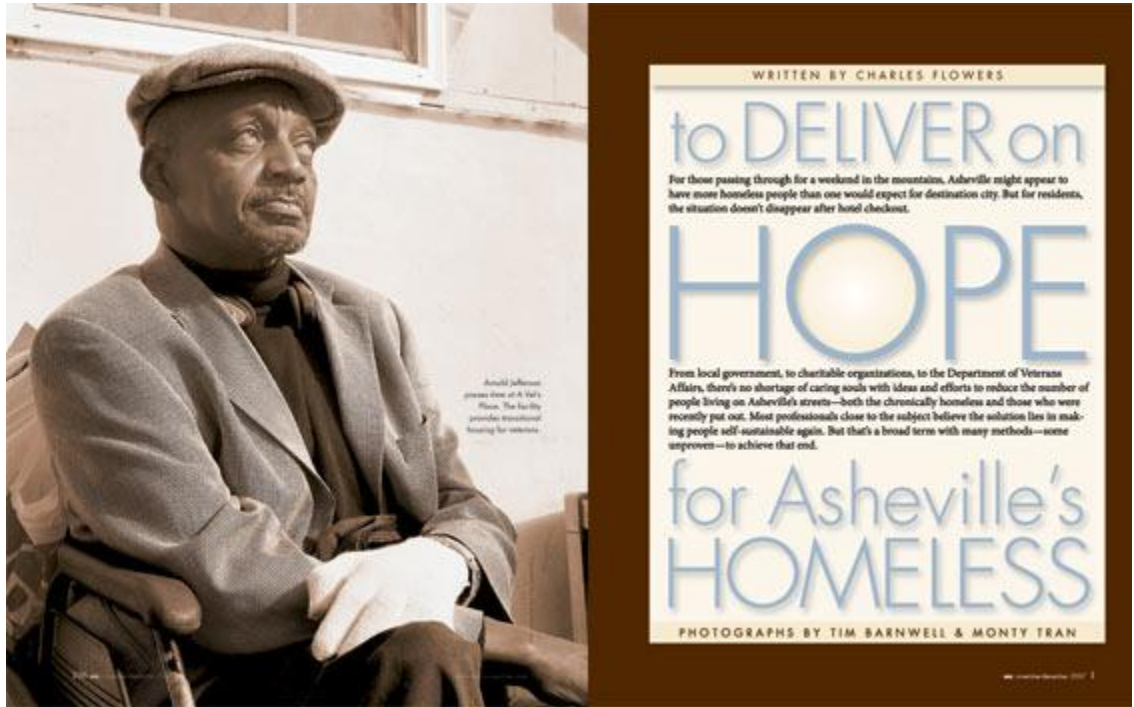


To Deliver on Hope For Asheville's Homeless

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For those passing through for a weekend in the mountains, Asheville might appear to have more homeless people than a destination city. But for residents, the situation doesn't disappear after hotel checkout.

From local government, to charitable organizations, to the Department of Veterans Affairs, there's no shortage of caring efforts to reduce the number of people living on Asheville's streets—both the chronically homeless and those who were professionals close to the subject believe the solution lies in making people self-sustainable again. But that's a broad term with many methods—some unproven—to achieve that end.



“I’ve never considered myself homeless,” says ‘Won Ton’ Dave Jacobs, 56, whom the cold October drizzle has driven inside the Pack Library in downtown Asheville. “I consider myself houseless.” He begins to list “great men who were houseless,” starting with Abraham. Like Jacobs, “Crow,” 30, is from somewhere else—in his case Austin, Texas, by way of Phoenix, Arizona. Crow, who rolls himself a cigarette from a nearly empty pouch of loose tobacco, will sleep in the woods tonight, because the people in shelters “are too volatile.” Won Ton Dave, who hails from Southern California, will not say where he sleeps, but it’s not too plush. Both men say they are looking for work. For now, they are just two of the many homeless who trod the streets of Asheville.

No other city in WNC has the number or diversity of homeless people or programs as Asheville—or as ambitious a plan to end homelessness. The Asheville homeless—who number as many as 700 at last count in April 2004—can get dental extractions, food, subsidized housing, phlebotomist training, free clothes and bus passes, mental health evaluations, and medical care including MRIs from various organizations. In other locales, they’re lucky to get a place to stay and something to eat. That’s why many find their way to this town.

ACROSS □ WNC

We’re too small to have this problem and too big—because we’re the regional center—to



avoid it,” says Rev. Scott Rogers, executive director of the Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministries, which runs seven facilities, including a soup kitchen and shelters for women and children and veterans.

He knows from intake interviews that many of the homeless come from outlying counties that lack Asheville’s resources: public transportation, adequate shelters or medical care, including a top-rated Veteran’s Affairs center.

