

City blunders attempt to reduce homelessness

Solutions just are not working, according to city council officials

By Annabelle Pardys
STAFF WRITER

Despite Asheville's implementation of a 10-year plan to eradicate homelessness and to increase enforcement of anti-panhandling laws, levels of homelessness in the Asheville-Buncombe area remain steady.

"On average we have around 600 homeless in Asheville on a daily basis, which is a problem because we only have 350 shelter beds on a daily basis," said Moss Bliss, president of the Asheville Homeless Network.

In early 2005, Asheville City Council and Buncombe County jointly adopted a 10-year plan to eradicate homelessness in the Asheville-Buncombe area. Almost two years later, members of city council and area activists working to address the issues of homelessness agreed there has been little improvement to the plight of the homeless in the city.

"I don't think we've made much authentic progress on our homelessness issue," said Carl Mumpower, Asheville City Council member.

Mumpower, who voted against the 10-year plan, criticized its lack of accountability.

One of the central and most controversial elements of the plan was the initiative to move approximately 30 individuals identified as "chronically homeless" directly into permanent housing and then provide necessary recovery and support programs, according to Mumpower.

Traditionally, homelessness relief models have favored "housing readiness" programs in which participants must earn permanent housing through participation in treatment and job training programs.

Red tape and lack of available funding and housing impedes the



IREY BOUVIER - STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

"Country," a part of Asheville's homeless population for eight years, moved to the city for logging work but lost his job after his friend and employer died. The city recently instituted a 10-year plan for the Housing First initiative, but some city officials believe it is ineffective.

Housing First initiative, a part of the 10-year plan which aims to provide housing before addressing potential problems such as mental illness and alcohol addiction, according to Bliss.

"There are lots of holes in the plan. There is no way to end homelessness. There are people who want to be homeless. There are people who slip through the cracks no matter how much you do for

them," Bliss said. "If we get 80 percent or 90 percent, that would be fabulous. It would be more than the government has ever done for the homeless. Forty percent is probably enough to justify the program."

Providing permanent housing to a small group of people who have been deemed "chronically homeless" becomes "a distraction from a more meaningful

solution," according to Mumpower.

"You can't give addicts a blank check and expect them to stop using," said Mumpower. "If you don't create accountability, there's no incentive to change."

Downtown residents noticed the consistent homeless population as well.

"I've definitely had more and more people asking me for

money," said Christine Whiteman, resident of the downtown area. "It changes what it's like to walk downtown because you're worried about who's going to approach you."

Homeless people in the downtown area have become more aggressive, according to Mumpower.

The increased enforcement of anti-panhandling ordinances helps

make things a little less comfortable for the predatory panhandlers downtown, according to Mumpower.

"I don't like being approached downtown," said Whiteman. "But I just don't think arresting people for being homeless and needing money is going to change anything in the long run."

Panhandling laws are unconstitutional, Bliss said.

"It says in the Bible, 'Ask and you shall receive.' It doesn't say, 'Ask and we'll tell you that you can't do that here,'" Bliss said.

According to Mumpower, there are many different types of homelessness. Some people are authentically down on their luck, free spirits, mentally ill or addicts. Some, he said, are social predators.

Many of the "chronic homeless" that the 10-year plan is attempting to put in permanent housing are

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Asheville City Council

predatory homeless, according to Mumpower.

"Some of these people have been arrested over 100 times," Mumpower said. "They abuse the hospital system by claiming to be suicidal and take a four or five day vacation at the taxpayers expense."

Whiteman said that viewpoint might show the lack of services for people, if they have to go to the hospital to get off the streets.

"I can't imagine seeing suicide watch at the hospital as a vacation," said Whiteman.

A large percentage of the homeless in the Asheville-Buncombe area have jobs, Bliss said.

There aren't enough resources available to provide the kind of treatment programs that cities like Raleigh are able to offer, according to Mumpower.

"The private sector should take more responsibility for the homeless," Bliss said.

Students get Hands On to help with Katrina relief

By Courtney Metz
STAFF WRITER

Instead of going straight home after fall finals, a group of 18 students traveled to Biloxi, Miss. to assist with Hurricane Katrina restoration.

"It taught me a lot about service and how important it is to live for something higher than yourself," said Ben Yoder, senior sociology student. "It just really solidified my idea that my life should be dedicated to service."

The students spent Dec. 13 to 20 in Biloxi working with the Hands On Gulf Coast, a non-profit volunteer organization that provides food and board to all of the volunteers during their stay. The organization also provides tasks for volunteers, including the restoration of water and wind-damaged houses, providing food and service at the local Salvation Army and walking dogs at the Humane Society.

"Hands On has a permanent base camp in Biloxi where they receive volunteers from all over the country," said Jason Tuell, a junior literature student and intern at the Key Center. "They run programming. They run all the trips that go out of the camps. They provide leaders for things like gutting houses and reconstructing houses. So, they really have a foundation set in Biloxi for volunteers to come in and start working."

The Key Center sponsored the event, making it free for all volunteer students and providing transportation to Biloxi.

"The only thing we had to do was get to Biloxi, and Hands On provided everything else," Tuell said.

Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in August 2005, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration con-

siders it, in economic terms, the costliest storm in U.S. history, costing approximately \$60 billion in insured losses.

Biloxi was a good place to go because there is still a large amount of work to be done in the area, according to Tuell.

"Biloxi was hit very hard," Tuell said. "Right on the bay there is a tremendous amount of damage. When you go down to Biloxi, the only things running right now like they were running before the storm are casinos. It's kind of an odd juxtaposition. There are these big casinos and everything else is just devastated."

However, the students said they gained as much from the trip as those they were helping.

"It was a real bonding experience," Yoder said. "I made a lot of friends. Sharing an experience that was such a meaningful experience really brings people together, more so than hanging out and partying. Doing something meaningful together brings meaning to the group and to the friendship."

Nick Ladd, senior environmental sciences and philosophy student, said the trip brought a lot of different social groups from around campus together for a common cause.

"I think we really solidified some good friendships there," Ladd said. "I couldn't have asked for a better experience over winter break. To be given the opportunity to go to a state that I've never visited before and meet a whole new culture of people was amazing."

Hands On Gulf Coast continues to ask for volunteers throughout the year, as the restoration needed to the city and surrounding area is

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DONATED BY BEN YODER

Clayton Crowhurst and Amanda Alvarez, freshman students, pass trash to Kendra Sylver, junior student, while Paul Harbison, senior environmental studies student heads back into the house students spent all day gutting. Hurricane Katrina near destroyed the house, which belonged to Biloxi resident Mae Chester. UNC Asheville students removed water-damaged possessions alongside Hands On Gulf Coast members. All volunteers wore respirator masks to prevent themselves from breathing in mold, which proved to be the most difficult obstacle to overcome when gutting, cleaning and prepping damaged houses for building crews.