

Adjacent opportunities (17.1)

Adrift

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It's difficult to find anyone, no matter their politics, who is in favor of homelessness. And yet there are currently 610,000 homeless people in the United States, and 7.7 million Americans at risk of becoming homeless due to economic factors. Of those 610,000, 65%, or nearly 400,000, are living in shelters or temporary housing. Despite these very unfortunate numbers, they do represent a 21% decline in homelessness since 2010. Only 79% to go.

In Los Angeles, the numbers of those living on the streets range from 50,000 to 70,000. During last year's homeless count, LA decided to institute new protocols. Counters couldn't just record the number of those they identified, they also had to speak with them. But in true bureaucratic fashion, the questions they were given were often inappropriate and void of any real human connection to the issues these people were facing. For example in one such survey, the initial question asked had to do with sexual orientation.

To many, homelessness is a nuisance and the homeless something less than human. "They're not like me. They're mostly crazy, or criminals, and definitely dangerous." What is not understood is that of the total homeless population, only 14% are characterized as "chronically" homeless. But then that 14% are often the most visible. But what of the other 525,000.

One very positive development is the practice known as "housing first." By providing housing to the homeless, a whole slew of issues are resolved. Now, before the hue and cry goes out about cost and government giveaways. Before half the population who thinks homeless is not a good thing, but who still don't think taxpayer money should be spent on "those" people, there is an important and rather convincing point to be made. In a recent Huffington Post article, it was noted that researchers repeatedly found that the process of housing first not only reduced homelessness it saved money. How? First, providing permanent housing, reduced the impact and costs placed on the criminal justice system when homelessness is treated punitively. And second, and of even greater importance it reduced hospital and medical costs.

These researchers also found that 90% of the population that enters these programs stay in their housing and meet all the requirements. For the 525,000, not chronically homeless, but whose economics pushed them onto the street, having a real home and address was the crucial issue in helping them re-establish their lives.

For those with greater needs, the effect of housing first is equally as significant, if not more. Housing First comes with an agreement that the homeless must enter a variety of treatment programs. And surprisingly, here is where the cost savings come. This portion of the homeless population often incur a larger share of the costs on both the justice and medical systems. However, when you give people the medications they need rather than allowing them to self-medicate, a great many of the problems caused by substance abuse and abnormal psychological behavior are reduced. There's less crime and fewer emergency room visits. Subsequently, the cost to society is far less than the punitive approach some think is the only way to deal with the issue.

For all involved, the greatest payback comes in giving people back their lives. They are able to re-emerge from the shadows, and regain a sense of confidence and inclusion. This clear emergent phenomenon unfolds by providing the appropriate alternative to self-medication, a doctor's prescription and the agreement to follow the treatment.

The issue is still finding the housing and convincing policy makers that this approach is far better than the more traditional and punitive methods. Enter Tina Hovesepian, a young architect living in Los Angeles. Tina saw the pain and suffering of the homeless, not just in the United States but in Asia as well, and came up with a design and a plan. Using an inspiration from Japanese origami, she designed a homeless shelter that could fold up into a compact and portable size, was made out of coated cardboard, and could be produced for less than \$30. She called her company, Cardborigami.

From her field studies in LA and adjacent communities, it became evident that the money and the will to provide permanent housing, no matter how effective, simply wasn't to be found. She also knew her Cardborigami design could supply a temporary solution, but something this innovative and different always makes policy people nervous. To assuage some of that fear, getting one of Tina's remarkable collapsible structures comes with some strings.

Utilizing the concept of housing first, Cardborigami's four step process begins first by providing one of her structures. Assembled in under 30 minutes, these amazing shelters immediately instill a sense of self-empowerment in the recipient. Not only do they have real shelter from the elements, they have agreed to make a change in how they have lived their lives.

That agreement connects them to services that include life training, social and mental health services, substance abuse counseling, job training tools, and even instruction on how to use a smart phone. In addition, Cardborigami works with the

population to make sure they are receiving the benefits that they are due, but often fail to obtain simply because they haven't properly filled out the paperwork.

Cardborigami then partners with other organizations to get people into permanent housing. But by going through this program, Hovesepian and her team aren't relegated to locating housing designated for the homeless, rather they seek alternative housing situations, for example, renovating vacant or abandoned living spaces within a municipality.

By partnering with other organizations, Cardborigami's program helps sustain the housing provided by initiating job training, and working with other organizations to find jobs for participants and offering entrepreneurial courses for those interested in starting something of their own. Now to some the idea of entrepreneurship and the homeless sound oxymoronic. But the fact is, for many, surviving on the street requires a tremendous entrepreneurial capacity... some of it is actually legal.

What emerges out of the interaction of these four steps is people living successfully off the streets, costing the community less and when working again, giving back to the society that had provided a hand up. For the 86% of the homeless population who because of economic hardship find themselves on the streets, this is a fresh start. For those more troubled, it gets them the assistance they need. And all of it begins by folding cardboard into a "starter" home.

Municipalities all over the country are wrestling with how to effectively treat their homeless population. Often the conversation is about how do we get them out? Interestingly, many other programs get lost in how we can help them. It is this "Us" and "Them" perspective which actually stifles progress. We have to realize as a society that the homeless are also us.

Municipalities are renowned for putting on conferences to end homelessness. But they are invariably lacking one very important ingredient, the homeless. Any meaningful problem solving needs to include the population effected, not as an outsider or an invited guest, peering in from the fringe, but as valued and integrated participants in the whole process.

Change is predicated on interaction. Nothing new emerges without the narrative. And if that narrative is made up of us and not them, what emerges has little hope of being adopted by the "them" and very little chance of affecting the whole.

What folks like Cardborigami recognize and live on a daily basis is our interdependence. It's not us helping them, but us helping each other.

Treating homelessness punitively and as a criminal act may remove the problem from the immediate surroundings so we don't have to look at it, but it does nothing to solve the problem. And for all those that argue we don't have the money to treat it any other way; they ignore the fact that their approach costs more, is temporary, does not have a lasting effectiveness and is a greater burden on the system they want to dismantle.

The answer is not less interaction, it's more. Real change only emerges when the narrative is neither fixed nor exclusive. If no one wants homelessness, doesn't it make sense to employ practices that cost less and are successful in addressing the problem? One would think so.