

## Homing in on the Problem

### The latest tweak on addressing homelessness involves you. Yes, you!

By [Damon Hodge](#)

At first it seemed like a cop-out: The Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition's Committee on Homelessness wanted you to help it address a problem that's flummoxed folks paid to address the issue (the mayor's failed homeless task force) and frontline activists who've made ending indigence their life's work.



Photo by Wesley Gatlinton

What's the public know about solving homelessness?

Without being privy to data and how resources, programs and monies are being deployed, what can

Annie McNanny in Henderson offer beyond occasional donations, weekend or holiday service at a food kitchen and periodic letters to the editor?

"I thought the same way initially," admits George McCabe of Brown & Partners, the advertising firm behind last Thursday's open house at the 1600 Pinto Lane offices of Clark County Social Service, where a third-floor room had been transformed into a homelessness university of sorts.

"There are lots of causes in Las Vegas, and this is not high on the radar of many people in the community or many businesspeople," McCabe says. "Homelessness generally doesn't touch their lives. How many CEOs have been homeless?"

McCabe's point: Part of the solution is letting people know there's a way for them to help. Show decision-makers how homelessness affects their lives and maybe, just maybe, they'll get off their duffs and help.

Hanging curtain-like throughout the room and propped up on easels were long sheets of paper used to convey messages to visitors ("40 percent of homeless are mentally ill") and used by them to make comments ("More costly to do nothing"). A documentary on homelessness, playing on a back wall, showed vistas of a life on the street—gravel lots and underpasses that double as sleeping quarters.

After years of bottom-dwelling ratings from Washington, D.C.-based National Coalition for the Homeless (Vegas was "fifth-meanest city" in 2005), legal jousting over criminalization and entrapment issues, maybe it's time the average person got involved.

Indeed, after contentious sweeps that simply relocate the problem and little tangible evidence of progress—the Salvation Army food lines are still DMV-worthy, sidewalks near Owens Avenue and Main Street are still overrun by sleeping bags at night—maybe it's about time you got more involved.

Any additional assistance is music to Linda Lera-Randle El's ears. If the Committee on Homelessness is on the front lines of the war, she's the general, as intelligent as she is irascible. Director of the nonprofit Straight from the Streets homeless advocacy group, Lera-Randle El delivers food, water and toiletries, along with encouragement and hope to the homeless. And she'd like some of your help: if not your money, then your mouth. The more people who know about homelessness, she says, the more who can help and can spread the word that this isn't a criminal issue we can arrest our way of out, but a social dilemma on which every resource needs to be trained and every person—you included—concerned.

"So many people have misguided perceptions about what homelessness is about," Lera-Randle El says. "Some people are frightened by homeless people and think they are all criminally inclined. And, no, the chronic homeless don't make it easy to help them. But people [would rather] leave the problem alone than find solutions."

These forums are beneficial if only to show people something positive is being done, regional homeless services coordinator Shannon West says. The media reported on the creation of a homeless trust fund and Assembly Bill 580's approval of \$4 million for direct services. If the public doesn't know what's up with the fund (\$10,000 in the account; paltry considering it's nearly two years old ) or where the \$4 million went (mobile-crisis intervention and case management), they might think, well, they might not think anything. Poll a good section of the town and probably most don't remember the trust fund or the \$4 million.

"We need to put information out there in order to grow the trust fund and get people to decide to donate in some form or fashion," West says.

An article in the April 3 edition of Fortune magazine, "The Toughest Customers: How hardheaded business metrics can help the hard-core homeless," notes that Detroit, New York and San Francisco winnow chronically homeless populations via a business-plan approach: identify consumers; do market research on their needs—"They don't want a 12-step program or a bed in a shelter. What they want is a room of their own," Cait Murphy writes—and develop a strategic plan. "Get people into a room or an apartment, by either renting in the private sector or building permanent housing, and then bring social services to the tenant. The rationale is brilliantly simple: If you give people what they want [not what you think they should want], they just might accept it."

Perhaps it'd help if the Vegas public knew that half of the 156 chronically homeless on the committee's case load have transitioned into housing and that 66 percent of the 216 chronically homeless contacted are still working with case managers. West says the committee's first-quarter report is due out soon.

"People think the \$4 million fixed everything, but it didn't stop harassment, it didn't add detoxification beds, it didn't raise the minimum wage, it didn't provide gas vouchers," Lera-Randle El says. "We're still piecing things together."

Movies being excellent promotional tools, 30-year-old Faith Lutheran teacher Jose Diaz recruited students ranging from the sixth grade to high-school seniors to shoot a documentary on homeless youth, gathering footage from Westcare, a social-service agency, and interviewing clients involved with the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth. He created the film, he says, because "I tried imagining being a

homeless kid in Las Vegas, and I couldn't do it." The documentary has screened in local churches and at conferences in Washington, D.C., and New York.

In Anthony Munn, a quiet kid whose days-old facial hair made him look older than his 18 years, the committee might have found a good mouthpiece. Escaping an abusive home led to a circuitous journey through the social-services system that ended at the Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth. The nonprofit youth-service provider then found him a place to stay and gave him stability. Life's better now. Instead of worrying about where he'll lay his head—"everywhere from couches to friends' cars," he says—he can focus on graduating and helping young people on the streets.

Says Munn: "Most people don't notice that there are homeless youth out there."

Maybe now a few more will.