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November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

ENC1145-0026

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In the past 3 years it is expected that the homeless population in Tallahassee, FL has grown by over 575 people (Big Bend Homeless Coalition). There are currently 17 registered homeless shelters in Tallahassee, a city of only 103.5 square miles. This number is incredibly high compared to other cities around the country. New Orleans, a major metropolitan area that is more than 3 times the size of Tallahassee (350.2 square miles) has only 22 homeless shelters in its area. Take into account that this city's homeless population rose catastrophically after hurricane Katrina wiped out over 15,000 homes in their area and left more than 20,000 people homeless (Hurricane Katrina Relief Foundation) and you can see how Tallahassee suffers from this problem more than other regions. I believe that the homeless epidemic in the city of Tallahassee as well as other parts of the country can closely be linked with government policy and the current practices we use to control homelessness.

Over the years the government has created a serviceable network of temporary shelters, food pantries, donated clothing centers, and soup kitchens aimed towards the homeless in an attempt to reduce the amount of citizens without a home. In the late 1980's this network was capable of housing between 200,000 and 300,000 people per day, although that number was rarely reached. By 1996 the homeless service system in the United States could house about 607,000 people on any given day (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 3). Homelessness advocates working in the government believe that if the government provides the homeless community with a safe and stable place to temporarily live and provide them with basic necessities while they are

there that they will take the chance to get off the streets, get back on their feet, and live more stable lives. Although this rationale sounds good in theory, it is clearly not working as planned. As I just mentioned, the homelessness assistance network is only growing larger, yet homelessness has only become more problematic as more and more people are becoming labeled as homeless. There is little evidence that this policy has helped to diminish the problem of homelessness.

I believe the homeless population is growing despite increased government efforts and funding to reduce homelessness because the current policy the United States Government has in place focuses only on the immediate effects of homelessness while disregarding the causes of it altogether. Simply putting a roof over their head, some food in their stomach, and some clothes on their back will not solve the issue. Unfortunately this is basically all that homeless shelters in today's world do. Please don't get me wrong- providing someone with food, clothing, and shelter is a wonderful thing that today's homeless shelters do. I'd like to believe the people making the donations and the volunteers at the shelters mean well, but for example purposes, think about homelessness as a sickness. Let's say you have a stomach virus; you are experiencing immense pain in your abdominals, you can't eat anything without vomiting, and you can barely move out of bed. When you visit the doctor, you would want him to give you medications that would help with these symptoms- maybe a strong pain killer or something to hold your food down. But is that all you would want him to do? Just treat the symptoms and leave you with your stomach virus? Of course not! You would want him to prescribe you something that treated the *cause* of your symptoms, the stomach virus. So although homeless people are faced with many issues or "symptoms" such as lack of housing, malnutrition, and shortage of proper attire, only attacking the problems that arise from homelessness will not reduce the homeless population. In order to do that, we must focus on the causes of homelessness

, the “stomach virus”.

Now that we know that we need to treat the causes of homelessness in order to effectively reduce the homeless population, it is imperative that we fully identify the specific causes of homelessness. When you think of why someone is homeless, your first thought might be that they simply cannot afford a home, so they are forced to live without one. However, shortage of affordable housing is NOT the main reason that people become homeless (Appelbaum 220). In order to gain a better understanding of the causes of homelessness, I asked many different homeless clients at the Tallahassee-Leon County Homeless Shelter what caused their homelessness. I also did further research from secondary sources and took into account various reports and trends submitted by one of the leading homelessness research organizations, The National Coalition for the Homeless (National Coalition for the Homeless Annual Report, 2010). After recording and analyzing this data it can be reasonably concluded that the main causes of homelessness stem from addiction, mental illness, and violence.

