

What Is the Answer ?

How many times during the past 20 years have I been asked the question, “Well, what is the answer to homelessness?” Dozens of times, I’m sure, and often enough that I came to dread the question because my answer seemed to elicit little interest or understanding from the questioner.

I began to realize that the questioner did not expect an answer to such an intractable problem. In fact, the questioner assumed there was no answer. If I had simply responded, “Homelessness is a horrific problem, I don’t have the answer to solve it,” I would have received a more sympathetic and understanding response. At the very least, I would have confirmed the enormity of the problem. But you know me, I wouldn’t allow the question to slip by without giving my answer, especially because I have the answer.

The question is not really a difficult one, which, of course, makes a simple answer even more difficult to accept, especially when the reporter, the Loaves & Fishes supporter, or the audience member presumes that the question about eliminating homelessness has no answer.

Think about it. The state of homelessness simply means that some people do not have homes. If every person had a home, there would be no homeless problem. What prevents a person from having a home? Exactly right, not having enough money to afford it. The fact is, every homeless person has some money, just not enough to afford a home.

There’s your answer. People do not have enough money to afford 2004 rents. People who work low-skill, minimum-wage jobs – not even a paycheck away from homelessness – do not earn enough to pay the rent. And for those who are mentally and/or physically disabled and not part of the work force, their government subsistence stipends do not include enough money for rent. If low-skill working people were paid enough money for their work, they would not be homeless or teetering on its edge. If the Social Security disability stipends included enough money for rent, disabled people would not be homeless.

Is this difficult to understand? I expect not.

If a free market economy will not pay low-skill working people enough to live in homes, then it falls to government to subsidize business by providing truly affordable housing, which means that no more than 35% of a worker's income should be spent for rent. In a 2004 California minimum-wage economy, this means \$400 a month rent, including utilities.

The answer to homelessness is simple enough: (1) set wages high enough to include payment for housing; (2) guarantee and provide affordable housing; or (3) both (1) and (2).

You ask, why don't free market employers pay low-skill workers enough to afford housing? Their answer is always the same: business will not make a profit if workers are paid more. No profit, no business. It is the use of this profit argument time and again that persuades government not to raise the minimum wage. Today's headlines make this very point: "Minimum wage boost vetoed: Governor says increase to \$7.75 an hour would hurt businesses and cost jobs."

Take a look at the profit argument from the perspective of a low-skilled, minimum-wage worker, a person always on the edge of homelessness. The conclusion seems inescapable: the viability of business depends on my being grossly underpaid, and my inability to afford housing supports the free market economy. In other words, homelessness subsidizes business profits.

Obviously, government at every level supports the profit argument used by business to prevent increases in the minimum wage, because the current shortfall in wages, not large enough to pay for housing, is \$3.25 an hour – or 33%. Since government won't permit wage increases, why will they not subsidize business by providing affordable housing?

Dear reader, this answer is not a pleasant one. Local government – not unlike business profit employers – considers minimum-wage working people to be relatively worthless. Truth be told, such people are considered to be a drag on the local economy, a negative influence on a desirable quality of life for the rest of the community, and insatiable consumers of social services.

Does this sound harsh and unfairly critical of local government? Yes, I'm sure it does. Is it true? Let me assure you, it is. Permit me to qualify; it is true here in the capital city of the state of California.

Understandably, no local elected government official talks publicly about these harsh realities. There is no need to talk; their policies say it all. Some examples: many hundreds of affordable housing units were razed in the downtown area to lay the groundwork for a more desirable major league high-rise future; its own housing agency was forbidden to bring low-cost housing proposals forward for consideration; NIMBYism has been deliberately fostered in order to bury housing advocates and nonprofit developers; zoning codes were used to impede the development of affordable housing; and punitive special-use permits mandated astronomically expensive building requirements for midtown low-income housing.

Dare I describe such policies as “cleansing”?

The bottom line for these elected leaders seems to be that people who have money are deemed to be moral and worthy citizens, and those who do not are immoral and unworthy, and worse yet, unwelcome. This view is antithetical to and a corruption of our cultural Judeo-Christian religious heritage, which holds that because God created each person in His own image and likeness, that person is not only good in the eyes of his Creator but also the recipient of His unconditional love.

Despite the inhumanity of such policies, I do not believe they constitute the social injustice that requires people to be homeless. The social injustice, as I see it, is the paltry sum of \$3.25 an hour, which represents the difference between housing and homelessness. It is exactly this differential which our economic system deems necessary to guarantee business its profit. As a community, we cannot afford the human suffering caused by this social injustice of deliberately underpaying low-skill minimum-wage workers.

Deep down within us, we know homelessness is not right. We know business and government should do better for the low-skill, low-income members of our community, but what? I submit that adding \$3.25 an hour to the current minimum wage is the first step in putting our money on the side of our good intentions. The minimum wage should be the moral touchstone for our

business economy, and not the stranglehold that keeps people homeless or teetering on its edge.