

HOMELESSNESS: A CITY MANAGER'S PERSPECTIVE ON PUBLIC
RESPONSIBILITY AND PRIVATE COMPASSION

By:

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A White Paper

In response to a citizen's question posted on a publicly accessible Facebook page

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ABSTRACT

This white paper explores the complex issue of homelessness from a City Manager's perspective, emphasizing the importance of differentiating between public actions and private compassion. It highlights how homelessness is not a singular issue but a collection of diverse circumstances and challenges. John Honeycutt discusses the need for a pragmatic approach to public policy while maintaining a humane understanding of the struggles individuals and families face. By contrasting public responsibilities with personal beliefs, the text advocates for proactive solutions considering community expectations and the moral obligation to assist vulnerable populations.

Keywords: homelessness, public responsibility, private compassion, community solutions, diverse circumstances

Introduction

[REDACTED NAME], you ask a great question: “What are your thoughts on the homeless population in town?” My answer requires clarity on the distinction between action and thoughts. My answer also requires considering the distinction between public and private lives.

These distinctions yield four combinations: (a) public action, (b) private action, (c) public thoughts, and (d) private thoughts. My reasoning for taking time to respond to your question is that an off-the-cuff sound bite would be flippant and inaccurate. (Also see Appendix A)

Clarification

In this circumstance, my thinking and actions as a public figure differ markedly from my private thinking and actions. Understandably, people conflate these distinctions. My public and private thinking and actions would be identical in other subject areas. Here, though, they are not.

I will contrast the public from the private using a Webster's Dictionary approach, a psychological model, Scripture, and a well-known short story.

1. My public action and thinking as City Manager would be pragmatism in applying laws and ordinances. My private action has been and will continue to be from a compassionate view. These two “hats” would differ. (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2003).
2. A psychological explanation comes from Johari’s Window. Johari and his model describe the differences between public and private lives. His four quadrants are similar to mine. This model explains my position in responding to your question. As a public figure–City Manager–my actions and thinking would differ from those of an individual (Carlton, 2008; Welch, 2023).

3. A scriptural explanation lies in a contrast between Romans 13:1–7 and James 2:8. That is, to honor those in authority over you (in this instance, those in authority include the public at large, the Board of Commissioners, Law, and various ordinances). My job as City Manager would be to honor and respect these authorities. My private life, however, would be through personal actions I have previously done and will continue doing (Today's Parallel Bible, 2008).
4. Loren Eisely's "The Starfish Story " mirrors my thinking and action, which mirrors the protagonist in this compelling short story (Kinnaman, 2003).

As your City Manager, I would pragmatically align with public expectations and execute our ordinances without trying to solve the issue beyond the scope of the job.

As a private citizen, I have and will continue to work compassionately in the private partnership described with my wife. I will continue striving toward demonstrating faith through private action, and as an individual, I would address the "starfish" that are within my reach.

Homelessness is a Complex Issue

First, we must recognize that the homeless population is not one large, homogenous group. Next, we must recognize that forms, reasons, and choices related to homelessness blur lines that otherwise could neatly categorize the various subsets. The underlying causes of homelessness versus the results of being in a state of homelessness complicate the issue. (Vissing, et al., 2019)

The federal definition of homelessness is broader than most of us consider. “The federal government defines homelessness as a lack of a fixed, regular nighttime residence or living in a place not meant for human habitation. It can also include being at risk of losing housing or having no resources to find permanent housing.”

Biases, judgmentalism, misunderstanding, and "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) syndrome can exacerbate the difficulty in finding solutions—let alone putting solutions in place.

To be blunt, and in the extreme, some people believe homelessness is "just their fault," can be easily fixed "except for their laziness," and that "It is just not my problem."

But even with lesser versions of this extreme, many of our citizens face personal, economic, and safety challenges. Some of our struggling neighbors meet the federal definition of homelessness even if they are not living on the street. Your question probably concerns people who are homeless, but as your City Manager, I would include struggling families in finding appropriate solutions. Preemptive action is usually preferred over overreaction.

A Culture of “Us”

The expression "worldview" is tossed around at times. Most of us have a vague sense of our worldview—even if we do not solidly understand what a worldview is or is not. Especially near here, a collective view of the world comes through some sense of spirituality or religious faith. In my instance, I took a graduate class called "Worldview." If interested, you can explore mine. I have posted it on my website (Honeycutt, 2024).

That said, Sallisaw has an “us/they” bias—an ingroup and outgroup worldview (in my opinion). The local worldview of “us” heavily influences our local culture (attitudes, assumptions, and behavior). “Us” generally represents long-established family names or those that have lived here long enough to become locally naturalized. Even as Sallisaw grows, this core aspect of our culture remains influential and likely will for the foreseeable future. A City Manager cannot realistically influence this, nor would I want to try. Many homeless people are an outgroup here (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020).

Sallisaw also has a continuum of compassion and judgementalism. This continuum impacts whether the citizenry is willing to help or rejects helping, and it is likely true everywhere else.

