

Replacing Reno's Homeless Shelter with a More Effective Model

"We are a nation of laws, not of men."

John Adams

Homelessness is not against the law in Reno, but ALL* of the following are:

- Sitting or lying down in public entryways
- Urinating or defecating in public places
- Illegally camping on public property and blocking sidewalks
- Illegally camping anywhere on the banks of the Truckee River
- Possessing or using drugs, paraphernalia, or open-container alcohol
- Possessing stolen property (including shopping carts)
- Aggressive panhandling and disturbing the peace
- Storing personal belongings in public places
- Loitering and littering

**(Reno Municipal Code: Sections 8.08, 8.10, 8.12)*

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I. Overview: A misdiagnosis

"To BEGIN rightly is to END rightly."

(Mary Baker Eddy)

Reno's chronically homeless vagrants are living on the street by CHOICE -- NOT due to a lack of services or resources.

The only way to *end* Reno's problems with the Reno's Record Street homeless shelter is to "begin rightly" with an accurate diagnosis of the problems related to chronically homeless vagrants.

Reno's problem with homeless vagrants has been misdiagnosed for years as primarily a lack of services and resources. As a result, Reno has supported ineffective programs that have worsened the problem, wasting millions of taxpayer dollars in direct and indirect costs.

Use of HUD funding to create and maintain the current homeless shelter mandates operating as "no-barrier or low-barrier housing," more commonly known as "wet housing."

- Clients are permitted to continue using alcohol and drugs and are not drug tested.
- Clients are not required to seek employment or mental health counseling when it is needed.
- Clients are not required to pay anything for their shelter, nor are they required to help clean the facility.
- By alternating three-month stays between the homeless shelter and the overflow warehouse, chronically homeless vagrants are able to remain in the facility indefinitely.

The first Housing First "wet house" approach was implemented in the United States 26 years ago, but it has neither lowered homeless vagrant populations nor redeemed many lives.

Reno's wet house homeless shelter has simply geographically centralized the chronically homeless vagrants. Meanwhile, their population has increased, while Reno's quality of life has decreased. Crime rates are higher and growing vagrancy threatens Reno's future.

II. Correctly Diagnosing Reno's Chronically Homeless Vagrant Population

A. Chronically homeless vagrants are NOT "hungry."

Every person living on the street has access to:

- 25 food pantries in the Reno/Sparks area managed by Food Bank of Northern Nevada, providing more food than any individual or family could eat
- Either \$200 per month of free food stamps, and/or a mental or physical disability check ranging from \$700-1,000 per month
- A variety of community organizations such as Gospel Mission and St. Vincent's who regularly serve meals at their sites

B. Chronically homeless vagrants are NOT "trying to find work."

The Reno area has over 20 employment agencies desperately seeking employees, and most businesses in town are currently hiring. A one-minute phone call and a 30-minute interview minimally result in a \$400 to \$600+ per week job almost immediately. As the Reno office of the Nevada Department of Employment recently stated on local television, "Anyone in Reno who ISN'T working, doesn't WANT to work."

C. Chronically homeless vagrants are NOT living on the street because there is "no affordable housing."

Using the earnings potential figures in Item B and with savings from four-to-six weeks of steady employment, chronically homeless-vagrants can choose between dozens of available rental rooms and apartments (\$400 - \$900 per month). Rentals are even more quickly attainable and affordable when sharing a residence with a working roommate.

D. Chronically homeless vagrants are NOT living on the street because "there are not enough mental health services or drug/alcohol treatment facilities."

- **Mental Illness** - The Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services recently stated that there would never be a situation where anyone seeking treatment for mental illness would be turned away. Services would be immediately provided.
- **Drugs/Alcohol** - The Reno area has over 40 Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings per day, and more than a dozen inpatient facilities and sober living homes.

E. Chronically homeless vagrants are NOT living on the street because “the community doesn’t care them.”

Chronically homeless vagrants are living on the street because they don’t care about the community that has made abundant, comprehensive services available to them. Spending more on chronically homeless vagrants who refuse to utilize readily available services is wasteful and an irresponsible use of taxpayer funds.

While rejecting free community homeless services, chronically homeless vagrants choose to remain living on the street where they regularly violate City municipal code quality-of-life laws. Choosing to continue their lawbreaking lifestyles, they disproportionately utilize emergency services, spread filth and disease, negatively impact the downtown area, cost the city millions in annual tourism dollars, contribute nothing to building Reno’s future, and constitute a growing burden on Reno’s already troubled financial situation.

Chronically homeless vagrants REMAIN on the street for ONE REASON:

Misdiagnosis of the homeless situation by the City of Reno has led to pursuing failed policies of pity rather than policies of accountability and genuine compassion.

Reno Police Department, in dealing with chronically homeless vagrants, has not been allowed to enforce the municipal code equally for ALL citizens. Officers are being ordered to act as social workers rather than strong, fair, law enforcement officers.

Reno’s chronically homeless vagrants have arrogant contempt for the City’s well-intentioned but wrong-minded efforts. They have NO respect for the law and NO respect for the countless people offering help. Without being held accountable in any way for their situation, they have no reason to change their lifestyle or their choices.



“You never truly help someone by doing for them what they could do - and should do - for themselves.”

(Anonymous)

III. Solution

- A. Sever all ties with HUD funding of the homeless shelter. Fund the shelter program with a fraction of what is currently spent via a 3-way donor partnership between the City of Reno, a local business coalition, and the community.**

Rationale

Increased reliance on HUD homeless funding has increased Reno's problem with chronically homeless vagrants. More can be accomplished with less funding that is unrestricted by counterproductive HUD policies and mandates.

