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City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.)

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HOMELESSNESS AS A "PREMIER ISSUE"
FOR THE CITY CLUB OF PORTLAND

A Report from the Steering Committee on the Homeless

FOCUS OF REPORT

Appointed by the Board of Governors in the fall of 1985, the Steering Committee on the Homeless has been charged with developing a plan for City Club activity that would reflect the City Club's commitment to public education on policies and programs affecting "homelessness" in the metropolitan area.

In response to this charge, the Steering Committee has developed a proposed three-year agenda for a City Club focus on homelessness as a "premier issue." The Board of Governors has approved for publication this progress report on the Committee's activities and findings in order to educate the membership. This progress report is for information only, and does not represent an official City Club position or opinion, nor will it be submitted for Club action at this stage. The authority to express the opinion of the Club rests solely with the vote of the membership.

I. INTRODUCTION

People are homeless for many complex reasons, and one cannot look at homelessness without also considering all of the factors and other social problems contributing to it. At the outset, it should be noted that the term "homeless" does not adequately describe the actual scope of this premier issue. The term itself suggests a primary focus on the absence of shelter, when that is only one in a set of problems that are complex, interrelated and due to many causes.

The Steering Committee hopes that a recognition of the many components of "homelessness" will follow from this report, and that the term will be generally understood to include related aspects of dependence and behavior characterized as "social deviancy."

In its deliberations over the last seven months, the committee has charted a course for the City Club which should serve three goals:

- a significant increase in the awareness of the membership and the public of the dimensions of issues involving those who are dependent on public services, primarily because of homelessness
- the participation of state and community leaders in a reexamination of our present policies, and particularly of our priorities for the allocation of resources
- a sustained examination of the policy changes necessary to address the causes of long-term dependence of individuals on public services in the metropolitan area.

The Steering Committee's proposed agenda of City Club activity would incorporate programs, research, and education among the public and our community's leaders. The process designed by the committee will capitalize on the Club's strengths -- especially its informed and dedicated volunteers

and staff, its network of standing committees capable of developing Friday and Second Wednesday programs on virtually any topic, its research process, and its capacity to serve as the catalyst for dialogue and mutual education among leaders and the public.

II. THE IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS ON THIS COMMUNITY

As is true of many topics which attract intense media and celebrity attention, solutions to the problem of homelessness are endangered by over-optimism that sufficient money and good will can remedy both the causes and the symptoms. While money and good intentions are indeed critical to a reduction in the extraordinary dimensions of homelessness across the most affluent country in the world, fundamental changes in public policy must also be involved.

Across the United States there are an estimated two and a half million people who are without permanent shelter -- a place to which they can predictably return from one day to the next. In the Portland metropolitan area, there are an estimated 3,000 - 4,000 individuals who are permanently or temporarily homeless. The U.S. Conference of Mayors has reported that the number of homeless in twenty-five key cities across the country has not declined with the current national economic recovery. In fact, in 22 of these 25 cities, the number of homeless is expected to increase during 1986.

In a succession of meetings with public and private officials, the Steering Committee has heard that public policy has been more fragmented than coherent, and that it has proved unnecessarily costly in human and economic terms. As a result of largely uncoordinated, unplanned evolution, human service programs offer responses that are piecemeal and "too little, too late."

Commendable concern has been expressed and notable initiatives undertaken at City Hall, at the county level, by citizen task forces, and by certain state legislators, who have concentrated on the provision of the most minimal needs -- food, shelter, clothing -- for those unable to care for themselves, temporarily or permanently. Sensitivity to the concerns of the downtown business community exists in many quarters, and additional initiatives can and should be taken to include business leaders in the resolution of issues which directly affect them. Of particular importance will be measures building consensus on acceptable behavior among all parties concerned.

However, it is apparent that many of these positive steps constitute no more than "band-aids" for problems that will require certain fundamental shifts in the way decisions are made about services and the priorities by which resources are allocated. If we want to lessen the true costs of a very expensive public problem in the years ahead, we need to do more now than provide just enough resources to maintain the status quo. We need to identify the most rational, humane kinds of assistance that individuals need in order to become as self-sufficient as their capacities will allow.

The Steering Committee urges the City Club -- as a body of informed, influential and impartial advocates of civic leadership -- to take this opportunity to study and to educate others in the community on a problem which will not go away, which will instead become increasingly costly in terms of human and economic resources. We urge it to take leadership in education for a public policy that will by intent achieve a more rational

and less costly use of scarce public and private resources. Above all, it should advocate for policies that are more humane, enabling those who are now dependent on public services to become more independent, productive, respected, and self-respecting.

