

When Humanitarianism Goes Bad

December 18, 2008

Thomas A. Dutton, Director, Miami University Center for Community Engagement in
Over-the-Rhine

Marcia England, Miami University

Kate Fadick, Director, Peaslee Neighborhood Center

Chris Wilkey, Northern Kentucky University

Barbara Wolf, Independent Documentary Film Maker

This piece was originally posted on *CincinnatiBeacon.com* (December 19, 2008) and published in *StreetVibes* (January 2009).

Beware the new language of concern—the new humanitarianism—regarding homelessness in Cincinnati! In October 2008 Cincinnati City Council passed an Emergency Ordinance that, while probably not technically in violation of the state’s Sunshine Laws, sure is sketchy in that it was not formally on the agenda and never received public commentary. Placed in front of Council Members on the day of its passing, the Ordinance sailed through with barely a hiccup.

Regardless of its legal status, the Ordinance clearly articulates Council’s intention:

“Directing the Cincinnati/Hamilton County Continuum of Care for the Homeless to immediately address the inadequacies of the current provision of services for single homeless individuals in the City of Cincinnati, and to put into place a comprehensive plan to implement such services. The plan must ensure that as a critical segment of the homeless community, single homeless men and women, will have access to safe, appropriate shelter facilities and that such facilities will provide comprehensive services necessary of homeless individuals to obtain and maintain housing.

“Furthermore, Council directs that the comprehensive plan guarantee the highest standards of care for the homeless so they can successfully move from “Homeless to Homes.” In addition, all plan recommendations must insure that any facilities are “Good Neighbors” and do not result in any behavior or actions that are disruptive to businesses and residents. Recommendations for shelter facilities and service models must be based on nationally recognized best-practice methods within the context of the Continuum of Care for the Homeless and shall include case management services, medical services, mental health services, and recovery services.

“Furthermore, it is the intent of the Mayor and the Cincinnati City Council that the recommended best practices model will guide City of Cincinnati resource allocations for services to single homeless men and women in the future. Any and all providers of these services will be selected through an objective, competitive process consistent with HUD guidelines that homeless services planning and implementation are coordinated, inclusive and outcome-oriented.

The Continuum of Care is urged to submit its recommendations to the Mayor and Cincinnati city Council no later than March 31, 2009.

“Furthermore, it is the intention of the Mayor and the City Council to empower the Continuum of Care to respond to this mandate by creating a process that is inclusive of all of the key stakeholders in the community, including but not limited to homeless providers, the business community, government representatives, funding entities and regional/national experts. Failure to present a comprehensive completed plan to Council by the deadline will lead to direct intervention by Council to address the homeless system in a different manner.”

If you pardon the not-so-veiled threat of the last sentence, the Ordinance may seem reasonable at first glance. Isn't it a good idea to examine shelter facilities and to ascertain the best practices of homeless care from around the nation?

It would seem so, but a closer read of the Ordinance reveals the emperor's clothes of this new humanitarianism.

First, the Ordinance is specious. Without offering evidence to support its claims, the Ordinance's first sentence sets a tone of crisis in homeless care that needs addressing “immediately.” Shelters are thereby positioned as places of deficiency. Rather than trying to nurture a social discourse that can allow citizens to learn from and appreciate otherness—to come to see the homeless for their gifts—the Ordinance reinforces the dominant, pernicious discourse that sees homeless people as deficits, as lower-than-life individuals needing to be fixed, disciplined, or regulated.

Second, the Ordinance is spurious in that its pitch for comprehensiveness is belied by its narrow focus. At a time when the fastest growing segment of the homeless are families with children—25% of the total homeless population are children, and 45% of this number are five or younger—the targets of the Ordinance are single men (49% of the total) and single women (16%).

Third, the Ordinance is mis-directed. Rather than address the political-economic forces that actually create homelessness—lack of affordable housing, joblessness, poverty, less public assistance, lack of child support, massive inequality—the Ordinance ignores those forces and shifts attention to homeless providers as if they are the only problem in this matrix.

Fourth, the Ordinance has a rushed time schedule. Few in homeless care feel comfortable that a “comprehensive completed plan” can actually be accomplished by March 2009. This raises concerns about the validity of the process itself. City Council's stated intent to implement its own plan “in a different manner” suggests that a script is already written and that failure of the process to actually deliver a “comprehensive plan” is the desired outcome.

