

# The decriminalization of the homeless



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The decriminalization of the homeless has resulted in a lot of people, especially the elderly, in being subjected to the most pitiable conditions. Since 2005, the number of homeless people found sleeping or camping in public places has alarmingly increased. The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), which was established in 1984, is the oldest national homelessness advocacy organization. It is comprised of local and statewide advocates, representatives of homeless coalitions, service providers, faith-based organizations.

It continues to document discriminatory practices in more aggressive forms. The goal is to end and prevent homelessness. The Federal Government has sent billions on programs for the homeless since the enactment of the McKinsey Act in 1987. IN Gainesville and Alachua County, estimates reveal that there are an estimated 1, 000 homeless persons. There are 350 shelter beds, leaving more than a third of these homeless unsheltered each night. These include women, children, the elderly, and the physically and mentally disabled.

The decriminalization of the homeless in the City of Gainesville will affect several issues. Some of these are listed here. Efficiency—With the decriminalization of homelessness, more intervention strategies would emerge; such as multi-disciplinary treatment, supportive housing for homeless persons with disabilities, and improved access to free health care and affordable housing. Locally, public safety agencies shell out approximately \$1 million yearly in dealing with homelessness issues.

The cost to arrest, transport, book, house, and process a person through the First Appearance could be as high as \$600 per incident. According to the

National Law Center on Homeless and Poverty 2003 Report, " Punishing Poverty," some sources report that the daily cost is as much as \$140 day/person. On the other hand, the average cost of providing counseling, housing, food, and transportation for one day is approximately \$40. With the decriminalization, there would be more efficiency in the long run as the problems will be answered in a more effective manner.

Political Feasibility Criminalizing the acts of people to live life without offering any legal alternatives is supported by the Criminal Justice Legal Foundation and the Center for the Community Interest or formerly the American Alliance for Rights and Responsibilities. These organizations apply the rules of private ownership to public space. They advocate anti-homeless policies on the pretext that it is to preserve the common good. But, in actuality, they may be in violation of both State Constitutions, or the U. S. Constitution (according to the NCH Report).

For example, laws prohibiting or limiting panhandling may violate the First Amendment. In the city of Gainesville, the key stakeholders, including civic leaders, politicians, as well as housing developers, finally gathered to effectively help the homeless population. The Gainesville Community Ministry has helped in the process but the problem is getting worse. Other housing programs are on the waiting list. Decriminalization will help ease the political community turmoil and focus on the other needs of the city. Social Equity—Again, with the decriminalization of the homeless, Gainesville will be able to manage the symptoms of homelessness.

The goal is to end and prevent it. Decriminalization can provide equal opportunities in terms of access to free medical care, access to affordable

housing, and ensuring access to services through a first only/one stop center. It won't have a housing shortage, but a lack of housing that is affordable for the people in the community, especially the working populace. People are still sleeping on the streets amid "for rent" signs. With the policy on decriminalization, people in the City of Gainesville will be able to live more decently and thus pursue their other social needs.

The Gainesville/Alachua County Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness is strategizing to start in 2008, the provision of supportive services to at-risk households such as employment training, education, budgeting workshops, etc. , that will, in the long run, reduce the number of at-risk families and individuals who become homeless. People on the streets—There would be fewer people on the streets because it will no longer mask the exclusion of homeless people under the guise of public safety. Instead, legislators will be able to pass laws that are more humane.

There will be no more discrimination of these people, and tourists' fear of being asked for money by panhandlers will be minimized. It cannot be denied that negative perceptions follow a city whose homeless walk the streets at all hours. A humanistic approach would go a long way into building public trust. According to the NCH (National Coalition for the Homeless) Illegal to be Homeless 2004 Report, when cities warn tourists and residents not to give money to panhandlers on the street, they create the fear of homeless individuals that leads to further discrimination.

This criminalization then helps to legitimize that fear. It then follows that decriminalization will eliminate the fear of discrimination of these people on the streets. Public relations—There are about 10, 000 citizens earning 30%

or less of the area's median income (\$20, 357). Meanwhile, 5000 citizens whose earnings are 30-50% of the area's median income spend more than 30% of their income on housing. Increased awareness about the plight of the homeless in Gainesville will necessarily reduce the number of homeless arrests.

Because there will be a review of existing city ordinances, the public relations aspect of the citizens will thereby improve since they would be proud of what they are doing for their own residents. According Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness, one objective is to establish a Housing Trust to serve as a vehicle for providing additional housing for the homeless. One of its strategies is the publicizing of this new Housing Trust and the soliciting of donations. As mentioned above, the public awareness that will be generated will facilitate camaraderie toward a common goal.

This Plan also includes establishing a coalition of Homebuilder's Association, Realtors' Association, U. F. , City and County to develop a strategy to increase the number of affordable housing units. This coalition would bring a lot of minds together that would cause a ripple-effect throughout the community. The policy goal that is best suited to my alternative is the one that will help facilitate and coordinate homeless persons' access to benefits. This is because the estimated budget expense of \$300, 000 would go a long way in improving access to existing medical facilities.