

# HOMELESSNESS

## MYTHS VERSES ECONOMIC REALITIES

BY LARS DIN



A cool breeze followed us along the wooded trail distant from the sound of traffic. Patches of sunlight flickered along the ground as the tall canopy overhead swung in the stronger winds above us. Coming around a bend, we passed a massive pile of rusted metal and full garbage bags. A dump seemed out of place in this beautiful patch of woods, until it became obvious that the garbage was carefully collected here, to keep it out of the rest of the woods.

My guide in visiting several camps was Jon DeCarmine from the Gainesville/Alachua County Office on Homelessness. According to protocol for approaching someone's camp, he called out from down the path and we entered the camp area only after being acknowledged by whoever was there.

We met Joe, thickly blond and gray beard, clear blue eyes, standing in unlaced combat boots, affectionately scolding his enthusiastic dog by explaining that the situation was under control and he could stop barking now.

He invited us into the dusty tarped kitchen area he had constructed. Sitting at the table, we talked about the One-Stop Center, which is intended to allow anyone homeless to get support like counseling, job assistance, basic medical care, and so on, all at a single location.

"What they need to do," said Joe immediately, "is go out to Phoenix, Ariz., and look at the one there. It's downtown, been there for years."

DeCarmine asked if he had heard that the Gainesville one might be sited north of town on 53rd Avenue. Joe laughed. "Now you're talking about busing people around. A lot of them are not going to want to do that."

But then, very few people are asking anyone who is homeless what they want to do. In our bike tour of several camps, DeCarmine made it a point to ask people we met what they needed. As we talked, Joe explained he wouldn't mind getting a place again. "I just gotta get back into working."

DeCarmine asked, "What do you need to be able to do that?"

Joe laughed again. "I just need a brand new body: this one's wrecked. Twenty-six years of doing rehab...One day my back and knee gave out—just like that."

### THE HOMELESS MYTH AND ECONOMIC REALITIES

Of the chronic homeless, almost half reported health issues as the primary cause of their homelessness in 2007, according to the annual survey conducted by the Office on Homelessness.

Jon DeCarmine is co-author of Project GRACE, the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness, a staggeringly comprehensive and detailed road map to providing permanent housing and necessary services to those who need it in this area. Approved by Gainesville and Alachua County Commissions in 2005, it also provides a framework for understanding just who winds up on the streets in our area. The One-Stop Center is a part of the plan.

It is tempting to generalize about the 'homeless,' DeCarmine said, but homelessness is more a condition than an identity. "It strikes many different people, and in different ways. Only a tiny fraction of people fit the classic stereotype of 'panhandler with a drinking habit.' In reality, any time you have rising rents and stagnant wages, eventually housing becomes unaffordable and that's where homelessness comes from."

Donna Lawson, director of the Interfaith Hospitality Network, agrees. "Look around. Do you see any new affordable housing in this area? Plenty of luxury condos though. When I started in position, the waiting list for subsidized housing was 2 or 3 months, now it can be a year and a half."

The scarcity of affordable housing is a national problem. According to the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP), since the 1980s, affordable housing across the nation has been disappearing. In the six years leading up to 1982, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development built three-quarters of a million new public housing units. But in the 25 years since 1983, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, HUD built only a quarter of a million units. In other words, there were more than 12 times as many new public housing units built in 1982 than in the last two and a half decades.

To make matters worse, in recent years 200,000 private sector housing units have been lost every single year, while 1.2 million unsubsidized affordable housing units vanished from 1993 to 2000.

The WRAP report, called "Without Housing," shows that the federal government is, in fact spending money on housing, only the subsidies, which have steadily grown to over \$120 billion "largely benefit upper-income homeowners." Meanwhile the U.S. government spends more on destroyer than on all McKinney-Vento Act homeless assistance. And how much was spent on Section 8 and public housing units since 1996? Zero dollars.

And while this in part explains why homelessness has become such an issue across the United States, the current homeless may represent only the tip of the iceberg. Home foreclosures are hitting new records these days, with 2.2 million in 2007 and 200,000 every month this year. With many analysts warning that the last decade of credit-driven expansion will be answered with severe market corrections, the people most likely to feel the crunch won't be bankers. While the Federal Reserve will bail out the wealthy gamblers, here in North Florida there will be more evictions, as more people struggling with the intense stigma of not being able to pay their own way.