- B. ALL chronically homeless vagrants seeking shelter must pass drug and alcohol tests.**

Rationale

Reno's years of providing homeless shelter without requiring a commitment to sober living has been a failure. Addicted clients not working toward building clean and sober lives will maintain criminal lifestyles in wet house shelters that facilitate continued substance abuse and law-breaking. No amount of time or money invested in addicted clients, without sobriety requirements, will yield anything more than temporary results.

- C. Any chronically homeless vagrant desiring a shelter bed:**

- Would be charged \$200 per month, payable with job earnings, disability checks, or donating food stamps.
- Would be required to seek employment, accept life counseling, participate in daily cleaning of the facility, and participate in treatment for mental health issues, if needed.
- Would be allowed to stay in the dormitory a maximum of 8 weeks. Individuals desiring an overflow bed would pay \$3 per night that would not include any use of the dormitory facilities.

Rationale

Reno's HUD-mandated, no accountability approach has resulted in increased homeless related problems including less homeless vagrant employment, increased vagrant crime against individuals and property, and increased numbers of individuals using the shelters. Many chronically homeless individuals, from all regions of the U.S., come to Reno for an indefinite stay with its readily available meals, entertainment, and homeless shelter accommodations.

D. Eliminate the 2-tiered-justice system of special courts for chronically homeless vagrants.

- Direct the Reno Police Department to begin full, impartial enforcement of the municipal code for all residents, especially Sections 8.08, 8.10, and 8.12, dealing with “offenses against persons, public property, and public peace.”
- Create a smaller, lower security, less expensive jail facility to incarcerate chronic misdemeanor offenders. It would accommodate the projected increase in chronically homeless individuals once Reno Police Department began to fully enforce Reno’s municipal code.

Rationale

Requiring Reno Police Department to practice soft, social-worker-style, discriminatory law enforcement that favors chronically homeless vagrants and establishes a two-tiered judicial system for the chronically homeless, has resulted in increased violent crime rates. A lower security jail facility for misdemeanor offenders, many of whom would be service-resistant homeless vagrants, would deter additional chronically homeless individuals from coming to Reno, encourage a portion of Reno’s chronically homeless vagrants to utilize existing homeless services, and motivate others to leave town.

E. Ban unauthorized group feedings of the chronically homeless vagrants on Record Street by community organizations.

Rationale

- Unauthorized group feedings enable the homeless vagrant lifestyle, discourage independent living, and is unnecessary, due to existing and available food options (see Section II. A).
- Dozens of cities have banned unauthorized public feedings. Some cities still allowing them have had outbreaks of various diseases stemming from this practice. According to the Washoe County Department of Environmental Health, allowing unauthorized feedings increases Reno’s liability for lawsuits stemming from illness and/or death related to tainted food.

F. Close the “pit” at the Record Street “campus” and require Reno Police Department to fully enforce Reno’s municipal code ordinances against loitering, drugs, possessing stolen shopping carts, blocking sidewalks, and publicly storing personal property.

Rationale

- City Hall’s practice of declaring Record Street a homeless shelter “campus” is legally incorrect. Record Street is public property. All city laws apply.
- The only individuals loitering on Record Street near the homeless shelter should be those waiting to be seen by intake counselors.
- The “pit” is a magnet for criminal activity due to city leadership preventing Reno Police Department from fully enforcing the law.

G. Withdraw from participation in the county’s failed “10-Year Plan to End Homelessness.” Let Reno take personal responsibility for its own chronically homeless vagrant issues.

Rationale

- The Washoe County “10-Year Plan to End Homelessness” has been a failure. Homeless related issues have worsened dramatically since the plan was implemented years ago.

The Homeless Plan’s primary vision: “...*providing housing for everyone who needs it ... for an indefinite period,*” is absurd and unattainable. It is neither necessary, nor affordable, nor would it encourage homeless vagrants to take personal responsibility for their lives or to become self-supporting individuals.

- The Homeless Plan is a bureaucratic snafu. It is overly committed to “community coalitions” of multiple service providers. It contains excessive duplication of services and confusing, contradictory approaches. It has no strong, central leadership. Reno’s City Council needs a focused, strongly led one-agency approach to deal with the homeless shelter and basic issues of chronic homeless vagrancy. Other local organizations offering ancillary services to homeless vagrants would be encouraged to work independently.

H. Prevent homeless vagrancy growth by addressing two predictors of homelessness: poor education and inadequate parenting.

The city would create ongoing advertising campaigns focusing on these two critical issues.

Nevada public schools rank worst in the United States. The advertised message would promote higher learning standards, schoolwide drug testing, and mandate work experience as a graduation requirement.

Free parenting classes would be encouraged for all parents, and would be required for those with children previously involved in the criminal justice system.

Rationale

Four leading predictors of future homeless vagrancy are:

- Poor education
- Ineffective parenting
- Early drug and alcohol use
- No work experience

Implementing this component would be a strong, preventive measure against future homeless vagrancy problems, and help protect Reno's future.

IV. Summary

After many years of unsuccessful spending, wasting millions of taxpayer dollars, Reno's HUD-funded homeless shelter on Record Street has dangerously failed both the community and the homeless vagrants it was established to help.

Reno's wet housing shelter, a mandated model when using HUD funding, has resulted in a program that:

- De facto encourages the daily, rampant drug and alcohol abuse that occurs, both inside and outside of the facility
- Does not require residents to look for employment
- Does not require residents to accept mental health counseling when needed
- Does not require residents who have income to pay anything for services received
- Does not require residents to clean up after themselves

Reno's failed shelter has made the homeless vagrant problem immeasurably worse and threatens Reno's future financial stability by negatively impacting tourism and business industries.

The principles and components described in this document for operating the homeless shelter have been proven. They have transformed the lives of numerous chronically homeless vagrants. With operating costs far less than the current program, there is no reason not to try it.