Fifty-six-year-old Bill Warren, a former pastor, runs shelters in Marion, 34 miles east of Asheville. Marion is the seat of McDowell County, a region struggling with job losses in textile and furniture industries and little growth—except in real-estate prices. One shelter houses men only; the other women with children younger than 12. They are more than a mile apart. “I have a problem with separating families like that,” Warren says. “But that’s what we have to do. It’s rough, especially on the young women. There is no family shelter in McDowell.



“Another problem we face is zero transportation—zero,” he continues. “No buses, or even taxicabs. I have actually carried them to Asheville in my car. There’s a place where you have to cut your losses. If somebody’s been through our shelter three or four times, what’s one more stay likely to accomplish?” He knows they can find a space at the Asheville Salvation Army, on Haywood Street, which offers 66 beds on a pay-as-you-can system, evening meals, and hot breakfasts. Most guests are turned out by 7:30 a.m. Some walk around the corner to A-Hope, on North Ann Street, a day center with free services including peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, hot showers, laundry, telephones, and a mail drop.

Like A-Hope, Boone’s Hospitality House on King Street dishes out food and emergency shelter at downtown locations. Unlike most Asheville shelters, 20 is a crowd here. Director Lynne Mason, who also serves on Town Council, says Hospitality serves more than 1,000 temporarily or chronically homeless people from seven Western North Carolina counties and has been “at or beyond capacity the whole year.”

In October, the Boone Town Council approved the transfer of land east of town to the Hospitality House to build a homeless complex that could combine food service and distribution, job training, and shelter for up to 70 people. Although the new center will not be operational for at least two years.

Some of the homeless blend in—dressing in hand-me-down “Life is good” T-shirts and carrying backpacks like college students. “Signing,” the practice of panhandling with signs, can yield as much as \$40 a day in a college town like Boone.

In downtown Asheville and at the malls, panhandling is a misdemeanor. Through the “Spare Change for Real Change” initiative in downtown Asheville, visitors are encouraged not to give money to individual panhandlers, but instead drop donations in collection boxes around town. The money is then passed to relief agencies.

HOPES & PLANS

Though far from a paradise for the homeless, Asheville has more than 300 shelter beds to sleep in and nearby woods in which to camp. Asheville is one of more than 200 American cities with a 10-year plan to end homelessness. Even its proponents have a hard time with the title, a verbally pleasing euphemism. But the plan might work. That's because, for a seemingly insurmountable problem that has dogged America for at least 20 years, a consensus has arisen about an answer to chronic homelessness—homes. But here's the hard sell: providing housing works best for the most chronically homeless. And that's just the beginning.

"Anybody moving from the street to housing is going to have to relearn how to live in a house," says Amy Sawyer, 30, who coordinates the homeless initiative in Asheville. She says following the best practices of other cities has meant supportive housing for 166 long-term homeless people in Asheville. "The things that keep you safe and protected on the street are not the same things that keep you safe and protect your housing. There's a period of transition. You can't just say, 'Here's your house. Go figure it out.'"

Sawyer says the plan adopted by the Asheville City Council and Buncombe County Commission in 2005 makes economic sense. By housing the "chronics"—people who tend to fall into homelessness and stay there—service providers are saving money in jail and emergency room visits that cost taxpayers up to \$22,000 per year for each homeless person, according to study by the steering committee that developed the plan. The first 37 housed in Asheville had accumulated 1,271 arrests and jail costs of \$278,000 in the previous three years. Housing them in apartments, even with support services like mental health and job skills coaching, totals about \$16,000 each person per year—a 28 percent savings per person.

A study by students from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill is underway to pin down the exact cost savings. Research already shows that the newly homeless need less supportive services than the chronics and benefit from having them off the street. Sawyer says five out of six who get supportive housing stay there—an 83 percent retention rate.

Comparing point-in-time homeless counts, taken at the same place a year apart by the Asheville-Buncombe Homeless Coalition, reveals a downward trend in chronic homelessness with a 38-percent drop from January 2006 to January 2007. Similar declines have been reported in other cities that have adopted 10-year plans. But that may be deceptive, since no one who serves the WNC homeless has seen declines in case loads; instead, beds are being added. Sam Everett, who ran the award-winning A Vet's Place on South Coxe Avenue for 18 years, says the count is misleading. Instead, he says, homeless programs should be measured this way: "Of the people they treat, how many are taken out of that population and never return to homelessness?" His success rate: 60 to 70 percent.