The most common stereotype of chronically homeless people are that they are drug and alcohol addicts- unfortunately this sordid stereotype often holds true. 68% of U.S. cities report that addiction is their single largest cause of homelessness (National Coalition for the Homeless- Substance Abuse). “Housing First” initiatives are well intentioned, but can be short-sighted. Even if the homeless person is eventually able to get him/herself together, they are very likely to return to homelessness unless they deal with their addiction. Drug addiction can be identified as both a cause and result of homelessness. In terms of a cause, people addicted to drugs allocate a majority of their money towards purchasing whichever narcotic they are addicted to. This powerful addiction leads the addict to prioritize drugs over their home and other higher priority expenses, ultimately leading to homelessness. Substance abuse can also occur as a result of homelessness. Those

experiencing homelessness often turn to drugs/alcohol in order to mentally cope with their unfortunate situations. These mind-altering substances help them to attain temporary relief from their problems. Sadly, substance abuse only decreases their chance of coming out of homelessness as it diminishes their opportunities to gain employment or save money. Drug addiction is the leading factor that keeps the homeless, homeless.

Drug addictions are incredibly powerful and narcotics can greatly alter someone's mental state. In order to get a lot of homeless people to save money and ultimately move out of homeless shelters we must treat their addictions. Addiction counseling should be placed in our homeless shelters so that those who are addicted have a place within their temporary home to seek assistance. An addiction screening should be mandatory for all homeless clients to go through before receiving assistance from the shelter. This will allow us to identify and assist the homeless addicts that are fearful or unwilling to seek assistance on their own. Samaritan Inns is a housing facility for the homeless in Washington. This housing facility requires all homeless addicts receiving aid to follow a 28-day social detoxification program, they are then given 4 to 6 months of temporary residence and are required to stay sober through unannounced screenings/tests. This program currently boasts an 84% success rate- one of the highest in the nation (Samaritan Inn Home Page- [thesamaritaninn.org](http://thesamaritaninn.org)). I believe The Shelter in Tallahassee as well as many homeless shelters around the country would greatly benefit from drug and alcohol dependency counseling. The main disagreement that I have ran into when proposing these ideas is that such counseling would cost additional funds that are used on the housing itself. In my opinion, I think that the money would be much better spent on treatment and counseling that helps people to move out of the shelters and into more permanent homes than on building or up-keeping additional housing so that we can hold more homeless people. By having more homeless people move into private housing they will

contribute to the economy, rather than take away from it by living in government funded homeless shelters for extended periods of time. Drug addiction doesn't go away with food on the table and a roof over someone's head, it goes away with planned treatment and support.

Mental illness is another leading cause of homelessness in both Tallahassee and the United States. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 20 to 25% of the homeless population in the U.S. suffers from some form of severe mental illness. This amount is quite high considering only about 4 to 6% of Americans are severely mentally ill (National Institute of Mental Health, 2009). In relation to homelessness, people with serious mental illnesses become unable to carry out fundamental aspects of daily life such as personal care and household management. Mental illnesses also make it difficult for the person to form and maintain stable relationships throughout their life. As a result of this, the person usually ends up pushing away family, caregivers, and all other support- resulting in them becoming homeless. Mental illness can also lead to poor physical health. A person's hygiene might suffer drastically, and they may not take the necessary precautions to avoid sickness and disease. This combination of mental illness, inability to form personal relationships, and poor physical health makes it incredibly difficult for people to obtain employment and live on their own. In 2005 a study of California's public mental health system revealed that 15% of their patients were homeless at least once in a one-year period (Folsom et al., 2005). It is a colossal misconception that homeless people become mentally ill or "crazy" as a result of homelessness, it is almost always as a cause rather than a consequence. Those who suffer from mental illness are at a significantly higher risk of becoming homeless. Mentally ill people are by definition different; special care and attention must be given to this group of people.

In terms of government policy, those experiencing homelessness that are mentally ill may receive higher priority in homeless shelters in exceptional cases (Policy Guide on Homelessness,