According to the 2000 census, 22 percent of the population of Alachua County — more than 49,000 people — already lived in poverty. Our median wages were already low compared to the rest of Florida and the nation. And those numbers have not improved, say advocates. There will be more people on the street this year.

"These are the people who need assistance," says Lawson. "People think we're talking about chronic homelessness, but we're talking about the working poor, single parents, who just can't make ends meet."

In Gainesville, according to the last survey done by the Office on Homelessness, fully a

\* Source: U.S. Congress & Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, "Don't America's Rental Homes Fit a Diverse Nation," Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, quoted in "Without Housing" by the Western Regional Advocacy Project, <http://wraphome.org>

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of the nearly 1400 homeless are children. The Interfaith Hospitality Network provides temporary support services, including shelter and food, for single parents with children. The local faith community, with 29 congregations in the area participating, provides immense support to the IHN, according to Lawson.

The city, however, seems to have different priorities, and actually has been studying ways to restrict how many people a church may feed, or increasing the minimum lot size for the siting of a religious facility.

"In the downtown area, you have restaurants serving till 11 p.m. with no restriction on how many customers can dine there, and bars can serve countless drinks till 2 a.m.," says Lawson. "But two churches next to each other can't both serve food after 8:30 p.m. and then may only legally serve 20 people! It's absurd."

## EARLY EFFORTS

Other advocates agree that city regulations and police can be an obstacle to their work. Before 2003, only a few local residents conducted outreach to people living in the woods. One of these citizens is Arupa Freeman, who coordinates the Homeless Outreach Mobile Effort (HOME) Van program from a modest house in Southeast Gainesville decorated with the effects of her other passion, painting. She doesn't mince words.

"The HOME Van is able to serve food consistently because we have a good lawyer."

Arupa also agrees that the number of working poor has increased as housing has disappeared. "We're seeing more and more elderly, and families with children, cancer patients, pregnant women, people with disabilities, vets, people with mental illness. And as for addiction, there are just not enough resources for people with addiction."

Freeman first began driving around town in September 2002 looking for people sleeping outside, as she says, "Because I was curious how they survived."

"We started by giving out blankets, food, that kind of thing. We didn't require any information from people we were helping, like asking for a date of birth before giving out a bar of soap. It's difficult sometimes. Give someone a blanket and cup of chocolate in the cold, and then leave. But I decided my discomfort is a poor reason not to do this."

Her approach inspired DeCarmine. "When I first met Arupa, what I had seen as 'homeless advocacy' was little more than efforts to mold people into a way of living more palatable to middle-class norms and standards — 'fixing' people through life skills courses, budgeting and so on, with little emphasis on the structural or systemic problems inherent in the housing crisis. From them, I learned a lot about meeting people where they're at and working cooperatively as allies and friends, rather than from a position where one person assumed they had the authority to tell someone else how to live their life."

Also in 2003, through DeCarmine's efforts, Gainesville officially began keeping track of homelessness with "Point in Time Surveys," a kind of local census where volunteers scour woods, parks, known hang outs and tally those in jails, shelters and hospitals to count who is without housing. It was an effort by housing activists to try to come to grips with a growing problem, one that the City was dealing with in such heavy-handed fashion that Gainesville was recognized as one of the top 5 of "Meanest Cities" in 2004, besting even the mean streets of New York City and Los Angeles. In the award, the National Coalition for the Homeless quotes City Commissioner Ed Braddy as saying, "I don't want to give comfort to misery."

Fortunately not everyone agreed with Braddy. By 2005, recognizing that existing resources were inadequate to address the problem, more than 200 people — staff at the Alachua County Housing Authority, activists, officials and concerned residents — worked for six months on what became Project GRACE, the Gainesville Region Alachua County Empowerment Ten Year Plan. It was adopted on December 15, 2005.

It was an altruistic effort, in part because the City is not required to address social service issues at all, but in 2005 hopes were high that homelessness could be successfully tackled at the local level.

## CURRENT EFFORTS

Prevailing winds on how to address the issue had shifted from the so-called continuum of care model to Housing First, helped by studies on how costly homelessness can be when not addressed directly.

