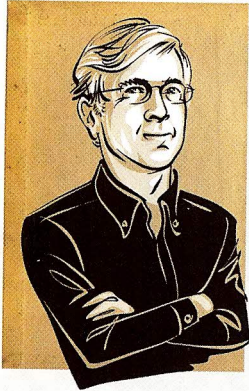


HOUSING AUTHORITY

WE HAVE THE SMARTS TO SOLVE THE HOMELESSNESS PROBLEM.
DO WE HAVE THE WILL?



AFTER CONFERENCE BOARD ECONOMIST KEN GOLDSTEIN GAVE his annual economic forecast to a packed audience at a Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce gathering earlier this year, he was asked what changes he had seen in Seattle during the past 10 years he had been making the trip from New York. ¶ “There’s a lot more panhandling,” said Goldstein, who noted that he had been accosted the minute he left his hotel that morning. “That doesn’t happen to me in New York.”

Seattle likes to regard itself as a modern, progressive metropolis with great cultural institutions and cutting-edge businesses. And we do have compassion. Last year, governments and nonprofits in the Seattle area spent \$140 million on the homeless. But a decade-long effort to come up with a comprehensive solution to address homelessness has made little progress.

Our city’s parks and streets are filled with the homeless. Increasingly, we are confronted by aggressive panhandlers, drug dealers and the mentally disturbed. A colleague of mine was walking downtown recently when someone used his hand to mimic a handgun, pointed at her head and said, “Kapow!”

A 2013 report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development says that with 9,106 sheltered and unsheltered homeless persons, the Seattle area had the third-largest homeless population in the country after Los Angeles and New York. As for homeless people who are living outdoors, the number in King County climbed to 3,772 in 2015, up 21 percent from 2014.

The problem is having a corrosive effect on our sense of community. Retailers are removing the roofs and awnings sheltering the sidewalk in front of their stores to discourage the homeless from sleeping there. Shoppers are choosing to go to malls where they won’t be accosted by panhandlers. The problem is so bad the Seattle City Council recently voted to add three tent cities to house more of the homeless.

That’s a short-term solution. We need to find innovative, long-term solutions. In London and New York, social agencies make an effort to find out if homeless people have friends or relatives who are willing to help take care of them. If they do, the cities will pay

for a one-way ticket home, whether by plane or by bus.

Salt Lake City has just 400 homeless on the streets today, down from 2,000 less than a decade ago. The city accomplished that reduction by avoiding temporary shelters, and instead offering permanent housing on the periphery of the city where counselors can help residents get off drugs and find jobs. The few homeless who are housed downtown in shelters are transferred to regular housing as quickly as possible. By contrast, Seattle hosts 90 percent of

King County’s services for the homeless. While Seattle is home to just one third of King County’s population, 70 percent of the county’s homeless live here.

The state must also play its part by increasing its budget for mental health services, currently among the lowest in the country.

With so much wealth and smarts in this area, we ought to be able to offer

mental health and housing services in a way that reduces homelessness rather than perpetuating it. And such services should be situated and offered across the region.

These are complex issues and we must address them compassionately, but firmly. In the meantime, we cannot allow uncivil behavior downtown to undercut the years of work that went into making this city a great place to live and work.

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