

The Homeless Crisis

by Bill Corden



Every night on the news we see the pictures, every metropolitan area in North America.

Human flotsam and jetsam camped out in city parks, under bridges, they're even outside the courthouse in our own capital, Victoria, here in British Columbia.

The campsites are littered with garbage, with supermarket carts, pieces of cardboard, tarps, ripped tents and broken down RVs. Crime, drugs and theft in the local neighborhoods run rampant and yet the authorities are hamstrung when it comes to dealing with the problem. The police won't enforce local laws because;

- a) They risk life and limb going into these zones.
- b) The justice system puts the homeless back on the street within 24 hrs.
- c) They risk losing their jobs if someone files an assault charge against them.

Social Services can do next to nothing as they have

- a) nowhere to house them.
- b) no powers to take the helpless into care.

The sites quickly become fetid swamps, no washrooms or running water, local businesses unable to move them on, for fear of being labelled as racists, bigots or heartless capitalists and so everyone has to suffer, including the occupants of the camps.

I recently had a visit from a friend of mine who lives in Utrecht, in the Netherlands and our conversation turned to this subject. "Do they have the same problem there?" I asked.

My friend, who is a professor at the University there and happens to study these matters (and who grew up in Canada) told me that there were only, now get this, only two homeless/street beggars in the entire city and he knew them by name.

The reason so few?

Well, their social security system is much more robust and their policing system works in tandem with Social Services. A small city like Utrecht has set aside enough of their budget to provide permanent shelter to the unfortunates, they have the ability to triage them into lawbreakers, drug addicts or mental health sufferers and they have developed a seamless process to get them to where they belong.

The city itself will not tolerate even ONE person trying to set up camp on public lands and they are taken into custody immediately (because it's against the law), assessed and then transferred to the care of the appropriate agency, be it Social services, Police or Medical.

It's easy to solve the problem when you're sitting on the couch drinking gourmet coffee but in a practical sense it boils down to the Central Governments (not the Municipal Governments) developing a policy and legislation to deal with this nationwide disgrace for countries with money spilling out of the edges.

As my friend said often in our conversation, "It's mainly a question of the will of society to allocate resources to the problem, it's not that we don't have the money, it's just that we don't have the will."

The solution that he is currently looking at in a University research project (even though they don't have a problem in

their own town) is the establishment of a new Agency with the powers to do what they have to. But in the meantime we have to live with the fractured system that is totally ineffective.