Thinking Philosophically About Homelessness
by Brandon Wilson

Whereas mental illness and drug addiction are extremely difficult conditions to treat, there is no reason why we cannot treat the symptoms and results of these conditions “topically” while working through the much harder tasks of curing the underlying illnesses.

It is absolutely ridiculous that anyone would live outdoors, unsheltered in the year 2024. It is too easy of a problem to solve. As a society we talk of “safety nets” as programs, while in some cases dramatically overcomplicating literal safety nets when it comes to protecting bodies from weather.

Our plan is to destroy the notion that basic shelter from the elements costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. We have to start at $0.00 and build to acceptable, not start at the median price of housing in America as if that is a real baseline. Our American standard of living has been so good for so long, we have pretty much forgotten how basic life looks for much of the world’s population.

**What causes homelessness, physically?**

The idea that if you cannot afford an ongoing monthly payment, that you cannot have anything, is ridiculous. If a person is shivering in the cold and they don’t have a sweater, I can hand them a sweater to keep, or I can loan them my sweater until we part – but in neither case would I consider “charging” for this basic human kindness. Housing used to be this way too. A house was shelter to keep warm and dry – and to have some modicum of private space. People would build teepees, igloos, leantos, mud huts, clay bricks – depending on geography and naturally available materials. Somewhere, somehow, we have devolved into the notion that “if you can’t buy it, you have to have nothing” which is not only offensive to our human evolution, but also intricately connected with issues of private property. One has to acknowledge that an urban person, with no tools, no trees they can cut down and no money to buy anything is going to struggle to do anything than use “found items” to shelter themselves.

**This can be remedied by one of two approaches:**

* Ability to pay cash for something that you can then own (in other words, a market offering nearly infinite options between zero dollars and millions of dollars)
* Someone giving you something that you can then own (in other words, it only necessitates a one-time giving to start a person on the path to self-sufficiency)

One big argument against certain entitlement programs is that they “have no end” once they start – once you start providing something for someone, especially for free, it is easy to be taken for granted.

**What are the obstacles to basic housing?**

* The “mortgage” or “rent” mentality (with outright ownership being a pipedream only open to the lucky, the wealthy or those who have paid their dues for decades)
* Building codes aimed at keeping poor people out of almost all areas
* Real estate taxes that have become so high, they make us feel like renters even when we own something outright
* Land that is only available to purchase in large chunks
* The belief that we are somehow safer with desperate homeless people begging for money at suburban road intersections and on sidewalks in cities, rather than them living in an actual structure where we will know where they are to deliver social services.
* The notion that homeless people sleeping on sidewalks, in tents, in makeshift cardboard structures or under viaducts is a “right” that homeless people have. This is ass-backwards. It should be entirely reasonable that tax paying citizens should determine the use of public spaces, while providing options for non-taxpaying citizens to go. If unimproved public lands are available and people want to live in a state of nature, that is one issue. But in a more evolved modern society we should consider providing “minimum viable housing” (MVH) in designated areas.

**Who should provide this minimum private shelter?**

One would say the answer is “the government” but my gosh the government is bad at things like this. It will end up being ugly, catastrophically expensive and poorly designed. The larger the ambitions, the worse the outcome.

Minimum viable housing should be designed from the perspective of a person that does not want to sleep outdoors, but has no real means for an alternative. We should build *up from nothing*, rather than scaling down from the high standards of a modern housed person.

When I see a person sleeping in a tent on the sidewalk I think:

* I have slept in many tents in my life
* Tents are hot when its hot out and freezing when its cold out
* Tents have condensation issues inside
* Without a cot, sleeping on the ground in a tent is a very small upgrade from sleeping on the ground
* I am yet to find a tent that keeps the rain and its resultant puddles out

So I then think:

* We need to get a real roof over this person’s head to protect from rain and snow
* We need to get real walls around them to protect them from the wind
* We need to get them off the ground for sleeping
* A door with a lock for privacy, security and protection of belongings

You can leave it right here to start. A structure that does these three things is a dramatic upgrade from most homeless contraptions (tents, cardboard, found items)

I don’t know about you, but I would sleep better if the 500,000 homeless people in the USA woke up tomorrow with a real roof, real walls, a cot/bed and a door with a lock. If it cost $10,000 per person to fulfill these four basic tenants, that means getting to this baseline would cost just $5 billion dollars. Our GDP is $23 Trillion. If we are a family, which a nation kind of is, it would take .2% of one-year’s family budget to get everyone out of the rain and into a private space sheltered from the elements. I’m not talking about homeless shelters here. I’m talking about minimalist tiny homes that these people could own and keep locked.

If I was a politician, which I am not and never plan to be, I would say, “In the next four years we are going to get every homeless American and veteran a basic house with four walls and a roof! As the richest country in the history of the world, that will be the bottom – as low as it can go, four walls and a roof!

**Upgrades Abounding**

Once you have covered these four requirements, you can build from this baseline:

* A blanket
* Electricity
* Split System Heating and Cooling
* A light
* A table
* Shelving
* A window

**Actually Hard Things**

* Plumbing (Toilet, Sink, Shower, Kitchen)
* Sewer connections

**At the last minute – Beauty**

* Varied paint colors
* Accent trim
* Flower boxes

**So why not use homeless shelters or converted hotels?**

For time immemorial there have been excellent charities doing the hard work of trying to care for the poor. The Catholic Church is a stand-out, having built homeless shelters, soup kitchens, social service centers, hospitals, orphanages and much, much more. Organizations like the Salvation Army do tons of work also.

However, most charity is done from the perspective of treating charity as a temporary crisis that people go through – like you find yourself homeless, you stay somewhere for a few nights or a few weeks and then you get back on your feet. When this is really the case, that is great! But we are at a point in society where people appear to be in a more chronic and enduring form of homelessness.

When I was in college there was a term coined to describe people who don’t ever really get back on their feet, the “underclass” (I guess in India they call them “untouchables”???) But I think it is time to coin another term, to describe the modern phenomena we see today. I would call some homeless today “non-participants” in our system – whether you consider that system to be capitalism, our laws, our religions, our mainstream behaviors and institutions. We have seen this gradually materializing in movements such as the “Occupy” movement. We see that mental illness and drug addictions are very common “co-morbidities” of homelessness. But it is harder to grab onto the mixture of injuries, disabilities, poor decisions, abuse, lost family connections, criminal records, trauma etc. that lead someone to a homelessness situation. There comes a point where a person has not set themselves up for success, and as more time elapses disadvantages cascade and aggregate. We talk of people going “down the tubes” or “into the gutter”. People devolve to the point where they are no longer participants in the same motivated society you and I live in. They are no longer living in the same realities, no longer pursuing the same goals. The longer they live this way, the less they have in common with normal participants in society. We can use this as a permanent wedge that prevents us from understanding the homeless, or we can chalk it up – we need to start over, with a new paradigm.

You may not agree with every bit of the above, but if you are reading this, you probably agree that something has to be done. I think we need to abstract the notion of “shelter” out of the political realm – stop this liberal vs. conservative warfare of ideas. Everything both sides says about the causes and remedies of homelessness has probably been true somewhere at some point – but the fact is, homelessness as an issue is a growing problem that does not seem to be approving on its own, instead it may actually be reaching a tipping point where we have to deal with it differently.

At Illinois Supply Company and Cubbie Homes, we are specifically working on bringing Minimum Viable Housing (MVH) products to market, so that they can be a part of the nationwide experiments of solving homelessness.