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## City's Homeless Proposal Based on a Proven Model

**By Mark Allison***Executive Director, Supportive Housing Coalition of New Mexico*

While this country has been building emergency shelters for 30 years, we have made no progress reducing homelessness. We now need to focus our efforts and scarce resources on strategies proven to work.

Continuing practices from the last century that aren't effective is a disservice to the community and particularly the people relegated to live short and desperate lives on our streets, 54 of whom died in Albuquerque last year.

While Jeremy Reynalds ("Plan to Help Homeless? Or to Promote Tourism?" in Friday's Journal) is entitled to his opinions about how to address homelessness, they are not supported by a large and growing body of research or by our experience.

Permanent Supportive Housing and Housing First are not "theories" or "gimmicks" but have been demonstrated to be the single most effective method for preventing and ending homelessness, particularly for persons with severe mental illness and substance abuse issues and those who have been "chronically" homeless.

Though perhaps counterintuitive to some, these approaches are based on research yielding evidence of better outcomes than those programs espoused by Reynalds. Instead of holding out housing as a reward for good behavior or moral deservedness by insisting that severely disabled people living on the streets obtain housing only after they become clean and sober, these models are characterized by getting people into housing they can afford immediately.

Housing is not time-limited, and a comprehensive, individualized range of services is made available on a voluntary basis. Yes, voluntary — the research shows that recovery outcomes are actually better if housing is not contingent on mandatory participation in treatment.

Tenants pay 30 percent of their income for rent and must abide by the terms

of the lease agreement like any other renter. This model does not "warehouse" people but instead allows them to choose their home in integrated settings in the community.

He quotes an anonymous source as stating it is "just a clever way to place people in housing and then say homelessness doesn't exist anymore." Exactly.

After all, the one thing all homeless people have in common is the lack of a home. If they have one, they aren't homeless anymore!

Conversely, is it realistic to believe that someone with severe behavioral or physical disabilities can have meaningful recovery while they are still living on the streets? Is it moral to deny them access to housing if they don't? Is it good public policy to force someone back into homelessness if they relapse? In contrast, supportive housing is the literal and figurative foundation upon which all of the other quality-of-life issues can be addressed.

Models from around the country don't work here you say? We have been creating permanent supportive housing in New Mexico since 1996.

In 2005, we pioneered the Housing First approach in New Mexico through a program funded by the city of Albuquerque. There was significant skepticism then, too. Detractors doubted that we could house persons who had serious behavioral health disorders and who had been homeless for years. Some even doubted that this population wanted to be housed.

Today, through this one program, 200 people who had been living on the streets are in their own home. Over 91 percent remain housed for at least seven months (a federal benchmark) and the vast majority stay for years.

Of those who do leave, over half move to other permanent housing.

We have fostered partnerships with 95 property owners throughout the city. The cost is less than \$18.00 per home per night (compared to \$700 for a single overnight hospital visit, for example). Services are offered by numerous provider partners.

We have observed first-hand how desperately needed this program was and continues to be. Not only has it enabled hundreds of individuals to escape their long nightmare of homelessness, it has also offered hope to the broader community by serving as an example of an effective, humane and financially responsible way to address homelessness.

I applaud the mayor's leadership on this issue.

Moreover, I applaud that he is going about it in a smart and pragmatic way that is based on methods that have been proven to work. And if we can end homelessness and at the same time help downtown businesses and tourism and reduce the amount of taxpayer dollars that go toward expensive emergency dispatches, jails and hospitals, that is just fine by me.

Those interested in learning more can go to [www.thehousingcoalition.org](http://www.thehousingcoalition.org).

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