

# Dallas' homeless need jobs, not just handouts

Without employment, they may never leave our streets, says **Tom Coughlin**

My exposure to the chronic homeless problem in Dallas can best be described as recent and limited. Despite that handicap, I will not let it prevent me from acting like I know what I'm talking about on the subject—or at least on one component of this multi-dimensional issue.

Pup quiz. Which of the following is the most effective way to help a homeless person?

- Provide a place to live.
- Provide a car (or bus pass).
- Provide some food.
- Provide some clothes.
- Provide some money.

- Provide some encouragement.
- Provide a job.

Many factors push people into homelessness, including lost jobs, domestic violence, mental illness, addiction disorders, release from prison, etc. But the continued lack of a job will most likely keep them in this category indefinitely, possibly forever.

Dallas seems to have an ample supply of quality facilities and programs, both public and private, designed to sustain these individuals. Shelters, food banks, soup kitchens, Goodwill stores, free health clinics, etc., provide the homeless with the essentials necessary to survive. But who's going to hire them? In addition to being homeless, most of them have no car, no phone, little more than the clothes on their back, minimal skills and only a few dollars in their pockets.

Many of them—out of understandable frustration—have stopped looking for employment. Some have even become "unemployable" with homelessness, choosing instead to take full advantage of all of the social services available to them. Government food stamps and medicine are sold for cash, and purchasing occurs on every street corner downtown. Drive by The Bridge, Dallas' newest shelter, any time during the day, and you'll find dozens of able-bodied individuals hanging around, waiting for their next free meal. Why look for work?

I know it's easier to point out problems than suggest solutions, so here's my recommendation: I challenge our next mayor to call for the design of a program to create public day jobs requiring minimal skills that become a prerequisite for continued partici-

ation in the city's programs that sustain the homeless. Such a program should coordinate and centralize private-sector participation.

Every sidewalk and public space could be cleaner. Every wall covered in graffiti could stand a good whitewashing. Every field and parking lot covered with trash and litter is a potential job site. And every owner of private property—commercial, residential and/or vacant land—is a potential employer.

Volunteers with vehicles could transport individuals to and from jobs. Supervision for larger jobs could result from internal promotion. Compensation at the end of each day could include a combination of cash and vouchers that would be used to pay nominal amounts for various social services that are currently being given away. I also suggest that proof of citi-

zenship be a requirement to participate, although that seems obvious.

Getting back to the pup quiz, every answer would help to different degrees, but the last option—hiring homeless people or helping them get jobs—is the best way to help them help themselves. It is also the action most likely to remove them permanently from the ranks of the homeless. The other options are Band-Aids. And Band-Aids are meant to be temporary.

*Tom Coughlin is a real estate broker and writer in Dallas. He is also a Community Voices volunteer columnist. His e-mail address is tcoughlin@hotmail.com.*

# Why I'll start in Dallas

After four years of collegiate paradise in northern California, it's time to face the real world. My classmates are flocking to urban centers like San Francisco or New York City—or pulling a delaying tactic by going to grad school. Yet I'm flying solo to Dallas, Texas, a city that, when I left four years ago, I swore I'd never move back to.

What happened? To borrow our president's line, "Change." Inevitably change to me (that whole "growing up" phenomenon) but more so to Dallas.

Growing up in North Dallas, I desperately wanted to start a whirlwind fabulous life in San Francisco and get away from the hometown I less-than-fondly referred to as "a giant suburb."

But during my senior year at Stanford, I was offered a job in Dallas' growing biotechnology industry. Despite the benefits of the opportunity, I admit my knee-jerk reaction was "no!"

Yet the job was a good one, and this still is in an economy where you can turn up your nose at employment. So I took a step back and tried to re-examine Dallas without preconceptions based on four-year-old information.

During my time away, Dallas, particularly downtown and the surrounding area, has been radically altered. I used to consider downtown Dallas the place where you took your aunt when she came to visit—certainly not a place you lived. But Victory Park and the West Village have exploded. The arts are pulling their weight with the building of the Winspear Opera House and the future Perot Museum of Nature and Science. Cafe culture and boutiques are sprouting up, and people are filling bars and music clubs.

The Dallas of my high school days is not the Dallas I am returning to after college. However, even objective acceptance of that fact wasn't enough to win me over to Big



With an influx of young professionals, Uptown has been the fastest-growing real-estate market in Dallas. Experts expect another surge in development soon.

Returning from college, I have found a different city than the one I left four years ago, says **Andrea Freund**

D. No, that award goes to the new housing options of Uptown. After Craiglisting "San Francisco Apartments under \$1,000/month" and finding it in an area where there will be other individuals at my same stage in life. I haven't had to make new friends in four years, so I'm going to need all the help I can get, and Uptown, with its walkability and barrage of bars and coffee shops, provides exactly that.

Dallas still has a long way to go. It will never claim the pedestrian walkability of some other cities, but it doesn't need a giant, sprawling suburb.

Uptown and Victory Park are just examples of pockets of urban-

ization that make me excited to return. And I am truly excited. Returning to Dallas, I'll be experiencing my first full-time job, looking to date in the real world and excluding those awkward few weeks when I move back in with my parents while I find my dream apartment.

The Dallas of 2011 is not what I expected, and I don't doubt that it will continue to surprise me.

