

GETTING BEYOND BENIGN NEGLECT

by Bill Woods for StreetVibes, January 11, 2019

The period connecting the end of the old year and the start of the new one often prompts thinking about past events and what will come next. This December, my thinking began earlier after hearing an update on homelessness in this region by Josh Spring at the annual dinner of the Greater Cincinnati Homeless Coalition. Spring, the Executive Director of the Coalition, didn't pull any punches as he depicted a worsening situation with more homeless families and individuals and an enormous need for affordable housing in this area.

This unsugar coated presentation jolted me to reflect about how we have evolved to such a dismal situation both locally and nationally. When Applied Information Resources, working under the auspices of the newly formed Homeless Coalition, conducted the area's first homeless study in 1986, the immediate response of people of good will was that resources must be quickly found to end this crisis that was impacting the lives of so many men, women, and children. One year later when I attended an international conference on homelessness in Delhi, India, delegates from other countries expressed disbelief that a rich nation like the United States could have a homeless problem. Those who knew their history would cite the programs of "the New Deal" and the 1960s "War on Poverty."

In looking back now at the 1980s, I believe that we had already entered a time frame that I am now calling "the period of benign neglect." By 1986, Ronald Reagan was in his sixth year as President. He came into office with the slogan:

"Government isn't the answer. Government is the problem." He vowed to cut costly and unnecessary federal programs, and to cut taxes in order to unleash America's entrepreneurial spirit. When AIR did its homeless study it cited that funding for various housing assistance programs shrank from \$24.9 billion in 1981 to \$7.8 billion in 1987.

A complimentary ideology also emerged at that time that government assistance actually entrenched poverty and caused a culture of dependency. Along with that philosophy came the mistaken notion of wide spread welfare fraud and welfare queens driving to pick up their checks in Cadillacs. Thus, a powerful new political force grew up in the Reagan era to counter the long prevailing concept that bold government action could solve major problems and assist families and individuals to get back on their feet.

I label the time from the 1980s to the present as a period of benign neglect, because the dismantling of the federal safety net has gone on steadily but slowly. The federal housing cuts and cuts in other federal assistance that began in the 1980s have continued with stops and starts along the way. During the almost four decades under review enough progressive and moderate members of Congress have prevented any cataclysmic assaults on the safety net, and for sixteen of the thirty eight years, a Democrat has served as President.

The new conservatism, however, subtly infiltrated the thinking of some Democratic leaders including Bill Clinton. As President, Clinton signed into law in 1996 a more punitive and limited welfare law that replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children, a long accepted entitlement program.

Meanwhile, states like Ohio witnessed the cutting or elimination of anti-poverty programs by their legislatures. Groups such as the Homeless Coalition and other advocates for the poor fought against this continual whittling away of funding for affordable housing and other safety net programs, but this ongoing battle with its stalemates and losses became almost numbing. Nobody did a very good job of keeping tabs on how these steady losses were mounting up and having a greater impact at the local level.

This article has focused on one major factor that has led to the homeless situation that Josh Spring described at the Coalition's annual dinner. A complete picture would include other factors such as the impact of "big money" on the political process at all levels, the change to a global economy, and a culture that now emphasizes individualism, corporate greed, and polarized groups rather than any emphasis on "we the people." These factors and others would need to be blended into a complete story about how we became mired in this period of benign neglect.

Perhaps the election and Presidency of Donald Trump serve as a wake up call to jolt us into acknowledging the critical problems that have slowly grown to gargantuan size over time. With democracy and most of our institutions and government programs now in jeopardy, maybe we will also be able to recognize that a city and a nation that can accept growing poverty and economic inequality no longer deserve to be called "great."