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INSTITUTIONAL POVERTY



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

While at the recent statewide downtown conference in Reading, I spent a couple of days checking out the city. One of the mobile workshops was held at a public housing complex close to the hotel.

We were there to talk to the tenants about the outdoor space around their complex. We were standing there outside as people converged to our area. Most people there did not speak English, and they had a nice interpreter there doing her best to convey the people's thoughts. I thought she did a good job. So, when things started to go south a little bit, I did not hear exactly what was said.

There is not enough parking at the building. Some of the men brought that up as a constraint to their pursuit of happiness. I, along with the others, was not surprised, as downtown people hear parking complaints all the time. There is never enough parking downtown. But the Resident Coordinator seemed to take umbrage with the comments. Finally, he interceded in the process and told us that the people were wrong.

He persisted in enunciating, and he continued his denial. Then the group got up and left and went to the other side of the open space. It occurred to be without regard for the merits of the discussion and the complaints. We were told not to listen to the people we arranged to meet. There were men and women there who had one common thread: they lived in a public housing project, and they were poor.

Unless you have lived it, there is no way to garner your thoughts around the restrictive atmosphere that prevailed that day. There is a price that you pay for getting government assistance — you

must follow the rules. There is a comprehensive set of rules for people that, in truth, are somewhat daunting.

The threat of losing housing is the result of not following the rules. You give up your individualism to be part of a "group think" of a certain point of view. The regimen is described in the bowels of a *Federal Register* regulation that could be interpreted any way the local jurisdiction reads it, within limits.

When you look at the history of public housing, back in the beginning, black developments and white developments depended upon where the project was located. As a result, white areas remained protected, and black projects were crammed into the city's industrial and less desirable areas to hyper-segregate an area.

So, minorities are pushed together with only the color of their skin, ethnic derivation, and their low-income status. In some cases, if you lose your unit, you cannot move to another and need to get on the waiting list. So, in a way, many are tethered to the unit.

In the meantime, money to make your life better is being eaten up in the administrative process. The residents are being administered to by people who seek to implement a complex set of rules. As funding changes in many cases, the rules change, but the one constant is some rules dictate how you live your life.

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DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

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Recently the \$4.925 billion in HOME-ARP (American Rescue Plan) was announced to help the homeless. There is an average of 553,742 homeless persons in the U.S. on any given night. If you divided the allocation by the number of people, it would be just shy of \$8,850 per person. If you split the money and say that ten percent of the homeless throw the money in the air, ten percent buy drugs or alcohol, ten percent get swindled immediately, ten percent are victims of a crime, and let's say ten percent have some miscellaneous reason to have the money misused somehow. Out of the total homeless cohort group, 276,871 people could get out of the shelters and start anew.

That would seriously reduce the load on the shelters, but what it would also do is not pay their salaries, not pay to build more shelters but better yet, not pay for a high price connected consultants to tell the organizations what they already know. They will be a direct benefit to the people, not the system. We cannot keep feeding the system and have connected elites skim the money off the top in the name of their expertise being needed.

People are homeless for many reasons, but the number one reason is they have no money. The money probably will never reach the people and will be used

for "services," also known as program delivery. Many consultants and many political elites know the program delivery well as it is a way to get around the administrative limit for a Community Development Block Grant.

I was at an equity workshop the other day, and it was reported that of the \$11.9 million to advise racial equity given through philanthropy, only \$1.15 million reached the intended recipients. About ten percent made way for the intended purpose.

It is all like that. I do this for a living; I see it all the time. I am always asking myself, "who is funding this?" when I see some glossy presentation without a merit effort.

The minority population of African Americans never had a chance after slavery. Then they were segregated, sometimes arrested, and made to work in jobs like US Steel mines and, in general, precluded from building generational wealth.

The only way everyone could gain freedom is by giving them the one thing they lack ... money. So instead, we pay for services because if they escaped the system, they would lessen the demand for institutional poverty.

Barry Cassidy is a freelance grant and economic development consultant. He can be reached at barrycassidy@comcast.net.

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