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COMMUNITY VOICES: Long-term hope for homeless rests with private, nonprofit sectors, not public political sector

By John Pryor
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Gov. Gavin Newsom and even President Donald Trump are providing (some say “throwing”) taxpayer dollars to help local people who find themselves tragically on “The Streets of Bakersfield” — but not in the vision of Buck Owens as he and Dwight Yoakam performed this song composed by Homer Joy.

If you'll forgive the pun, this financial support is greatly appreciated and essential for those already on our streets, but such efforts are neither a "homer" nor a "joy" because they only perpetuate homelessness. They do not eliminate homelessness. They are reactive, not proactive. They are essential but clearly not a permanent solution for our community – whether at the Calcot or county sites – or both.

Permanent elimination of homelessness will be achieved only if its (multiple) root causes are addressed proactively through early intervention and prevention. This ultimately should keep most, if not all, homeless off our streets and avoid the essential yet reactive provision of low-barrier housing and other critical assistance to the increasing numbers of homeless we see on our streets today.

In Matthew 26:11, Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you." This truism calls for proactive early intervention to provide counsel and economic assistance including, if needed, job retraining and other assistance that only the private, nonprofit sectors can provide – ideally without taxpayer dollars.

To describe what is needed to provide proactive assistance to those headed toward homelessness is easy to define. Ample data are available to chart our progress in achieving the long-term strategic goal of zero homelessness in greater Bakersfield.

What is difficult and challenging is how to get the job done, ideally without public funding using taxpayer dollars.

What's needed is a major collaboration of local private and nonprofit organizations with leaders, staff and volunteers available to "head off at the pass" those who otherwise are destined to become homeless.

I'm very pleased to learn that a collaboration of local organizations has already begun to create such a private, nonprofit collaborative system to address these issues proactively through early intervention to help each individual or family. Kern Leadership Alliance — a coalition of 60-plus local churches, their clergy and lay leaders — is working with CityServe and Bakersfield College on the need for career preparation or career reentry so potential homeless can become employable and self-supporting in a permanent manner to avoid homelessness.

But that's only a single dimension of the overall permanent solution.

Other root causes of homelessness also must be addressed, e.g., alcohol or drug abuse — or a combination of the two — as well as mental health assistance. Still other root causes may emerge.

To be truly proactive, an “early warning process” needs to be created within this overall system — a system composed of multiple processes to be certain anyone heading toward homelessness can be redirected through early intervention and appropriate assistance. This separate and distinct early warning process would be performed by the following:

- family members and relatives living elsewhere
- neighbors
- employers and fellow workers
- clergy
- professional counselors
- teachers and school administrators
- no doubt many others.

With an email communication process between as many as possible people in one or more of these categories, feedback should be facilitated early on before anyone’s current housing is lost beyond re-access or restoration.

Then perhaps the ongoing outcome for “The Streets of Bakersfield” will once again become what the song’s opening line describes — “I came here looking for somethin’ I couldn’t find anywhere else.”

For us, this means a community without hundreds of homeless on our streets, in our business entries, along our river or anywhere else that converts our city into a despicable and unacceptable environment for our businesses and government locations as well as our families and visitors to our community.

Both levels of assistance are essential – reactive assistance for those already homeless plus proactive prevention through early intervention. Proactive prevention provided by our private, nonprofit sector is our “missing link.”

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