

# Homelessness: No easy answers\_11204

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## HOMELESSNESS: No easy answers

**By John Hall**

*Texas Baptist Communications*

Social acceptance and compassion fatigue are leading Americans to leave needy individuals out in the cold, according to advocates for the homeless.

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Donald Whitehead, executive director of the National Coalition for the

Homeless, said the public believes homelessness is an accepted byproduct of capitalism. People incorrectly view the homeless as being in their condition because they do not want to work.

Homeless people worship beneath I-35 at the Church Under the Bridge in Waco.
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When people see no decline in homelessness, their preconceptions about the homeless are reinforced, said Whitehead, leader of the nation's largest advocacy group for the homeless.

This notion of a never-improving homeless population hurts Christian outreaches, said Jimmy Dorrell, executive director of Mission Waco. The negative connotations make it difficult for homeless ministries to raise funds.

Dorrell encounters this firsthand as he raises funds to construct Waco's first shelter for the chronically homeless.

He acknowledges it is difficult to get someone on sound financial ground, a sad fact that demoralizes workers. Volunteers continually give of their time, energy, resources and hearts, but seldom see someone get off the streets, he said. Workers burn out and give up hope, believing the socio-economic factors are too great to overcome.

Directors of Christian ministries have to alter many Christians' perceptions of what it means to have a successful homeless outreach, Dorrell said. While ministry leaders would like each person to find a home, success comes in many small steps.

Whitehead agreed success is largely an individual measurement. Victory can be as simple as entering a rehabilitation program, eating a warm meal or finding a temporary job.

"Success depends on the individual," Whitehead stated. "For some people accessing treatment is success."

This redefinition of success is important for Christian businesspeople, as well, Dorrell argued. Christian efforts are largely dependent on believers who are willing to give a homeless person a job and a chance, he said. A job does not guarantee a person will get a home, but it gives him a better opportunity.

These steps, no matter how small, are movements in the right direction, Dorrell reminded. Christians must continue to minister to people in need, despite the length or difficulty of the work ahead.

"In the kingdom of God, you can't give up on these people," Dorrell commented. "But it's hard to convince results-oriented church people of that. Change may be as small as getting a day-labor job today or finding a safe place to sleep for a few days."

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New approaches to helping the homeless population are giving hope to Christians who want to get people off the streets and into warm housing.

Jefferson Street Baptist Center in Louisville, Ky., which deals primarily with mentally ill and substance-abusing homeless people, is on the verge of

offering a ministry organizers hope will meet needs and transform lives.

In the next month, the ministry will launch an 11-unit permanent-support housing complex that will give dually diagnosed homeless individuals those with mental illness and substance abuse issues a place to stay. Staff members will serve as secondary caseworkers for each resident and teach practical skills such as budgeting, hygiene and apartment cleanliness.

They also will be first detectors in case a resident regresses by not taking medication or abusing substances and will report to the person's primary caseworker, provided by an outside agency.

"We will catch issues earlier. We will see them every day," said Rick Brenny, executive director of the center.

The outreach goes beyond the scope of more traditional ministries that provide meals, clothes and temporary housing. While those are effective at meeting needs, a transformational element is needed, said Gerald Davis, consultant in the Baptist General Convention of Texas Missions Equipping Center.

Davis is looking to create an outreach network in Texas cities that will help churches work together to rebuild the lives of the homeless. The network would include feeding, clothing, training, housing, transitioning, rehabilitating and job placement.

This comprehensive approach is the key to fighting homelessness, according to Donald Whitehead, executive director of the nation's oldest and largest advocacy group for the homeless, the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Permanent-support housing is a more cost-effective way of serving the homeless, no matter how long they stay, Brenny noted. The service is cheaper than providing food, hospital care, substance abuse treatment and

mental health counseling to people who remain on the street.

Jefferson Street Baptist Center clients, who receive a government subsidy for the mental illnesses, will be required to pay a minimum contribution of \$25 a month for rent and utilities. But they will have clean, safe housing to live in and improve their lives.

While residents can choose to stay in the apartment complex permanently, some will use the complex as a stepping-stone to self-sufficiency, Brenny said.

Homeless individuals are showing interest in this new approach to helping them. Without advertising, there is a 15-person waiting list to get a room, Brenny said.

“We could fill as many of these units as we could provide,” he added.

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