2003). Sadly, very few of these people ever make contact with a mental health service provider. This is usually due to the fallacy that homeless people with severe mental illnesses aren't willing to accept treatment. Outreach programs are considerably more effective when workers establish a trusting relationship through continued contact with those suffering from mental illness (American Psychological Association, 2008). Trust is a major factor in this; homeless shelters are usually filled with volunteers who come and go as they please. Rarely does a mentally ill homeless person see the same worker twice in a row. This "revolving door" of workers makes it very hard for a homeless person to trust or build a relationship with anyone working at the shelter and is unlikely to listen to them when they suggest treatment. During my time volunteering at the Tallahassee-Leon County homeless shelter, I made several visits during different times of the day and rarely did I ever see or work with the same volunteer or employee twice. In order to build trusting relationships with the mentally ill in the homeless community (a group that represents roughly 25% or 1/4 of the homeless population) homeless shelters must construct a routine schedule for employees and volunteers so that the homeless community has a more predictable and dependable schedule where they will interact with the same person repeatedly. This will make it more likely that when treatment is suggested and the person they trust recommends it that they will go through with it. Title IV, Subtitle C of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 authorizes "supportive" housing programs. In addition to housing, these programs are supposed to offer services such as mental health treatment, education and employment opportunities, peer support, money management classes, and *routinely scheduled supportive meetings*. An example of this can be seen in Wake County, NC. The Wake County Supportive housing program focuses on long-term case management to improve the quality of life for families and individuals. They focus on everything the McKinney-Vento Act was created for- this includes the smallest details such as credit repair,

coordination of mental health services, assistance in meeting lease obligations and complying with house rules and more (Wake County Government Human Services Division). Although this amount of detail and effort might sound expensive, this program has actually saved the county money because they have a very low percentage of repeat homeless clients and therefore use less and less resources every year.

Violence is one of the most difficult causes of homelessness to attack because it comes in so many different forms. One of the most common forms is known as domestic violence. Nationally, 50% of homeless women and children are fleeing from domestic violence (National Coalition for the Homeless-Domestic Violence) and many of the women I spoke to while working at the Tallahassee-Leon County homeless shelter disclosed to me that they left the home where they were living in order to protect themselves and/or their children. Domestic violence causes a crisis- if the woman stays in the home she is likely to face abuse again, and if she leaves she'll have little means of support that often leads to homelessness. Either choice is a risk that nobody should be faced with. I was personally moved by some of the stories I heard at The Shelter and my heart goes out to all the women who chose homelessness over abuse, it is an incredibly brave decision and they should receive the upmost support and respect from the homeless care system. Sadly, the only additional support that homeless shelters usually give to those escaping domestic violence is a recommendation to contact the police- an option they are more than likely to have considered prior to becoming homeless.

According to a study done by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, domestic violence survivors make up about 12 percent of the sheltered homeless population in America. Survivors of domestic violence are often isolated from support networks and financial resources by their abusers. This causes them to lack steady income, ruin their credit history, damage their

employment history, and may suffer from anxiety, depression, panic disorder, and various other conditions that may lead to homelessness. One major challenge that shelters run into when serving survivors of domestic violence is that the victim often has safety and confidentiality concerns that make it difficult to work with them. In order to solve this problem, shelters must be created specifically for those suffering from domestic violence. A beaten woman is not likely to agree to stay in a shelter filled with men. She is more likely to take her chances on the street, and will never get the assistance or support she needs. These specific shelters should be more secure than a normal shelter and should have the strictest of safety and confidentiality policies so that women feel more confident and safe and will seek the assistance that is necessary to get them off the streets. This policy would also help a large number of homeless children, since often mothers who are victims of domestic violence take their children with them when leaving the home where the abuser lives. On March 5<sup>th</sup> of 2013, the Coalition for the Homeless released their annual "State of the Homeless" report. This report estimated that roughly 21,000 children sleep in homeless shelters every night. Many of these children became homeless with their mothers when escaping from domestic violence. These children should not have to live the rest of their childhood in homeless shelters because the homeless support system for their mothers are ineffective.

Another connection between violence and homelessness can be seen within the homeless community itself. Many crimes that homeless people commit are often *nonviolent* offenses such as turnstile jumping at the subway, loitering, carrying an open container of alcohol, public urination, so on and so forth. However, a recent trend in legislation in America is prohibiting almost all activities done specifically by the homeless. Examples of this include anti-begging laws and more restrictive laws against eating, sleeping, and even sitting in public places. Not only are these new laws prejudiced towards the homeless community, but the unjust application of existing laws upon the