The economic cost to all of us of the public dependence of only a few thousand has generally received little attention and virtually no ongoing analysis. Public monies and the funds of private non-profit organizations which are deflected to meet the short-term, basically repetitive needs of this population are inevitably diverted from those basic services on which every citizen relies -- fire, police, jails and the courts, and emergency medical services. These costs also subtract from programs which assist the working poor and the elderly, improve basic education, or provide the infrastructure for economic development. Ambulance costs, medical bills, and taxes paid by small businesses and major corporations must rise in order to cover the steeper costs of meeting the most basic needs of a few. Small businesses affected by petty crime or inebriates nodding in their doorways, large corporations thinking of expansion into Old Town, tourism in neighborhoods designated historic, and the attractiveness of convention or stadium facilities will all be affected by public irresolution and the failure to direct sufficient resources toward reduction of the numbers involved and the intensity of their dependence. If Gramm-Rudman legislation forces a contraction in government services, alternative uses of public resources must receive more intense scrutiny.

III. SEPARATING MYTH FROM FACT: WHO ARE THE HOMELESS?

The homeless we read so much about are not a homogeneous group. There are pervasive generalizations about who they are, how they became homeless, and what can be done for and about them. Misapprehensions have yielded policies which have swelled their numbers, resulting in wasted human lives and depleted public and private resources.

Nationwide, demographic studies of the homeless have identified certain characteristics of this very heterogeneous group, no matter what part of the country is surveyed. All the studies have confirmed certain basic facts about the homeless:

- The majority of the homeless are male (65-75%) and under 38 years of age. Fewer than 10% are now married; fifty to sixty percent never have been married. Fifty-five to sixty percent never completed high school. Most resided in the same state before they became homeless; if not, they moved there because they heard jobs might be available.
- Although women constitute a minority among the homeless, they have a much higher incidence of mental illness (70-75 percent). They tend to remain "hidden" (primarily to avoid the dangers of being on the street, alone and female). Many have had alcohol and drug problems and have experienced domestic violence. Perhaps a third have young children in their care, children who are often expected to cope with problems with which their mothers cannot.
- The number of children who are homeless is steadily rising. In New York City last year, there were more children in public shelters than adult men and women. In the Burnside area, there are believed to be between 150 and 200 children, most with single mothers.

- The percentage of minorities among the homeless is disproportionately high.
- Homelessness most often results from four factors: family problems; insufficient income to pay for even the cheapest rental housing; loss of employment; and drug and alcohol problems.
- Lack of low-income housing and lack of jobs are the two most frequent reasons for homelessness. To reverse the cycle of homelessness, housing and jobs have to be created. (In Portland, 59% of the single-room housing available to low-income individuals has disappeared in the last ten years.)
- Most of the "able" homeless want to have jobs. Their reasons for not working are primarily physical and mental disabilities and the unavailability of jobs. Most of the homeless have worked previously at unskilled jobs.
- The income most of the homeless have comes from panhandling, can or paper collecting, or various welfare benefits. However, many of those entitled to means-tested welfare benefits do not get them because they do not have permanent addresses or because they cannot "negotiate" the disability entitlement system.
- Many of the homeless are literally unable to cope with a system of services which requires them to identify their multiple problems and then to seek out the appropriate agency for each problem.

A. The "Able" and "The Disabled"

Many of the homeless are very ordinary citizens -- conceivably you and I -- who have, through "a series of quiet catastrophies," suffered traumatic family or personal crises for which they were unprepared by education, experience, or mental or physical health. For many of them, the loss of a job, an apartment or a family member precipitated the loss of almost everything. These ordinary citizens want desperately to get on their feet again. Nationwide, surveys have confirmed that they do not want to be dependent on someone else for primary needs -- food, clothing, shelter, transportation, emergency medical care, even a place to spend the day in physical safety. Remarkably, after what many have experienced, their values and their goals are much like ours -- a place to live, a job, safety, education and opportunities for their children. They, too, want "roots" in our society.

There are others among the homeless who have disabling conditions which stunt their aspirations and limit our reasonable expectations for their eventual self-sufficiency. Many -- known in the social service system as "dual diagnosis" clients -- have more than one major problem (e.g., mental health and alcohol problems).

