

Homelessness and the Need for Affordable Housing - Two Long Term Failures In Need Of Adequate New Responses

By Bill Woods for Streetvibes

As the year winds down, one is sometimes led to assess long and short term failures. One long term failure continues to weigh on my mind. It is the failure of Cincinnati and the nation as a whole to make serious strides in eliminating homelessness. This long term failure also causes me to feel some personal guilt.

Back in the mid-1980s, when homelessness emerged as a major problem in Cincinnati and in most cities across the country, the public, including elected officials, became troubled that such a crisis could occur in this wealthy country. What were its causes, and how could we eliminate this tragic situation in our midst? City officials reached out to Applied Information Resources, a non-profit corporation that I launched in 1981, to consider conducting a study that looked at both the size of homelessness in Greater Cincinnati and its causes.

At that time, Buddy Gray, who ran the Drop Inn Center, was the leading voice in the city championing the need to address homelessness. City officials tended to distrust Buddy and believed that he exaggerated the problem. Realizing that we needed to work closely with shelters and agencies that served the homeless, we told City personnel that we would only undertake the study if we could utilize this group as advisors for our work. The City accepted these terms, and we were able to tap a group of shelter and social service agency administrators who were invaluable to our research. We also gained the support and assistance of the newly emerging Homeless Coalition.

With this collaborative assistance, AIR conducted month long surveys at the area shelters and interviewed many shelter and social service personnel who worked with homeless clients. When we released the study in February 1987, it received a lot of news media attention. We were also interviewed and asked to speak about our findings by many community groups and religious organizations in the months after its release.

The public was shocked by the growing number of families with children who were part of the estimated 10,000 people who were homeless in this area in 1986. Both locally and nationally, the prevailing attitude was that homelessness should not be allowed to exist in this country. A lot of grassroots activities occurred at this time to raise money to help shelters and services to assist homeless individuals and families. When I attended an international conference on homelessness in New Delhi, India in November 1987, attendees could not believe that the United States was now home to a growing numbers of families and individuals who did not have a place to live. The U.S., with its ample resources, they declared, would quickly solve this tragic situation.

In the years ahead, AIR completed four other homeless studies. Although our research continued to reveal crises for individuals and families that were getting worse, these studies never received the news media attention and general public interest that our 1987 report garnered. What had happened since our first study? The number of shelters grew and services

for homeless people improved. Meanwhile, organizations such as the Homeless Coalition expanded their operations and advocacy work. Funding for immediate homeless services increased. Why then had homelessness increased in Cincinnati and other cities across the country?

The real question is: "What didn't happen after the initial public dismay about homelessness in this country?" First of all, not enough leaders and elected officials connected the dots that homelessness is the result of growing poverty. People who earn a living wage or live in affordable housing do not become homeless. No magic wand existed to end homelessness. It required addressing long-term systemic economic and social issues.

Unfortunately, the 1980s was a decade when government at the national level was actually a major factor in causing the homeless crisis. In 1986, we were in the middle of Ronald Reagan's second term as President, and his entire agenda was based on shrinking government programs and preaching the doctrine that government action is not the solution but the problem. Beginning with the Reagan Presidency, safety net services and housing assistance programs for low-income families and individuals were cut to the bone. With certain exceptions, cuts in these programs continued to occur during the Administrations and Congresses that followed Reagan. Recall, that it was with President Clinton's support that Congress ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program in 1996.

While these things were happening in Washington, D.C., little was being done by Cincinnati City Government and other local governments to deal with homelessness or a growing affordable housing crisis. Meanwhile, piecemeal efforts by foundations and the private sector lacked the ongoing funding to really make a dent in any of the factors creating poverty. In recent years, however, agencies and individual activists concerned about homelessness and the lack of affordable housing have become more organized and aggressive in pursuing effective, long term local responses to reducing poverty.

It was such a grassroots effort that led to the recent ballot initiative that would have required the City to allocate \$50-million a year to producing more affordable housing in Cincinnati. Initially, Advocates for Affordable Housing and the Homeless Coalition effectively prodded the City to create an Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Then, when the City failed to provide more than token funding to this entity, these two coalitions organized the ballot initiative that was on the ballot last May.

Although the ballot initiative was defeated, it did not discourage or slow down the leaders of the affordable housing movement. They are busy meeting and formulating plans for another ballot initiative and other strategies and policies to increase local government funding for affordable housing. Meanwhile, a new Mayor and City Council were elected in November, and both Aftab Pureval and the new Council members seem much more inclined to accept the fact that the City must adequately respond to the housing crisis.

Additionally, a glimmer of hope emerges in Washington, D.C.. If the Biden Administration can succeed with its small Democratic majorities in Congress to pass the Build Back Better Act, programs in this Bill would significantly help low-income families. Extending the child tax credit and providing child care assistance are two major pieces of this legislation.

What started as a piece about our long term failure to reduce homelessness in Cincinnati and the nation concludes with a bit of optimism. This appears to be a moment when anyone concerned about homelessness and poverty needs to support the affordable housing initiatives championed by Advocates for Affordable Housing and the Homeless Coalition. Please stay tuned to their efforts! Although gerrymandering has given us Republican Congressmen who can't be swayed to support the Build Back Better Bill, we can still let Senator Brown know that we applaud his work to get this law passed. We simply can't afford to let this moment of opportunity pass without getting involved.