Micro-integration and homelessness

The standard concept today is that the answer to homelessness is to create a bunch of affordable housing and move people into it. That is not going to work for a number of reasons, but the biggest reason is because taking a bunch of people struggling in life and putting them together in an inexpensive development doesn't solve anything. It just hides the problem. In the end we need to get this crowd remediated so they can participate and contribute like we are all supposed to.

STEP 1: Zones

The problem should be divided into manageable chunks and it kind of already is except that it is ad hoc. Using the neighborhoods that are already created for the elementary schools the homeless population would be distributed accordingly. Each area would then have to arrange for - temporarily - enough camping areas prorated for their size. For example, with 645k people in Portland and a sunnyside school area encompassing around 10k people (I don't know how accurate that is) 1.55 percent of the homeless population, 62 people of 4,000, would be assigned. Those groups should then be again divided into camp area of say 10 or 20 each. As with all parts of this plan initial decisions would have to made with proper metrics for success - i.e. less 911 calls - that would be monitored to see which size is optimal.

Some adjustment should be made for less dense areas that are more affluent as they should take on a slightly larger group because they have the resources to do so. This also provides impetus to get the more wealthy on board with making this concept a success. An important part of this system is the notion of overflow areas. They would be city-managed areas like the ones setup in inner-southeast near the water in parking lots. This helps with the uneven distribution of campers today and also takes care of as issue that will be noted below.

STEP 2: Volunteer

With a known quantity of homeless people to within each zone, residents would then be solicited for volunteering in three different areas; advocates of camping, housing and training. Again, something that is already occurring ad hoc except now the idea is that they are responsible for ensuring a group of people are being supported in their neighborhood.

STEP 3: Programs

Each area would have the ability to take their own approaches for each program although there should be coordination between them and the best in class as they become obvious should be distributed city-wide. Here is a start:

A. Camping

People using the campsites should be given specific minimal restrictions to ensure that some harmony returns to the area. Specifically, the problems of unsightliness, garbage and poor behavior need to be both noted and also dealt with. For example, restricting campers to a single tent and their transportation (i.e. a bike or car) outside it to stop hoarding. The idea is that each camper would be allowed to stay in the site as long as they followed acceptable rules of behavior - both interacting with their neighborhood as well as their fellow campers - and kept their site clean and organized. If they became a problem they would be asked to move to one of the overflow areas mentioned above.

As far as the related volunteers they would regularly visit the site, at least one person daily, to ensure that things were going smoothly and standards were being met. The key here is that this role needs people proficient in outreach. Their role would need them to be stern but also supportive. They would not be there to nag the campers but, rather, engage with them and help them meet the basic requirements. A great advantage here is that the involved neighbors would start to know who was camping at their site.

B. Housing

To further along integration, neighborhoods would be canvassed for potential housing opportunities. Everything from a backyard willing to have a tent or a garage used to a room in a house and even land to build a small ADU. This should be entirely funded by the contributors and not a government program. The idea is to slowly but surely diminish the size and number of camping sites and replace them with individual opportunities from citizens who want to help out. The transition would need to be managed closely to ensure that homeowner safety wasn't an issue.

C. Programs

Essentially, in exchange for getting to stay in a neighborhood zone versus an overflow area, a camper would need to regularly attend social and vocational training, preferably several "classes" each week. They could be offered in the area elementary school in the evenings. This pseudo-conservatorship further strengthens the bond between campers and homeowners and gives the campers important implicit wraparound services as well as much needed social interaction with people who aren't struggling in life. These same programs would be offered at the overflow areas albeit in a more rigid and structured format since this would be the part of the population with bigger behavior issues.

STEP 4: Rules

Camp sites would be the responsibility of the volunteers. When the police or county agencies received phone calls the caller would be given the contact information of their volunteer group. If a person is unhappy with the homelessness situation they now have a direct ability to do something about it. The whole situation would need to be closely monitored by the city so that things that are working well can be spread to other areas. Also, areas that are having problems would receive training for their volunteers. Campers and camps not meeting basic requirements would be swept. This gives activists an opportunity to prevent this activity as well as specifications for what they need to do.

Closing

This is a very cursory explanation of the concept. I can provide more details if you'd like but I think you get the gist. As with any idea of this magnitude and nature a lot of details will need to be worked out and then adjusted along the way. While it is an unorthodox approach two things are certain. There's nothing else that is known to work and there's a great reason supporting this approach. This is the only viable option because it comprehensively integrates a problem part of the population and a society works best when everyone is included.

The toughest part will be getting people to dispense with their selfishness and this is a great first step. More community is needed. Better community is required. It's time we put technology and money aside and started focusing on people.

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