*Andrea Freund is a Stanford on June 2. Her e-mail address is andrea.freund@gmail.com.*



# Take it back

More companies need to recycle their own products, says **Brynn Sissom**

Our landfills are filling up with solid waste, and our water is contaminated with drugs flushed down the toilet. How can North Texas do better?

The Texas Product Stewardship Council, headquartered in Fort Worth, supports cooperation between state government, waste and recycling companies, and businesses of all kinds to create practical and feasible solutions for the materials management industry. One of the council's top suggestions is that manufacturers establish take-back programs much like the ones many electronics firms already have. Becoming responsible for the product from the beginning to the end of its lifetime would make a manufacturer a better steward of resources.

In Maine, pharmaceutical waste is targeted. When a patient is trying out a new medicine, the doctor is only allowed to give 10 days' worth. If it works, fine, but if it doesn't, then there is much less product to throw away. This way, waste is avoided altogether.

Victoria Hodge, program manager for the city of Denton, says, "Such programs as the one in Maine put responsibility on everyone to monitor themselves and be responsible stewards." Denton has had three take-back programs for pharmaceuticals over the past 18 months. Each program costs the city money for the event, collection and disposal. But that burden can and should be shared. The aim of product stewardship is to shift this burden onto the manufacturer, user or designer—whichever has the greatest ability to minimize the product's impact on the environment throughout its life cycle.

Our taxes pay for the government's responsibility for cleanup and disposal of manufactured goods. But if consumers and companies worked together more diligently, we could reduce the impact of pharmaceuticals in our water. Trash could be minimized if we encouraged packaging companies to keep it simple. Ultimately, this shift helps keep taxes low and encourages design improvements that help promote a sustainable planet.

Getting manufacturers and producers to take on the challenge and financial responsibility takes time. It means getting consumers used to take-back programs instead of throwing away used items.

In Austin there is SB 329, which only needs Gov. Rick Perry's signature to become law. The measure allows for take-back programs for television sets similar to the programs for other electronics. An editorial in *The Austin American Statesman* suggests there are "100 million older, unused televisions sitting around in American homes" and that they "threaten to overwhelm landfill space." I support SB 329 and other programs that push businesses to do more because finding better ways to throw away our junk affects all of us. Disposal has been traditionally a government activity, but it doesn't have to stay that way.

*Brynn Sissom of Irving is a writer and a Community Voices volunteer columnist. Her e-mail address is brynn2k@yahoo.com.*

# What can prison tell us about our priorities?

Well-rounded students seem unlikely to see their lives spiral out of control, says **Christy Robbins**

I can't stop thinking about the time I spent in prison.

After signing up to visit a maximum-security women's prison as part of a monthly church service, I boarded a Greyhound in the church parking lot long before the sun had kissed the sky. I wanted to know what happens after the judge raps the gavel and sentences are read in the books.

After an extensive background check and pat-down at the double-gated entrance, the guards let me pass behind the barbed wire.

Amid patches of analop grass, cinder block buildings house hundreds of ladies serving time in Texas. Not unlike uniformed students at private schools, they all wear the same outfits, but in their own unique styles.

Volunteers divided into groups and set off to visit dorms.

As we entered, the ladies came from their living spaces to greet us, introduce themselves, tell us they were glad we came. They immediately began asking for prayers for themselves, prayers for friends and for attention that didn't involve a reprimand. I can't begin to imagine the success organizations would have in this world if they could emulate such a warm welcome. There was no pretense of perfection to wade through.

We sat and talked. They asked about me. I shared tidbits from my life, my hopes, my fears. They told me how they hoped Mom would write, how they wished their kids were well, how they dreamed of staying clean upon release and how deeply they wanted to make parole.

They told me their fears. Would their families forgive them? Would they feel the sting of society's rejection? Were they too far down the road for reformation or redemption? We laughed. We sang. We prayed.

We were scolded by a guard for getting too loud. I wondered about family circumstances and education separating these ladies from success and sentences. It impacts me today as I work with youth and think about short-term habits and beliefs that lead to long-term hardships inside and outside prison walls.

Who are these women, beyond the guilty sentences? Who are their parents? Who were their teachers? Yes, some of these inmates took part in crimes with victims who may never fully recover. From the other side of the barbed-wire fence, though, I realized many of these ladies were victims of life choices that quickly spiraled out of control.

Eighty percent of prisoners struggle with substance abuse; 82 percent are high school dropouts.

But it doesn't start with drugs or dropping out. As an educator, I suspect it all starts in how we teach our children. We focus less on developing well-rounded students these days. Health, drug awareness, social skills, work habits and strong men-

tor relationships are shoved aside in favor of heavy emphasis on test prep in school. Health and social studies become the things you teach in May after the last nail is pounded in the testing coffin.

Rather than compare our scores from school to school or state to state, perhaps a better reflection of our success in education comes in the form of our prison population. When you consider that incarceration costs \$20,000 a year per inmate, plus immeasurable tolls on society, we can't afford not to provide a well-rounded education that goes much deeper. Maybe one that takes into account people's hopes and fears from the right side of the barbed wire.

*Christy Robbins is a reading specialist at Northrich Elementary in Richardson, and she is also a Teacher Voices volunteer columnist. Her e-mail address is ChristyRobbins@tardaron.k12.tx.us.*