1. Drugs and Alcohol

Up to 50 per cent of the homeless have had problems related to drugs or alcohol. Those who fall into this category are typically male, older, divorced or single, have served time in jail, and have been homeless twice as long as non-abusers. For most of them, alcohol or drug use preceded homelessness and has been exacerbated by it.

2. Mental Illness

From 30 - 50 per cent of the homeless are troubled by mental illness. Since the 1960's, the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill has been recognized as one contributor to homelessness. However, it has become evident that many of the mentally ill -- and particularly those who are young and most troublesome -- have never been hospitalized and have had no supervision or care. Many are not regularly taking the kinds of medication which can control the symptoms of some forms of mental illness.

The mentally ill homeless are under enormous stress, and there is currently no adequate facility for them when they are in crisis, nor enough supervised housing. When they are most vulnerable -- on their discharge from jails or hospitals, for example -- they receive wholly-inadequate support and must compete for housing with others who have many more resources and capabilities.

To be mentally ill and homeless is to enter a circular drama of recurring instability and stress. Presently, about 35% of the chronically mentally ill population in the metropolitan area is receiving no mental health services. In the absence of adequate housing specifically supervised to meet their needs, jails and hospitals have become their shelters.

3. "Walking Misdemeanants"

The contacts which many of the homeless have had with the criminal justice system have aggravated prior conditions of alcoholism, drug use, mental illness, and general alienation from mainstream society. A local judge has characterized many of those who revolve through her doors as "walking misdemeanants," individuals who consume an inordinate amount of court time and divert funds better spent on the pursuit and custody of more dangerous offenders. Jail space used as shelter for each of them costs a minimum of \$1,000 a month.

4. Street Youth

Among the homeless are street youth, who may have homes in the suburbs of Portland or the small towns across Oregon, but for reasons that may be quite valid cannot return to them. Family problems usually precipitate their leaving, but most have few skills on which to build stable lives.

B. "Their" Needs and "Our" System

The homeless rarely face just one problem or have just one disabling condition. Lack of shelter, alcoholism, mental illness, and unemployment may all be problems simultaneously. Their multiple disabilities and needs tax the housing, social welfare and medical resources of the entire community. However, the "problem-focused" design of the services available to most of them means that individuals can fall between the cracks when no one agency can address all their needs. An individual with multiple problems is confronted by a system that requires him or her to separate interdependent problems into discrete ones that should be taken to one agency or another for possible resolution. Individuals under stress are placed at a disadvantage in trying to meet the system's expectations of rationality and initiative.

IV. WHAT COULD PUBLIC POLICY ACCOMPLISH?

This Steering Committee has focused its attention on what our public policy toward homelessness should be and how the City Club might use its unique resources of public education to shape better policy. We have recognized that homelessness is not a static condition. It is "a crude description of a constantly-changing picture," says one observer, with shelter as the principal, but not the only, issue. Its dimensions vary with the changing economy, and the multitude of problems represented among the homeless always reflect the broader societal context -- including ethnic and minority problems, pressures on the American family, and the changing technology of the workplace.

Sometimes, characteristics linked in the public mind with homelessness are actually due to other factors. It is a condition that extends beyond the loss of basic shelter and minimal necessities to mean the absence of support from the friends, family, churches, or employers on which the average individual depends -- and without which he, too, might engage in "deviant" behavior.

The Steering Committee members believe that certain premises should guide public policy in this area:

- a) Prevention of the problems characterizing the homeless would be less expensive than amelioration of their problems once they fall into one of the categories of homelessness.
- b) The dignity of the individual is an important consideration in public policy, and may imply rights of reasonable access to shelter, food, health care, and the opportunity to work.
- c) Society as a whole has certain rights of control or supervision over the conduct of its members and may reasonably expect minimum standards of behavior necessary to preserve public health and welfare.
- d) Programs for the homeless and other disadvantaged groups should be designed so that access is clear and alternatives of behavior and opportunities are well understood on all sides -- among the homeless, service providers, the business community, and the public.

The Steering Committee has identified specific public policy objectives that it believes could reduce the number of people who become dependent on public support, permanently or temporarily. To achieve these objectives, it is essential to focus scarce resources on effective supervision and services for those whose present disabilities, if not addressed, will inevitably make them long-term recipients of public assistance and social services.

