

## **Occupy Louisville: A Resource for our Homeless**

I would like to commend Tyler Bissmeyer for his thorough coverage of the Occupy Louisville camp presently staying at Founder's Square. As Mr. Bissmeyer points out, this group of protesters includes several homeless people. The work of homeless outreach teams sponsored by Seven Counties Services reports at least four homeless people are staying regularly with the protesters and as stated in the Courier-Journal article, being with those in the encampment has many advantages including warm food and tents, a feeling of belonging and increased safety, a very important commodity when you live outdoors. Local and national crime statistics show that homeless persons are no more likely to be dangerous than any other segment of the general population. However, it is very dangerous to be homeless. Of 244 people surveyed on the streets of Louisville, 44% have been the victim of a violent crime, 23% have a brain injury and 27% have been in the emergency room or hospital at least three times in the last year.

Unfortunately, these four people are a very small segment of our city's street homeless population. In September 2011, one hundred local volunteers surveyed persons sleeping on our streets. Over a three day period, we surveyed a total of 244 people including two pregnant women, 49 veterans, 22 people with liver disease, 47 with heart problems, 52 with asthma, 25 with diabetes, 25 with emphysema and 19 with cancer. It turns out, people are not just sleeping on our streets; they are dying there too.

How can this happen in a city with so many state of the art emergency and transitional housing programs as well as professionals that address job training, chemical dependency, domestic violence and the myriad of social issues? The problem is that while the Metro Louisville homeless service system helps over 5,000 families move from homelessness to stable, long-term housing each year, the numbers of newly homeless continue to rise.

The basic cause of homelessness and the frustration at Founder's Square is poverty. Yes, often homeless individuals and families have chemical dependency, family violence, and mental health issues; but these same issues are prevalent in wealthy families. The difference is the lack of resources to address (or cover up) these concerns without losing your residence and the lack of housing options for those who have few resources. As our economy continues to increasingly divide the wealthy from the poor with a larger gulf in salaries and housing costs, the number of homeless persons will continue to rise. The fastest growing segment of the homeless are single women with children and young adults, many who are exiting foster care or unstable households with less and less resources due to budgetary cuts from federal and state programs. It is no surprise that these are also the poorest segments of our population.

Until we begin to address the causes of poverty and homelessness within our community, the numbers will only continue to rise. It requires new ways of thinking, additional resources and non-traditional partners. We have begun to gather all three, but we have a long way to go. So, I am thankful to the members of Occupy Louisville who are serving "the least of these" in their newly established community. While they may have many decisions to make about their message and demands, this is one thing they are clearly getting right.

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