Business Community Must Help Fill Critical Voids

**The Crisis On Our Streets**

**For 30 plus years we have been helping San Diego’s homeless, but they didn’t see the periphery — donations, church and service club efforts, etc. Over the past several years though, we’ve watched this situation deteriorate into a crisis with death on our streets. Many areas of our beloved San Diego are beginning to resemble a third-world country. This must stop, and now. In order to do so, San Diego’s business community must fill the void and lead the charge. If this doesn’t happen, we are heading for big problems that will negatively impact all of us. San Diego is the eighth largest city in U.S., yet, we now have the fourth largest homeless population. Federal statistics reveal that chronic homelessness nationwide actually declined 30 percent from 2007 to 2015 yet rose an alarming 77 percent here. This is proof that something is gravely wrong with San Diego’s approach.**

9,116?

The latest annual homeless count cites 9,116 unsheltered people in the county, but we hear the real number is closer to 20,000. Furthermore, we are in the midst of the largest hepatitis A outbreak in the United States in decades. The disease is ravaging our homeless population — there have been 41 confirmed cases, 37 hospitalizations, and 18 deaths. Even before this outbreak, San Diego’s homeless deaths had doubled in the past two years from 525 in 2015 to 1,117 in 2017. Our greatest enemy in this crisis is time.

Aside from the obvious humanitarian catastrophe, this has also become a public relations disaster for San Diego with both national and international news widely reporting on our hepatitis epidemic.

**Best Practices to Emulate**

In the midst of this horrific situation there is a great deal of good happening. Dozens of organizations and thousands of San Diegans are tirelessly helping our homeless. We, the business community, need to be analyzing what is working and not working, and crafting a comprehensive solution to this problem based on best business practices.

Four organizations we are currently analyzing and learning from are:

- **East County Transitional Living Center:** Run by Harold Brown, ECTLC houses 400 homeless persons at a time — guiding residents to sobriety, employment, and independent living. In 2016, it served over 400,000 nutritious meals to those in need at a cost of 17 cents per meal. Through its employment contracts, residents work and generate 80 percent of ECTLC’s income. Father Joe’s Villages: In 2016 it helped 929 homeless people move into permanent housing and served nearly 1 million meals to over 7,000 individuals. The 6,800 acute care visits to its federally qualified health clinic saved the City of San Diego $87 million due to decreased use of hospital emergency rooms.

- **Solutions for Change**

- **Veterans Village of San Diego**

- **Father Joe’s Villages**

San Diego’s business community must lead the charge. Are you ready to help? George Mullen is a principal of Studio Revolution.com and a leader of a proposed transition center called Sunbreak Ranch. Brian Caster is CEO of A Self Storage.

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**Three Steps to Take for More Housing Solutions**

**What Can Business Do?**

**Donate:** Consider sponsoring an event or program that directly supports and helps the homeless. You can donate in-kind items and services to support programs and services for the homeless.

**Volunteer:** Many nonprofits that support the homeless work with a skeleton staff. Companies can start volunteer initiatives that provide much-needed people-power to help these nonprofits.

**Advocate:** Explore ways in which your company can advocate for solutions like affordable housing, particularly for seniors.

Work with your local business improvement district or community planning group. Reach out to your city councilmember and encourage them to make affordable housing a priority.

**County officials have taken the first steps toward a solution:** County land and money are being offered specifically for the creation of affordable housing. $25 million in San Diego County has been set aside for gap financing; $500,000 from the Neighborhood Reinvestment Program has been designated for pre-development expenses. 11 County-owned properties are being evaluated as possible sites for affordable housing development. But we need to do more.

Paul Downs is President & CEO of Serving Seniors, a nonprofit serving seniors living in poverty.