Such policy should be based on a realistic recognition of the limits of intervention with some of the homeless. Many of the leaders and professionals in this field with whom the committee met divided the homeless population in our community into three groups for which different objectives are appropriate. At a fundamental level, the minimal objectives of assisting them are common ones: the provision of food, shelter,

clothing, security, etc. However, the Committee believes that the ways to accomplish these objectives should vary with each group:

A. "Those Just Entering the Ranks of the Homeless -- Who Are in Crisis, But Can Return to Independence"

These individuals are often described as "at the margin" or "on the edge" of chronic dependence. They have usually had recent job experience, but often at unskilled labor or in declining industries. They still have the psychological resources to maintain their ambition and their perseverance. They view themselves as temporarily homeless and hold onto a vision of personal self-sufficiency. Intensive support pays off with these individuals. In economic terms, money spent on them is well-spent because it reduces long-term public dependence, maintains productive employees in the work force, and keeps families together.

1. Objectives

- Return them to self-sufficiency as soon as possible
- Minimize the period of dependence in order to reduce costs

2. Means

- Provide an adequate stock of permanent low-cost housing, especially for families. Emphasize the use of transitional housing for families and individuals who are in this category. Reduce dependence on shelters.
- Provide immediate, effective job counseling, training and employment assistance.
- Provide adequate income to promote family unity and to enable individuals and families to stay in one place long enough to take advantage of job training.
- Provide adequate funding for transportation for job searches.
- Assist with access to food stamps and other benefits to which families are entitled.
- Provide supportive counseling to families in crisis.
- Enable women returning to work to obtain child care at initially-reduced rates.

B. "Those Who Will Always Be More Or Less Dependent, But Whose Dependence Can Be Reduced With Cost-Effective Support"

In this category are included the 30 to 50 per cent of the homeless who are chronically mentally ill. Many are young and have never received consistent supervision for medication or therapy. It is likely that they will always require assistance in obtaining access to income, counseling through recurring crises, and referral to viable, long-term housing. Also in this group are the long-term unemployed, whose job skills are outdated. For reasons such as a history of alcoholism or mental illness, some are able to work only in sheltered settings or with supervision, but even under those conditions their long-term dependence is reduced. They may occasionally need help as basic as assistance in applying for the welfare benefits to which they are already entitled.

1. Objectives

- Reduce demands for intensive, crisis services.
- Provide stable living situations.
- Offer employment or supervised training compatible with their capabilities.

- Reduce reliance on hospitals, jails and shelters for meeting minimal basic needs.

2. Means

- Provide an adequate stock of SRO or group homes.
- Make available adequate medical care for basic needs and chronic conditions.
- Provide assistance in obtaining benefits to which they are entitled -- federal SSI, food stamps and income support programs.
- Assist with money management.
- Make available appropriate psychological and job counseling.
- Provide detoxification services and/or supervised medication.
- Provide transportation to employment or sheltered work and training settings.

C. "Those in a Permanent State of Dependence or Maintenance -- The Hopeless"

Some will always be dependent on public and private resources. They need to be supervised adequately by the appropriate authorities -- not the police, the jails, or fire and emergency service providers.

1. Objectives

- Provide supervision.
- Arrange maintenance in stable living situations with adequate access to basic necessities.

2. Means

- Provide supervised housing, with a reduced dependence on temporary shelters.
- Provide adequate, accessible daytime drop-in centers.
- Make available adequate public showers and toilets.
- Offer basic medical care.
- Assist with basic food and clothing.

While humanitarian considerations require that public funds be used for the maintenance of those in the last group, discretionary funds are better concentrated on those in group one. For example, it is much less costly for society in the long-run to concentrate funds on pulling individuals back from the "edge" than it is to care for them indefinitely if they become part of groups two and three. It is, for example, less expensive -- in both human and economic terms -- to focus sufficient resources on homeless children who are in conditions of extreme stress and transition than it is to take care of them years later as dependent adults and "takers" from the system -- not taxpayers.

V. SUMMARY

The present high costs of homelessness to our community are not fully recognized. The number of individuals who are permanently or temporarily without shelter and the basic necessities is no more than the number employed by Meier & Frank -- or the membership of the City Club. Yet they have an impact that is disproportionate to their ranks. Policies toward the homeless should be evaluated on the extent to which they reduce long-term societal costs as well as their responsiveness to basic

humanitarian concerns for giving individuals the means to maintain human dignity and to acquire the most basic necessities -- shelter, food, clothing, basic medical care, and physical security.

