

## THERE ARE NO EASY SOLUTIONS FOR HOMELESS

by Andre Coe  
The Dallas Examiner

DALLAS ( NNPA)—When local businessman Mike Rawlings was announced as the city's new homeless czar, Mayor Laura Miller gave him a mission: minimize Dallas' homeless population, gain support for the November bond election and then get the homeless assistance center built.

After voters easily passed a \$23.8 million bond election Nov. 8, to build the facility, it appears Rawlings has the easiest of his tasks behind him. Now comes the hard part, minimizing the city's homeless population as it prepares to open the doors to its new facility in 2008.

Problems along the way include: finding a location to build the new assistance center that takes into consideration the arguments that people have given against building a huge homeless shelter near downtown Dallas (it would ruin revitalization, Larry Hamilton of the Heart of Dallas Partnership has been quoted as saying), getting the chronic homeless to embrace the facility and use it despite years of living on the streets and working out a new lease deal with the Day Resource Center's owner, Rader Properties,

Add to that list recent news that Hurricane Katrina evacuees may soon be evicted from local apartments once federal assistance runs out and Rawlings has no small task on his hands.

The former Pizza Hut president and chief concept officer may have an ace up his sleeve though. He is "optimistic" that when he briefs the Dallas City Council on Dec. 5 that will be "a temporary place for the homeless." If talks with Rader Properties do not work out, he said, "there are contingency plans." Dallas sites will have to wait to learn what those contingency plans are though because Rawlings will share those plans only with the council before going public. That is of course if discussion with Rader Properties do not work out.

As for critics of the plan thus far (the City Council authorized a 10- year plan to end chronic homelessness last year), Rawlings believes that if you ask 10 different people their opinion on this matter, you will come up with 10 different opinions. That doesn't mean you stop what you are doing though because you can't please everyone.

First of all, this facility is going to supply the basics of what the homeless are going to need, he said. It's not going to be the Four Seasons but I'm very confident that the center will be big enough to take care of our homeless.

In the days after Hurricane Katrina and Rita, North Texans lent a Texas-sized hand to assist evacuees. Many opened up their homes, donated clothes, volunteered time and offered money to local charities and churches.

Donated items piled high underneath an overpass outside downtown's Reunion Arena. The response was so great that many volunteer agencies had to turn away donations and assistance.

They were swamped.

Many ask, "Why can't we offer that same type of assistance for the homeless people who stand on street corners or outside businesses and along highways throughout the city?"

"People saw Hurricane Katrina and it was an act of Mother Nature," said Lynne Sipiora, executive director of the Samaritan Inn in McKinney - Collin County's only homeless shelter. "They can relate to that."

Sipiora said her facility has a 150 - bed capacity. It is regularly full and has a 70-percent success rate. However, she pointed out that it has a different population than Dallas' homeless.

At the Samaritan Inn, residents are "situational" homeless compared to the 'chronic' homeless in Dallas. Before they can even check into the Samaritan Inn, they have to be clear of any alcohol or drug addiction for at least 30 days, she said if they have a mental illness, they need to be receiving treatment for it, she said, although mental illnesses are handled on a case - by case basis.

It's when people hear that a person is on the streets because they have a drug or alcohol problem that people say, "Well that's their fault," she said.

When asked how Dallas might solve its homeless problem, Sipiora quickly pointed out that people become homeless for a variety of reasons and until you address those reasons, you really cannot solve the problem.

"Maybe Dallas needs to set up different programs," she said. "Financial problems? You go here. Mental problems? You go here."

You can't help them become independent until you understand why they become homeless. Sometimes it's just rotten bad luck. Another reason is maybe a young woman becomes pregnant (and is kicked out), another reason is bad choices.

You gotta understand the cause.



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