

COMMUNITY VOICES DB News-Journal, Sunday February 2, 2020

Barriers to redemption hold homeless people back

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A few Sundays ago, a homeless man attended the worship service at my congregation. I'll call him Joey. Joey, in his late 40's, a veteran living on a meager disability income, had been living in a local residential motel which he quickly found to be beyond his means. He had been homeless in Ormond Beach a few days and was earnestly seeking shelter. He had been told by local law enforcement that he would not be able to get into First Step Shelter without a sponsor.

Would I help him, he asked?

Absolutely! I called the First Step shelter and spoke with a most pleasant and helpful case manager. Yes, Pastor, you can refer Joey to the shelter. Please go to our website and click the "Becoming a Resident" tab. There you will find a list of requirements for applying for the First Step program. If Joey meets the criteria, take a picture of him and submit it along with the completed admission request form and email it to us. We will get back to you within 48 hours.

I went to the First Step Shelter website and found ten criteria for admission, including "Resident of Volusia County." Resident? I ask Joey: "I know this sounds ironic but are you a resident of Volusia County?" He said, "No, Pastor, the last time I had a roof over my head was in Vermont." "Alas, Joey," I said, "you do not qualify for First Step Shelter for the homeless." What actually makes someone a "resident" of Volusia County?

What an utter shame. Joey who was sober as a judge but suffering from debilitating depression since his spouse was murdered in Crystal River, Florida, several years ago. He would have been a perfect candidate for the First Step program. There would have been solid potential for him to be stabilized medically, get connected with the social services he deserved, learn life skills and coping skills, all which would have given him a chance for success as a functioning adult in a world that is challenging for any one of us to navigate. Instead, I bought Joey a bus ticket to Jacksonville where he thought he would have a chance at being admitted to a Gospel mission downtown.

Only God can redeem souls

but we can be redeemers to our brothers and sisters in this life by extending our hands and our hearts to the downtrodden. Indeed we are called by God to do so if we can. The First Step Shelter, as it was conceived, proposed, and built, was supposed to be a low barrier, come-as-you-are homeless shelter. As it is now, there are only some 40 residents while many others have been turned away.

Albeit, there have been successes – The Daytona Beach Housing Authority has placed four residents from First Step into permanent housing and this is to be praised. Many are off the streets and in a safe place getting help. But, First Step Shelter can do better.

First Step has the capacity to be a safe zone if it staffs enough beds and takes away the strict barriers to entry.

The best time to help a person get off the streets is when they are asking for help! First Step Shelter has much more potential to offer redemption of the social kind to the most needful and vulnerable among us. I urge Catholic Charities Services, current operator of the shelter, the City of Daytona Beach, and the First Step Shelter Board of Directors to re-capture the original vision for the shelter.

I am a current Co-Chair of FAITH (Fighting Against Injustice Towards Harmony) and my congregation has been a member for 20 years. This strict criteria was not at all what FAITH envisioned when we advocated for the shelter.

We turned out thousands of people, every year for seven years in order to get the county and city governments to fund \$8 million for a come-as-you-are, 24/7, emergency shelter with enough services to get people into housing. The proposal we worked on with Catholic Charities and other community partners allowed for a \$1.2 million budget for 80-100 residents. With enough beds and low barriers to entry, there would be no need for a safe zone. FAITH will continue to fight for our homeless brothers and sisters because it is what God requires.