

As we hurry through our holiday preparations: buying gifts, sending cards, going to parties, and looking for some well-deserved time off with family and friends, most of us are oblivious to the homeless in our community that have just been here “forever.” Throwing a few coins or dollars into a red kettle gives us some sense of comfort that we are doing our part, but are we? If we, as a community, agree to address this issue, not just putting up tents when it gets cold or writing an occasional check to a charity or church, we could make the Christmas season a time to celebrate, even for those less fortunate.

Homelessness is a national problem: Every city is working to address this challenge, but it is complicated. With so many facets to this growing problem, there is no single, silver bullet solution. However, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, it is as simple as “housing and services.” “By connecting people experiencing homelessness to housing and services, they have a platform from which they can address other areas that may have contributed to their homelessness, such as employment, health, and substance abuse.” While the problem is complex, the focus on housing and services seems to be the approach recommended by most experts. Yet, the shortage of affordable housing is exacerbating the problem, both nationally and locally, whereby many are unable to find housing, even though they have a job.

Great strides being made: It is exciting to see our local governments working together to expand their services to this population. Nearly a dozen buildings are being added at the Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services (NNAMHS) campus for the expansion of the Crossroads program. This expansion will give homeless women, children, and families temporary housing, as well as drug, alcohol, and mental health services to aid them on their road to recovery. This effort will also open up space at the Community Assistance Center in downtown Reno and enable additional services to be provided there for the men. In addition to the NNAMHS expansion, there are over 200 transitional housing units expected to be available soon for those that can pay for low rent housing at the Village on Sage Street. Many other agencies are engaged and increasing their support for the homeless, like the Eddy House which is planning to expand their services for homeless youth, Nevada Youth Empowerment Project, Truckee Meadows Housing Solutions, and many others.

Two ways we can make a real difference. First, we should do whatever we can to increase the number of housing units in our community. As long as the supply of housing falls short of the increasing demand, housing prices will increase, and we will add to the homeless population. A NIMBY attitude is the number one reason for the affordable/workforce housing crisis, according to the Atlantic Monthly, “NIMBYs ... reflexively block any and all development,” which results in the increase of housing prices and a decrease in availability. Second, we should continue to support the programs, agencies and elected officials that lead the charge to help our homeless. It is more than housing, it is also the much-needed services. The non-profits and government agencies that offer the services that lift the homeless out of a life of poverty, need our support.

Let’s help our homeless year-round. The homeless issue is not a “problem to fix” or a “mess to clean up.” These are members of our community who need our help and a long-term commitment to solutions that are complicated and may take years to implement. So, as we sit around the fire and open our presents on Christmas Day, let us reflect on the nearly 1,000 in our community, many woman and children, that are homeless and will remain homeless unless we make a New Year’s resolution to help. Happy Holidays