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We all pay the price of homelessness

"The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped." —

Hubert H. Humphrey



VIEWPOINT

Brian S. Williams

The most recent sessions of the Indiana General Assembly and the U.S. Congress have focused significant efforts on addressing the needs of children through education and the elderly through prescription drug benefits, but one group of Hoosiers that remains in the "shadows" is the homeless.

On any given night, 3,500 people are homeless in Indianapolis; roughly 15,000 are homeless during the course of the year. Nearly 40 percent of the homeless are families and children. Nearly one in five homeless people is a veteran.

People often become homeless because they have extremely low incomes and cannot find housing they can afford. Frequently, these problems are complicated by other challenges, such as mental illness, substance abuse, limited education or work history, or lack of family support.

In 2002, over 450 individuals representing nearly 150 community organizations gathered to end homelessness in Indiana. The result of their activity was the publication of "Blueprint to End Homelessness"—an excellent example of how government, private and civic organizations have worked cooperative-

ly to address a public need.

The Blueprint is a 10-year strategy that emphasizes boosting cost-effectiveness and accountability, maximizing resources and rewarding successes. In short, the plan recommends being smarter about how the community pays for and delivers services to the homeless.

In Indianapolis, we spend an estimated \$22 million a year to support about 90 programs that provide assistance to homeless people. That is in addition to the public resources that go toward law enforcement and emergency care at hospitals. Unfortunately, despite these resources, the homeless population has not diminished.

A small percentage of homeless people in Indianapolis are considered to be "chronically" homeless. They typically have a serious mental illness and alcohol or drug problem. While they represent a small percentage of homeless people, they constitute a huge drain on community resources. These "frequent fliers" are not being adequately served by existing efforts. A random sample of patient files at a local health clinic revealed that 20 men contributed to 122 emergency room visits in just one year. These hospital costs alone amount to \$100,000 a year, and the men are still homeless and continuing to use other services.

San Diego tracked the costs of 15 homeless "serial inebriates" over 18 months and discovered the 15 men were costing more than \$1 million in public resources.

How can we make wiser investments of public resources in helping the homeless? Mayor Peterson and other community leaders have already endorsed the Blueprint as both a humane and cost-

effective strategy.

The Blueprint calls for increasing the supply of supportive housing: affordable housing linked with services that can help people stay housed and get the help they need to rebuild their lives. Supportive housing has been well-documented as an effective approach in helping even the hardest-to-serve homeless people. Once stabilized in a place of their own, the homeless use public resources 60 percent less. It costs Indianapolis about the same or more for homeless folks to be out on the street as it does to provide them with supportive housing.

Since the Blueprint was released, significant progress has been made in developing the services and infrastructure necessary to eliminate homelessness. Federal funding sources, local foundations and private organizations have all provided support that has established partnerships between organizations, increased capacity for supportive services, and trained and matched volunteer mentors with families in transitional support programs. Indianapolis has also made progress in converting affordable housing into supportive housing.

To end homelessness in Indianapolis, additional funding for support services, mentoring and supportive housing is necessary. Indianapolis has earned a reputation as a hard-working supportive community for the arts, sports and cultural initiatives. That reputation will be greatly enhanced with your support and community-wide involvement in ending homelessness. •

Williams is director of NNC Group, a local provider of specialized logistics services to the pharmaceutical and medical device industries.