In fulfilling its obligations of civic leadership, the City Club is urged to focus on an issue of persistent and growing significance to the community. This organization has an opportunity to undertake education and advocacy for appropriate responses to the needs of those who are less articulate and less able to advocate for themselves than are Club members. In this sense, leadership is not merely an opportunity -- it is an obligation.

Roger Bachman
 Thomas Balmer
 Robert Castagna
 Campbell Groner
 W. E. Hunter

William Long
 Reymundo Marin
 Sally McCracken
 Joan Smith
 Charlotte T. Kennedy, Chair
 STEERING COMMITTEE ON THE
 HOMELESS

MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS

Along with this report, the Steering Committee has presented to the Board of Governors a detailed framework for three years of suggested research studies, background and information reports, programs, and other activities involving education of the membership and the public. Among the issues on which a Club focus has been suggested are housing availability; the impact of the homeless on the justice system; community programs for the chronically mentally ill; services to families, women and youth who are homeless; and coordination and management among different levels of government and private organizations.

The Board is committed to a continuing focus on homelessness as a "premier issue" and is now studying the Committee's specific proposals for further action. We commend the Steering Committee for its thorough work and its informative progress report.

***Randall B. Kester
 President
 For the Board of Governors***

BALLOT MEASURE COMMITTEE MEMBERS APPOINTED

(Continued from second page)

B.J. Seymour, Chair, Measure 16, which phases out production of nuclear weapons components in Oregon by using tax credits and civil penalties, has named the following committee members: *Ted Falk*, Attorney, Spears, Lubersky, et al; *Clarence Hilbrick*, Engineer, City of Portland; *Susan Immer*, Manager, Emmett Travel; *Ronald Iverson*, Senior Staff Specialist, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; *Philip Spiers*, Director, American SIDS Institute; *Thomas Stimmel*, writer; and *Norm Winningstad*, Chairman, Floating Point Systems. *A. McKay Rich* serves as the Committee's Research Advisor.

Allan Abravanel, Attorney, Perkins, Coie, et al, is Chair of the committee studying four tax issues including: Measure 7, which creates a 5 percent state sales tax and limits property taxes to 1.5 percent; Measure 9, which limits property taxes to 1.5 percent of assessed value; Measure 11, which exempts the first \$25,000 of an owner-occupied home's value from taxation; and Measure 12, companion to the homestead measure, which provides funds for the exemption by raising state income taxes on higher-income corporations and individuals. The following members have been named to the Committee: *Ron Bergman*, Business Manager, SRG Partnership; *Alan Brickley*, State Counsel, Safeco Title Insurance Co.; *Roger Buchanan*, Labor Relations Administrator, U.S. Department of Agriculture; *Curt Gleaves*, Attorney, Schwabe, Williamson, Wyatt, Moore & Roberts; *Ruth Handlin*, Supervi-

sor, Moss Adams; *William June*, Vice President, Planning, PGE; *Marilyn Caton Quesnel*, Associate Director of Public Relations, University of Portland; *Richard Wegner*, Sales Manager, Trimac; and *Lynn Wokal*, CPA, Beemer, Johnson, Smith & Co.; *Frank Langfitt* serves as the Committee's Research Advisor.

As Previously announced, the Club also has had a Convention Center Ballot Measure Committee underway for several months. That committee is chaired by *Helen Goodwin*, Program Analyst, Bonneville Power Administration.

NEW MEMBERS

The City Club welcomes the following new members:

Mary Aiken, President, Mary Aiken & Associates, Inc., sponsored by Olive Barton.

Jean Armstrong, Account Executive, Regis McKenna, Inc., sponsored by Kathy Humphrey.

John Brockkamp, Corporate Treasurer, Brockamp & Jaeger, Inc., sponsored by Richard Norman.

Helen Delaney, U.S. Government, retired, sponsored by Peter Delaney.

Annamae Clawson, Portland Public Schools, retired, sponsored by Bill Natio/Jean Foster.

Orval Clawson, Portland Public Schools, retired, sponsored by Bill Naito.

Harvey Hettfeld, President, Sterling International, sponsored by Herb Crane.

Steve Lee, Committee Administrator, Oregon Legislative Assembly, sponsored by Fred Neal.

Dorothy Rothrock, Area Director, City of Portland, Portland General Electric, sponsored by Charlie Allcock.

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