

Mike Rhodes: Look at homeless in a new and helpful way

By Mike
Rhodes

There are thousands of homeless people living in Fresno. They exist because the economic and political system has failed them.

They are the victims of an inadequate health care system, an economic collapse brought on by the greed of the ultra-wealthy and a government policy that has not met their needs. There are plenty of houses and apartments in Fresno – enough for everyone, but somehow we still have people sleeping on ditch banks, in alleys and behind bushes.

To make matters worse, there are some in this community who want to criminalize and insult the homeless. They call them vagrants, say they are drug addicts and must be eliminated. Not content with blaming the victim, these politicians and their allies want to implement an approach that is even more harsh than the incredibly brutal policy at City Hall.

Allow me to suggest an alternative.

We should begin to treat the homeless with dignity and respect. They are our sons, daughters, fathers and mothers. We should treat them as we would like to be treated if we were in their situation.

If I found myself homeless, I would want to know that there was someplace where I could sleep that was safe and legal. This would be a place that has drinking water, a place where the trash is picked up regularly and where I can go to the bathroom. We could set up places like this all over town (including north of Shaw Avenue), where every homeless person could go to be safe as they get back on their feet. This would eliminate many of the public-health issues that people complain about. But this is not enough.

As obvious as it sounds, we are going to end homelessness by providing homeless people with decent, affordable housing. Numerous studies have said and experience has shown that this would be less expensive than our current failed system. Yes, we can end homelessness, and it would cost less than the disaster we have today.

Can you think of anything in Fresno that needs improving? Schools? Roads? Infrastructure? We could be using our tax dollars to improve our lives, rather than chasing the homeless from place to place with a stick.

Simply providing housing is not enough. We will need to improve access to social services so the homeless can overcome whatever challenges they have. That should include, but is not limited to, mental-health services, job training, continuing education and drug treatment.

Doing this is going to require enormous political will and the skill to transition from the current way of doing things to a new paradigm. Instead of spending millions of dollars on emergency medical care, policing and maintaining the current system of shelters and food lines, we need to plow that money into providing enough affordable housing and social services to end homelessness.

Even if we took every homeless person off the street today, new homeless people would emerge tomorrow. We will have an ongoing need to maintain safe and legal places for the homeless to go, develop a rapid transition to housing and provide whatever assistance is needed to help the homeless get back on their feet.

We all know there are criminal elements in every group, rich, poor, black, white, and everywhere in between. It is disingenuous at best to suggest that the homeless contain more than their fair share of outlaws. To suggest that the homeless as a group are dangerous, dirty criminals is like stereotyping Jews or African Americans. Politicians and

their allies who go down that road might want to give a second thought to what scapegoating marginalized minorities can lead to. Spoiler alert: It does not end well for the oppressed or the oppressor.

Until we fix our economic and political system to put human needs before corporate profits, we must find a way to help those who have ended up on our streets with no place to call home. The homeless have a right to exist and a right to live in our city. We can and must do better than what the city of Fresno is currently doing and must not be seduced by the heartless and cruel alternative proposed by opportunistic politicians and those who benefit financially from the exploitation of the homeless.

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