

SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

Advertisement

https://www.santafenewmexican.com/opinion/my_view/we-can-do-better/article_239c616d-1ed8-5d70-8185-7do2fc3f6018.html

MY VIEW

We can do better

By Joseph Jordan-Berenis Oct 19, 2019

As the director of the Interfaith Community Shelter, I agree with the title of Helen K. Garber's commentary ("Santa Fe must do better by homeless," Oct. 13). But I must respectfully, yet wholeheartedly, disagree with the "how."

First, locating all of Santa Fe's homeless population on the campus of the former Santa Fe University of Art and Design would only do one thing: create a ghetto. The Federal Housing Authority learned that lesson too late to do anything about it when they unintentionally created ghettos by building low-income housing projects in our major cities.

We do not want to repeat that same mistake here in Santa Fe. It is always preferable to have people who are homeless mainstreamed into every neighborhood in the city. It is better for them and, subsequently, better for the community.

Second, I know many of the people in our community who are homeless. While occasionally, I see one or two sprinkled around the city panhandling, for the most part, the panhandlers are not homeless. Research shows that. United States' courts have upheld panhandling as a First Amendment right because, agree or disagree, it is some citizens' means of earning an income. Likewise, no one is obligated to give money to a panhandler.

I always say, the first syllable in homeless is "home." Homes are what people who are homeless most need, in addition to robust mental health and navigation services to keep them housed.

Albert Einstein once said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking used when we created them." In Santa Fe, we bill ourselves as a "creative city," full of technology and art innovations. Yet when it comes to "housing for all," we also fall prey to stereotypes that perpetuate misleading commentary and an unfortunate tendency to see people experiencing homelessness as the "other" and not of one of us.

Here, as elsewhere, there are institutional and governmental barriers to "housing for all," as well as a lack of builder incentives to build it. Even when funds are available, we inevitably run into the issue of where to put the housing for those who are homeless. Every neighborhood seems like the wrong neighborhood in the eyes of the people who already live there.

So the questions multiply and getting to larger answers poses a herculean task. But first we have to stop dehumanizing people experiencing homelessness. No one in life sets out to lose their housing or become addicted to a substance, but it happens. It happens for reasons that often include histories of trauma and violence that the individual didn't cause and could not control.

On Sunday night, the Interfaith Community Shelter opened its doors at Pete's Place to the seasonal night shelter. Former Santa Fe Mayor David Coss and the City Council had the foresight to place the shelter and create a "one-stop shop" at our accessible location on Cerrillos Road. For the past two years, we've served 1,200 people for 23,000 nights, and I suspect this year will be no different.

For the most part, the people we serve are not the people Santa Fe observers see panhandling downtown and in other parts of the city. The last two people to die downtown were unknown to us and never chose to spend a single night at the shelter.

I am proud of the work that the Interfaith Community Shelter staff and nearly 2,000 active volunteers do on behalf of those who are most vulnerable in our city and the services and safety we provide them every day, but I still have this stubborn thought gnawing at the back of my brain: Is

this really the best we can do?

Joseph Jordan-Berenis is executive director of the Interfaith Community Shelter at Pete's Place.