Everett, Rogers, and others who serve homeless veterans in Asheville celebrated in October when a \$1.6 million grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs allowed them to buy the Super 8 motel on Tunnel Road in East Asheville. The purchase will add 100 beds to the homeless veterans program, plus training and education space in the former Methodist Church next door. In the works are a for-profit restaurant and a vegetable-oil recycling business, both run by homeless vets. Most of the \$4 million

balance—\$3.25 million—will be paid from the sale of the current A Vet's Place location to the Western Carolina Rescue Ministries. Starting in December, homeless veterans services will be concentrated at the new site.

“There's no reason for any of our vets in this area to be homeless anymore,” Rogers says. This should reduce the homeless presence in downtown Asheville since at least one-fifth of the city's homeless are veterans, the vast majority of them men.

Moss Bliss, who runs the Asheville Homeless Network, a self-help advocacy group, criticizes the 10-year plan's focus on the chronics. “What about the 40 percent of the just-barely homeless who are trying to get on their feet?” Bliss wonders. “We need to put more resources on the people who need the help and can't get it.”

Thursday meetings of the Asheville Homeless Network are held in a loft at the Grove Corner Market called “The Perch.” About 25 people climb the narrow stairs to see what the self-help group has to offer. Unlike other missions, this one has no preaching, unless you count Bliss, a contrarian who distrusts all forms of government, including the Asheville Downtown Association (the merchants' group responsible for the Spare Change for Real Change collection boxes.)

“They say they're against panhandling, unless it's their panhandling,” he says, referring to the group's requests for donations to a foundation planned to assist yet-to-be-named homeless programs. Bliss' gadfly efforts have raised an anonymous \$15,000 donation. He is seeking ideas from homeless men and women on how to spend it. Although he tries to interest the diverse group in “sustainable” uses for the money—to keep the network and its members afloat—there is a clear bias among this homeless band for free stuff now. They hoot down a request from one man for \$60.60 to fix a mountain bicycle, with one dissident saying a decent bike can be had for \$20. But they jump to their feet at the offer of monthly Asheville Transit bus passes, which cost \$15 apiece. Most flee the meeting as soon as they get their passes. More than \$400 goes for Transit passes this day. With \$5,000 squirreled away in a certificate of deposit, for next year, Bliss says the network's budget is essentially shot for this year, with the coldest months still to come. He knows the homeless will keep coming.

So does Salvation Army spokesman Colonel Ernest Miller, 82, who calls Asheville's homeless plan “marking time” and says that, like the sun “homelessness comes up anew every morning.” Asheville Mayor Terry Bellamy studied the homeless initiative in Chattanooga, when she took office two years ago. She liked the way the city got all the care providers—faith-based, secular, and governmental—in one room. So she copied it. As a result, she says, Asheville is tackling the problem of homelessness more effectively. “In the last two years, we have put more than 100 people into assisted housing,” Bellamy says. “It shows the importance of putting housing first and getting those people sustainable.”

FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCE

Steve Fisher, 64, wears his laminated bus pass around his neck, like an ID card. An Air Force veteran who served in Vietnam in the mid-1960s, he comes to A-Hope to check his

mail. Fisher has led a rough life, including a felony conviction for aggravated assault that cost him seven years in a South Carolina prison followed by heavy drug and alcohol abuse most of the last 17 years that put him on the street. He says he has not talked to his son or his sister, his only family, in years. He has attempted suicide three times, once by throwing himself in front of a car. His legs and stomach are grotesquely scarred, and he says he has constant back pain.

“I’m diagnosed with deep depression, PTSD, bi-polar, schizophrenic, bad nerves. I take about 22 types of medication every day,” he says, clear-eyed from staying off alcohol, cocaine, and heroin for six months. “I try not to get angry anymore because it got me in trouble once. I just try to take each day as it comes.”

Veterans Administration homeless outreach coordinator Allison Haberfield discovered Fisher last April. Since then, his fortunes have changed. After two months of sleeping at A Vet’s Place, Fisher now has a subsidized studio apartment in an Oakley neighborhood, which has a nearby food bank and Meals on Wheels location. Still, his \$643 monthly income from Social Security and disability checks barely stretches.

“Everywhere I go there’s homeless people trying to beg me out of money, bum cigarettes, and want me to buy them a drink. I tell them. ‘I don’t drink myself. I’m not going to buy you none.’ If somebody asks me for a cigarette, I give them one. I know how it is to be without a cigarette.” By month’s end, Fisher will be unable to afford tobacco.

He also knows how it is to be alone. Although he says he learned in prison to “walk the yard alone, otherwise you might get killed or have to kill someone,” he seeks companionship. He takes the bus to Leicester for Sunday Baptist church services. Looking at the growing A-Hope lunch crowd he says, “I hope and pray all these homeless people find work and a place to stay. Everyone needs a place to stay, someone to care about them.” 