

America's nomads

According to a 2017 report from our own Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), at any given night there are over a half-million Americans sleeping on our streets, under our bridges or, if they're lucky, at a homeless shelter (65% of the homeless sleep in homeless shelters). An even more disturbing fact is that about 5 million Americans currently qualify for admittance to a homeless shelter! Happily, this is one of the rare lists where New Mexico doesn't figure as the worst of America's states. Topping the list for most homeless people is Alabama followed by Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, and so on. The city with the largest number of homeless people (78,676) is New York City.

Of the top ten cities with the largest population of homeless people, nine are run by Democrats. Does that mean that Democrat-run municipalities are more welcoming or are willing to offer succor to the homeless? Maybe. It could also have something to do with the paucity of jobs in those cities or housing costs or a myriad of other reasons. One of the indisputable facts is that homelessness spiked in the 1980s when housing and social services were cut. Unfortunately, that coincided a few years later with America's recession. Fast forward to the 'Great Recession of 2009' when 1.5 million children were homeless and it doesn't take a social scientist to know that the problem has gotten considerably worse.

According to Wikipedia, the causes of homelessness in the United States include lack of affordable housing, divorce, lawful eviction, negative cash flow, post traumatic stress disorder, foreclosure, fire, natural disasters (hurricane, earthquake, or flood), mental illness, physical disability, having no family or supportive relatives, substance abuse, lack of needed services, elimination of pensions and unemployment entitlements, no or inadequate income sources (such as Social Security, stock dividends, or annuity), poverty (no net worth), gambling, unemployment, and low-paying jobs. Homelessness in the United States affects many segments of the population, including families, children, domestic violence victims, ex-convicts, veterans, and the aged. Efforts to assist the homeless include federal legislation, non-profit efforts, increased access to healthcare services, supportive housing, and affordable housing.

In 2009, President Obama signed several pieces of legislation that addressed the homelessness crisis like the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act which allocated an additional \$1.5 billion to HUD for the "Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP). The idea was to help individuals and families who are otherwise healthy - and not chronically homeless - in escaping homelessness or preventing it. Another piece of legislation was the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act which re-authorized HUD's Homeless Assistance programs.

Each community handles its homeless problem differently, but all rely to some degree on the Federal government and non-profit groups who work hand-in-hand with municipalities to provide counseling, medical care, food, shelter and clothing to the homeless. They are aided by faith-based organizations and many volunteers. America's homeless problem is a complex one and many hands, heads and hearts must come together to help those in the homeless community to transition back into 'normal' life.

The City of Albuquerque doesn't have accurate information on just how many homeless people are on its streets. Estimates range from 1,300 to 5,000, and of that number it is thought that around 80% have mental health issues, drug addiction or other problems. Panhandling has become rampant in certain parts of the city, along busy streets, and has presented problems at busy intersections. No one knows for sure how many of the homeless are illegal immigrants, but it can be assumed that the number is probably small considering that group's fear of being discovered and being subject to deportation.

A new mayor and a new administration has recently taken charge in Albuquerque, and the newly elected mayor wants to establish an emergency triage center for helping the homeless with their addiction and mental health issues. He also wants to assist the homeless in transitioning to affordable housing. While the city's heart may be in the right place, it will need to overcome a number of hurdles to make a dent in the homeless problem like: where to locate affordable housing; how to move the homeless from high population and vehicle density areas; and most importantly, understanding their individual reasons for being homeless so that a concerted effort can be made on their behalf to help them return to society.

Stephan Helgesen is a former career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in thirty different countries, specializing in export promotion. He is now a political analyst and strategist and author of over 900 articles and nine books on politics, the economy and social trends. He can be reached at: stephan@stephanhelgesen.com