

Band-aids

Posted by

Sunday, 15 October 2006 09:23 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 October 2006 09:23

Band-aids

PEJ News - Derek Book - Boy, what a tricky situation Victoria has gotten into. There are not enough emergency beds for the homeless here, and the street population is growing steadily. While 40 new shelter beds will be added soon, and 50 permanent housing arrangements are in the works, these simply will not address the sheer number of homeless that huddle in doorways, or set up tents in park bushes. As we face a cold and wet winter, we have some tough choices to make as a city.

www.PEJ.org

Band-aids

Derek Book

PEJ News

October Book

I have heard the line that we can't "warehouse" people by setting up massive dormitories where people sleep on the floor, but the reality of an increasing street population is making this band-aid solution more and more attractive. A 6 week temporary shelter for 40 people at a local church basement was opened, and within 3 weeks, that shelter was turning away 27 people. Furthermore, I know from my work with people at the needle exchange that a large portion of the homeless would not even go near the shelter; so the homeless problem is far beyond even the most conservative estimates.

While it is true that we cannot put all of our resources into temporary solutions, we also cannot dismiss the immediate needs of homeless. The Toronto "Streets to Homes" initiative was developed to take drastic steps to reducing homelessness in the city. One of the strategies employed by the city was to limit or move away from the distribution of sleeping bags, blankets, and other essential gear, because the overall goal was to house people, not to enable them to sleep on the street. Agencies were permitted to distribute sleeping bags, but only after pursuing all other shelter options.

While this sounds great on paper, unless an immediate option for the sleeping bag recipient is provided, the risk of death from exposure is much higher. One writer called this particular idea the " [Streets to Graves](#) " approach.

Band aids

Posted by

Sunday, 15 October 2006 09:23 - Last Updated Sunday, 15 October 2006 09:23

While it seems from a [surface investigation](#) that nobody was denied a sleeping bag in Toronto, it does concern me that people are considering the removal of basic supports as a viable part of dealing with homelessness. Of course those basic supports should not be necessary in an ideal world, but if even one person dies as a result of some administrative rule made in a cozy boardroom, then the whole plan is flawed on an ethical level.

Caution is the approach that I am suggesting here. Perhaps there is a growing frustration with what appears to be a growing problem, and some are suggesting that the agency supports currently in place are enabling rather than helping. While I think the help on the ground needs to be complemented by permanent solutions and long range strategies, the grave situation that we face dictates that we cannot afford to lose any supports whatsoever.

We must remember that even the slightest change in policy can have catastrophic effects on the extremely vulnerable members of our population, and act with due sensitivity. I know first hand what it's like to sleep absolutely rough with no blankets, and believe me, it's more about survival than sleep.

I remember sitting on the side of the highway one autumn night. My friend and I were hitchhiking between London and Toronto Ontario, and it started snowing unexpectedly. We could not get a ride, and having nothing on but jean jackets, light clothes, and running shoes, we hit the ditch and built a small fire. We fell asleep more than a few times in those 6 or so hours, and luckily, one of us woke up each time and stoked the fire.

If I had died there, what a waste it would have been. Basic support programs prevent tragedies, plain and simple. Despite our desires for longer-term solutions we must not forget the harsh reality that many people face. Band aids might not cure the complete illness, but we have to stop the bleeding somehow...

Derek Book is a street outreach worker in Victoria B.C. , and the creator of [Formerly Homeless](#) ,
a blog about homelessness in Canada