Pennsylvania Professor Dennis Culhane, who pointed out in the late 1990s that a \$12,000 per-year supportive housing unit was far more effective in keeping people off the street than a \$35,000 per-year shelter bed. But the homeless industry remained oriented to the big shelters created in the mid-1980s, which Mr. Mangano calls the "old status quo response of ad hoc, uncoordinated, well-intentioned, but ineffective crisis intervention." A bowl of soup and a blanket was thought to be the best we could do, he adds. Armed with Mr. Culhane's data and convinced that concentrating resources on the chronics could produce results, Mr. Mangano approached his job (left vacant by President Clinton) zealously. Believing in the effectiveness of political will, partnership and 10-year plans, he traveled the country relentlessly, working with states, counties, cities and the private sector to coordinate systematic approaches. "No one level of government can get the job done alone," he says, in part because federal resources go to the states as block grants that are spent by multiple jurisdictions.

The ideas that form the basis of the most successful 10-year plans -- and that are revolutionizing the long stagnant field of homeless services -- originated in New York, once the epicenter of street homelessness and now the model to be emulated. Not all of the ideas sound very Republican, but Mr. Mangano is an eminently practical and non-ideological man. The basic strategy, called Housing First, comes from a Harlem-based group, Pathways to Housing, which does not require psychiatric or substance-abuse training as a qualification for housing. Clients do not have to be either sober or drug-free.

This rubs many people the wrong way, including many advocates. Others, like Rosanne Haggerty, executive director of Common Ground Community, which builds and manages supportive housing in Manhattan, say it is right to shift the emphasis from private to public behavior. "We don't ask our lease-holding tenants, any more than any landlord asks, whether a tenant is drinking in his or her apartment. But we're very strict about behavior. If someone behaves badly, we get on it quickly -- figuring out what needs to be changed. We have few rules, but we enforce them vigorously." From the neighborhood's point of view -- and Ms. Haggerty runs buildings in once-notorious Times Square -- it is the public behavior that matters.

Atlanta's Mr. Sibley agrees, adding, "What appeals to us is that once a person has a decent place to live, [he] can get [his] life in order step by step. Each individual still has to take responsibility for [his] own future." Which leads to the perennial problem: employment. If the goal of independent living for former street people is to be achieved, or even attempted, training and counseling have to be part of the mix. Atlanta's model was a New York employment program -- Ready, Willing and Able. George McDonald, founder and former businessman, estimates that at least half of the men he works with for the first time have previously been homeless for substantial periods. "The vast majority of homeless single adults in our program," says Mr. McDonald, "are coming out of prison or jail, don't have an education, and do have substance abuse problems."

Well over half of every cohort of new RWA clients succeed the first time they try to live and work on their own after graduating from the program. In Atlanta, Mr. Sibley says the RWA model has helped 60 formerly chronically homeless people move into housing and employment, at a savings to the city of about \$1 million.

Yet Mr. Mangano lives with one huge failure: Los Angeles, which he calls the Ground Zero of American street homelessness. Entangled in bureaucratic wrangling among government agencies, the city has made virtually no progress in ending the encampments of 5,000-plus homeless people on the former Skid Row. The high floors of elegant new downtown skyscrapers look out on block after block of tents, shacks and cardboard, a sight reminiscent of the Great Depression.

"Los Angeles is doing phenomenally well economically," says Mr. Mangano. "So of course we can get to the bottom of street homelessness. Because while we're doing this for moral, spiritual and human reasons, it's the economic reasons that drive the political will." Mr. Mangano intends to deploy a task force of the most successful homeless officials and operators to work with the city.

Will economics eventually end the "disgrace" of street homelessness in America's wealthiest cities? It's about one-third of the way there.

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