Examples of Differing Circumstances

Pragmatic approaches and thinking must unbundle understanding of the homeless population into subgroups. I have listed a few here. As a city manager, my approach to each of these situations would differ—both by ordinance and in judgment.

1. Chronically Homeless Adults: Many rural areas see individuals who have experienced long-term homelessness, often compounded by health issues, substance abuse, and lack of access to healthcare. As a City Manager, having a ready-made relationship with the state, non-profit organizations, and para-churches would usually be an appropriate approach (Rickards, 2010).

2. Families with Children: Economic hardships can lead to family homelessness, especially in smaller towns where job opportunities may be limited. Single mothers or fathers with children seeking stability and safety for their families. As the City Manager, having a ready-made relationship with DHS is appropriate. But here, as a point of personal reality, I have been and remain a mandatory reporter.

3. Veterans: Some rural areas have significant populations of homeless veterans who may struggle with reintegration and accessing services. Military veterans may experience homelessness due to factors related to their service, including PTSD or other service-related issues. I am still getting familiar with how our city's relationship with the VHA facility will impact the city beyond the potential economic impacts. This need appears on my 100-day plan.

4. Individuals with Disabilities: Those experiencing homelessness due to physical, mental, or developmental disabilities that impact their ability to secure housing. Federal and state

law must be abided by for these instances. Two important considerations are the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—especially Title II and III of the Act. We sorely need to address both of these areas: Access and transportation. However, I am still determining how well our city complies with the Fair Housing Act (FHA). I would work with our City Attorney to better understand this need.

5. Substance Abusers: Individuals dealing with addiction may prefer being homeless or in transient situations rather than seeking treatment. These instances require collaboration with city and county enforcement agencies.

6. Elderly Homeless Individuals: Older adults may find themselves homeless due to financial issues, lack of family support, or health-related problems. In these instances, my staff—especially in our call center and police department—need to be aware of Oklahoma's agencies, such as Sunbeam Emergency Shelter for Seniors. There are others, too. But we cannot just dismiss these needs.

7. Transients and Panhandlers. Not all “panhandlers” are homeless. Some may have housing but find themselves in difficult financial situations, while others are more flagrantly conning others. The truth is difficult to distinguish. Even so, the same ordinances apply to both those in need and confidence-artists. Existing ordinances cover these instances to an extent but deserve additional attention.

Examples of Outreach and State Programs

Our emergency service professionals and contact center personnel should have contact information: Intensive Outreach and Navigation (ION). Safe Haven, Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG), Continuum of Care (CoC), Projects for Assistance in Transition for Homelessness (PATH), SSI/SSDI outreach (SOAR), the 2-1-1 Infoline, Sunbeam Emergency Shelter for

Seniors, Volunteers of America® Oklahoma (VOA), Department of Human Services (DHS), and the non-profit 1-1-1 Project. There are others also, I'm certain. But a quick job-aid list of these differentiating immediate/emergency from pre-emptive and long term solutions is appropriate. An example is KI BOIS Community Action offering yearly one-time rental or utility assistance to families in financial crisis. I have an idea to offer a co-location KI BOIS resource in our electric utility customer care offices in City Hall.

Summary

I want to discuss a city manager's primary responsibilities and challenges sufficiently. I emphasize balancing budgets, managing city resources efficiently, and ensuring that city services meet the community's needs. Additionally, I emphasize the significance of effective communication and collaboration with elected officials and residents to create a positive living environment. My job would be to make decisions that benefit the city and its citizens while maintaining financial prudence and using other resources wisely.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Facebook summarized posting (10th grade reading level):

Homelessness is a complex issue that goes beyond just seeing it as a problem. It is important to realize that the homeless population is not a single group; many factors lead to different experiences of homelessness. Some people might be without a home, while others may be at risk of losing their housing. Acknowledging these differences helps us understand that a compassionate approach is vital.

As the City Manager, I would follow laws and address homelessness within our community. However, I also believe in helping individuals on a personal level. It's crucial to remember that homelessness affects many people, including families who may not appear homeless but are still struggling. We can create solutions that support everyone in our community by working together.

A more complete response is in a White Paper I crafted before responding to you. It is posted on my website (Honeycutt dot US) under the "Our City" page.

Facebook summarized posting (8th grade reading level):

Homelessness is a complicated problem that requires more than a simple solution. It's important to understand that not all homeless people are the same; they have different reasons for their situations. Some may not have a home at all, while others might be close to losing theirs. Recognizing these differences helps us understand why it's important to be compassionate.

As the City Manager, I must follow the laws and work on the issue of homelessness in our community. But I also believe in helping people personally. Many families may be struggling and don't look homeless, but they need support, too. We can find better ways to help everyone in our community by coming together.

A more complete response is in a White Paper I crafted prior to responding to you. It is posted on my website (Honeycutt dot US) under the “Our City” page.