



City mistreats its own

By **Thomas P. O'Toole**

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WE CALL ourselves Charm City, but according to a survey last year, Baltimore is also one of the 12 meanest cities to its estimated 3,000 homeless people.

We share this dubious distinction with cities such as New York, Atlanta, Chicago and San Francisco. But with negative and unflattering reports of aggressive panhandling and public disruption by San Francisco's homeless population - and the city's "get tough" response - this is one distinction we should be wary of embracing.

Policy-makers here would be rewarded by taking a closer look at the genesis of San Francisco's problems. But first, we need to address several misrepresentations.

First, urban homelessness is not an imported problem. Homeless people do not go on the Internet, find out which municipality has the best welfare package and then grab the first bus to that destination. Research has shown that most people who are homeless report a last address, and often a birthplace, not far from where they are currently without a home.

Second, homelessness is not a condition of choice. Rather, it is a barometer of regional poverty and the availability of services and resources to care for the severely mentally ill and addicted. It also reflects the community's capacity to provide decent housing, jobs and opportunities.

As the media outline the problem, San Francisco either could turn a blind eye to the homeless problem and cut off any public assistance or continue a policy of "rights without responsibilities," allowing public urination, defecation and aggressive panhandling.

But there is a very viable and well-charted middle ground with a goal of eradicating homelessness through more readily available drug treatment, outreach efforts, vocational training, affordable housing and mental health care. The country's collective experience shows that this approach works.

Which brings us to the situation in Baltimore.

No one should have to tolerate public urinating, defecating or aggressive panhandling. But what can we expect when additional drop-in centers and day facilities touted in the 2000 Baltimore City Task Force on Homelessness have yet to materialize? Where are the public toilet facilities, and are they near places where homeless people congregate? Should we be surprised when we see more psychotic people on the streets when our community mental health care system is being decimated by budget cuts?

Locking more homeless people behind bars is not the answer. But, as last summer's report by the Center for Poverty Solutions suggests, that seems to be what's happening. More than 30 percent of the reported arrests among a sample of Baltimore's homeless were for offenses directly tied to being homeless, such as sleeping in public, loitering and panhandling.

Last year's report by the National Coalition of the Homeless ranked Baltimore second with San Juan, Puerto Rico, Tucson, Ariz., and Sacramento and Oakland, Calif. - all after first-place Atlanta - for having the most "prohibited conduct" laws affecting the homeless. Those laws - 13 for Atlanta, 10 for the second-place cities - target spitting, the use of shopping carts, public urination, aggressive panhandling, and loitering/loafing in public places.

A survey published jointly last year by the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty ranked Baltimore among the 12 meanest cities toward the homeless.

A lesson we can learn from San Francisco is what happens when development turns a blind eye to community needs. It is no coincidence that the "homeless problem" there coincided with the redevelopment of the South-of-Market area.

As development begins on the biotech park adjoining the Johns Hopkins medical campus on the east side and continues on the west side around the University of Maryland biotech park, we need to remember what will be lost. These neighborhoods have housed individuals and families who are struggling with drug problems, chronic lead poisoning, illiteracy and low educational achievement.

If we don't want to see an explosion of the homeless population, we need to find new communities and support for those being displaced. The deliberate efforts undertaken by the city, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Johns Hopkins to systematically address these issues during the east-side biotech development process should be lauded.

The bottom line: There is a price for redevelopment that goes beyond the costs of construction.

There is the need to ensure that change, growth and progress do not mean someone is out in the cold. Whether that means creating policies with the right incentives to encourage homeless people to join drug treatment programs or building affordable housing, it's a price that we as a society must pay. This is not liberal or conservative politics; it's common-sense policies. If we don't demand them now, we will face San Francisco's dilemma later.

We must remember that there is someone behind each statistic about homelessness. He or she probably grew up in Baltimore.

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