And fifth, the Ordinance is misguided. Rather than recognizing homeless facilities as places of compassion because they deal with the least fortunate of our neighbors and thus

deserve our respect, the Ordinance has the temerity to have facilities prove their status as “Good Neighbors.” At this historical moment when criminal acts of violence on homeless individuals are increasing, and when cities are in effect criminalizing the homeless by passing draconian legislation and incurring more police sweeps (Washington Park), the Ordinance, in the worst of the discredited blame-the-victim tradition, faults shelters implicitly as bad neighbors from the start and relieves other neighbors of their responsibility to civil community relations.

This Good Neighbor policy is where the Ordinance reveals its true intentions. Because, the elephant in the room here is the Drop Inn Center—the second largest homeless shelter in the state and home to mostly single men and women. Many do not see room for a homeless shelter in a neighborhood experiencing renewed development in the so-called Gateway I, II, III, and IV; a redesigned Washington Park; a new SCPA—all at a time when city and corporate figureheads chime for economic mix.

No, all this mobilization of people’s time and resources to look at “best practices” with a “clean slate” is merely *cover* for City Council’s real intention: to displace the Drop Inn Center from Over-the-Rhine.

This should come as no surprise. City and corporate powers-that-be have been plotting the Drop Inn Center’s future behind closed doors for some time now. But even when they have been out in the open, their track record has mostly amplified Cincinnati’s unrelenting war on the poor. For example, Cincinnati does not have just one anti-panhandling ordinance, but two. In fall 2001, City Council passed the “Impaction Ordinance” (No. 346-2001) to restrict public monies in affordable housing development in poverty-stricken communities. The Ordinance mistakes symptoms for causes by impugning low-income housing as the cause of poverty rather than job loss, governmental rollbacks, declining wages, patterns of racial discrimination and geographic segregation, and poor education, and the list could go on. And then this past June, in a Resolution (No. 4-2008) that seems to take its cue from the Housing Impaction’s attempt to restrict affordable housing, City Council this time is trying to reduce the concentration of social service agencies in Over-the-Rhine, as if, yet again, they are the problem.

Attacking social services is nothing new in U.S. cities and continues to grow in popularity. Zoning ordinances targeting social services have been put in place over the past several years in states such as Washington, Maryland, Florida, Texas, and Connecticut. Some have been challenged by the America Civil Liberties Union on the basis that they violate the Constitution. In a landmark 1985 case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a Cleburne, Texas ordinance similar to that put forth by the Cincinnati City Council was overturned because it furthered no government interest other than the removal of social ‘pariahs’ due to community prejudices.

It’s all just a little bit of history repeating, as Shirley Bassey would say. In the 1960s “Urban Renewal” came to be called “Negro Removal,” precisely because it displaced blacks from their neighborhoods across the country. Seeing that the script has already

been written, we can now call Council's pattern of ordinances as well as its most recent Good Neighbor policy precisely for what they are trying to do, "Homeless Removal."

As the project for Homeless Removal gains steam, some, of course, will be rank and callous to the poor. Good riddance, they will say. But the more sophisticated will veil their intent in a faux generosity, believing that what they proffer is best for the poor. Styling themselves as the new humanitarians, the high-bred rhetoric of compassion only masks the low-brow project of urban colonialism. Be not surprised about the new language of concern that will take form and rain down over Cincinnati. It will go something like this:

The way we care about the homeless, both as a society and in our Queen city, is unacceptable. The homeless are not getting the services they need. The homeless need support systems. And this lack of support is affecting the neighborhood negatively—the conditions in Washington Park, for example, have to change. We are behind the times. We need to put resources behind the facilities. We need to build a new state of the art facility.

We are not fooled by this discourse—which is just code to displace the Drop Inn Center and take its land.

A humanitarianism worthy of its name argues for a different societal vision—for a different political imaginary: One that stands for eradicating homelessness altogether, not just building another shelter; and one that stands to counter economic inequality, not just settle for economic mix.

Let us work toward a society that is empathic and compassionate, one that adds services and adds housing, the sum of which the Drop Inn Center is already doing. A compassionate Cincinnati would work to develop relationships and connectedness among those who are homeless and their neighbors, not simply move the homeless out of sight.