homeless community are even more apparent. While visiting a local fast food restaurant in Tallahassee, I noticed a homeless man being escorted by police out of the dining room. The police officer explained to him that there was a 30-minute time limit for consuming food in the lobby and that he must leave in order to avoid a loitering charge. In defense of the restaurant, there was (and still is) a sign posted in the lobby declaring this rule. However, during that visit a friend and I were working on a project for one of our classes and we were seated in the lobby for well over thirty minutes- in fact, I had seen the homeless man walk in and place his order about 35 minutes *after* I sat down. Neither my friend nor I were ever bothered by any employees or police officers. This is just one example of how homeless people are being unjustly criminalized in Tallahassee as well as in other places around the country. These ordinances and legislation are making these nuisance and completely non-violent offenses more difficult and as a result many people in the homeless community are escalating to more serious and violent crimes including theft or robbery (Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reporting Program). These crimes promote violent behavior amongst the homeless population and often lead to violence within the shelters. This causes many shelters to close down, spend more money on security that could be put into bettering their programs, and detracts potential volunteers and sponsors from putting their time and resources into the shelters.

This is a problem that only the government and lawmakers are capable of solving. In order to reduce violence amongst the homeless community that is likely to be passed onto the general population, we must either allow the homeless population to commit these minor offenses (that non-homeless people do without being criminalized) or apply these laws equally amongst the general population. Criminalization of the homeless will not make it less likely for people to chose homelessness. When more serious violations such as sleeping on the streets or aggressively begging

people for money are seen, the officer should record the person's information, write an official warning, and ask the person to leave the premises. If the person is sleeping on the streets in the middle of the night, the officer should either direct him in the direction of a local shelter or offer him/her a ride to the shelter. Repeat offenders that show blatant disregard for the law should be penalized as the law dictates. Too much money is being spent every year on drafting anti-homeless legislation and prosecuting the homeless for minor offenses such as loitering that millions of people violate every day. This money should be put towards transportation to shelters instead of prisons and within the shelters themselves.

These three leading causes of homelessness contribute to more than 90% of the homeless population. By attacking the causes of homelessness rather than treating the after-effects can effectively diminish the homeless population. Donations and volunteers may be beneficial to homeless shelters, but as long as the current policy and procedures that are in place are used- the homeless population will only continue to grow. Some of these ideas may sound expensive or not worth it, so I am going to explain why they are worth it. As long as homeless people are living on the streets, they are more likely to get sick or contract a disease. In the United States of America, hospitals must take in and treat people with life-threatening conditions, regardless of them being homeless or not. A study of hospital admissions of homeless people in Hawaii- a state that is notoriously known for homelessness- revealed that 1,751 homeless adults were responsible for 564 hospitalizations and \$4 million in admission costs in 2010. These hospitalizations were more than likely for minor and easily preventable diseases, and the hospitals that treat these homeless individuals will never see this money. Homeless people also spend a lot of time in jails and prisons, which is extremely costly for taxpayers. According to a two year survey conducted by The University of Texas, every homeless person cost the taxpayers \$14,480 per year, primarily for overnight jail.

Additionally, time served is usually a result of the laws discussed earlier that specifically targets the homeless population. The typical cost of a prison bed in a state prison is about \$20,000 per year and about \$30,000 per year in a federal prison. Many homeless people are also being placed in Emergency Shelters, costing taxpayers about \$8,067 more than the average annual cost of placing them in transition housing where they contribute to the national economy (Donovan, 2012). Point blank, keeping homeless people on the streets is more expensive than placing them in transitional or permanent housing.

In summation I am arguing that the current homeless policies and laws that are aimed at combating homelessness should be changed. Government efforts should focus on treating the causes of homelessness rather than only acknowledging its effects. Putting additional funding into homeless shelters and assistance programs now will save the country and taxpayers a substantial amount of money in the future. The U.S. Government has been sponsoring homeless assistance plans for over 50 years and yet the homeless population continues to grow. Our current programs are ineffective and if kept in place will continue to cost the country millions of dollars while hundreds of thousands of people are forced to live on the streets. After volunteering at the Tallahassee-Leon County Homeless Shelter and gaining a better insight into homelessness on a global scale, I believe treating the causes of homelessness can be beneficial to reducing the homelessness rate in Tallahassee as well as in the United States.

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