For example, the cost of providing emergency shelter and services to one homeless individual for a year is \$8,700, whereas providing a family of four with a subsidy of \$300/month sufficient to



prevent homelessness would cost \$3600.

Likewise, arresting a homeless person costs \$600 plus \$63 a day to keep them in jail, usually until the court date when, for minor offenses, they are often given time served.

"These nuisance crimes like open container, public urination, and trespassing are directly linked to the fact of not having a place to go," said Freeman.

So there was momentum behind the implementation of the Plan. The Gainesville/Alachua County Office on Homelessness was created and work began. In the first 19 months, homelessness decreased by 20 percent, according to Gail Monahan of the Alachua County Housing Authority. Although the numbers were expected to vary year to year, it was encouraging. More important was a pilot program to make existing state housing subsidies available directly for permanent housing, initially to 65 people. Collaboration with the ACHA and Meridian led to successfully housing 13 severely mentally ill chronically homeless.

But then in September, the Gainesville Police Department began clearing homeless encampments, targeting the visible homeless. Advocates say police flouted procedures that had been agreed upon to guarantee respect for people's rights and property, even if they were trespassing.

At the same time, advocates working on locating the One Stop began meeting the first of a series of organized neighborhoods that refused to consider people without housing a part of their community.

Recently, the Gainesville City Commission held a special meeting to vote on a zoning change for the proposed One-Stop Center on North Main Terrace. In five hours of public comments, residents with homes crowded the meeting and insisted they did not want it located near their neighborhood.

Commissioner Braddy joined the fray, having requested GPD arrest statistics that allegedly show a correlation between homelessness and criminality. Ironically, given his tough rhetoric, Braddy was himself shown leniency when he fled the scene of an accident in January 2006. Despite a blood alcohol level of twice

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the legal limit, and side-swiping another vehicle, he was charged with a misdemeanor DUI, and returned to his City Commission seat after several months in rehabilitation.

Residents say most people could only hope the law would smile on them so brightly. "Hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue," sighs Freeman, quoting writer de La Rochefoucauld.

Freeman was at a rally before the meeting, where Commissioners appeared to bow to the demands of residents to find a new location, farther out of town.

Joe Jackson, a legal skills professor at the University of Florida who also spoke to the rally, addressed Braddy's attempt to link homelessness to violence. "It's deplorable, and prejudiced. Recently a businessman committed murder. Will there also be background checks for occupational license applications?"

When asked about the perception by some advocates that the city pays lip service to the Ten Year Plan, while in reality pursuing a policy of making Gainesville inhospitable for anyone without means.

"It is clear that there are different interests that the city has to address surrounding the issue of homelessness. Some individuals and business interests pressure the city and GPD to do things like clear Tent City or make things more difficult for people who provide assistance to the homeless. In the past year or so, the City Administration has pursued a policy that you could call cracking down on the homeless. Those efforts are not consistent with the spirit of the Ten Year Plan," Jackson said.

Taken together, the obstacles to successfully implementing Project GRACE may be formidable. City and county budgets for most programs were recently cut. Local business owners are adamant that seeing homelessness and poverty is bad for business. Market forces and zoning regulations do not favor SROs and other last-refuge housing solutions.

And while the public may sympathize, there is just not enough visible, vocal and passionate support from local taxpayers for programs addressing the immediate sources of homelessness, such as domestic violence and addiction.

But perhaps most frighteningly, a local economy, such as Gainesville's, that requires minimum-wage earners to work 77 hours per week to pay Fair Market Rent is one that is structured to ensure homelessness. It is engineered to create failure.

DeCarmine identifies the issue as an employment market that is out of tune with the community. "When a company can get away with only paying \$6 an hour to someone and that wage is obviously not meeting their basic needs, it creates a situation where we taxpayers in turn subsidize that corporation's ability to pay less money," DeCarmine said. "That's because we're giving that person food stamps, we're giving them housing vouchers, or we're paying for their time in jail or the hospital or the shelter. We are paying for the things that company doesn't want to pay for. The lack of a living wage creates a situation where the owners profit at the expense of the community."

Maybe when the economy crashes next year, we will find the courage to hold them accountable, those who succeed by exploiting others.