

Letter to the Editor: A Millennial Problem in This Old City

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Following Alton City Council meetings has never been the highlight of excitement in one's life. However, cruising through the minutes and the agendas of 11-23-2019s meeting, we can read that Alton's City Council has approved TEMPORARY shelters and warming centers for the homeless and I can honestly say I don't know if this is a topic of conversation every winter, or if it's because our homeless population has increased so much in the past few years, that it now has to be a topic of discussion.

Either way, I find myself torn with the word temporary. If you put tape over a leaky hole in a dam, that's a temporary fix, it will not hold for any extended period of time,

eventually it will give away to the pressure. If we give the homeless population a temporary place to hunker down this winter, that's a great start, but what about their futures? Can we actually help them to receive public assistance? SSI? Housing? Free cell phones? Help them become independent members of society.

No, we are not responsible for their choices in the past, but as productive members of society I think we have a duty to help those less fortunate. After all, we don't know what their fight is; maybe they are fighting addiction, domestic violence, mental illness, sickness or they're runaways looking for a place where they can be accepted; in any of these cases we should make getting help easier. There's a 6 months wait at Centerstone, one of the only places that takes state insurance and offers MAT for addicts wishing to be in recovery and can't go cold turkey, they have mental health counseling, possible housing, transportation and free phones for clients. Alton Memorial offers a three-day detox, but there is at least a week's wait to get a bed and even then it's not coordinated with any clinics around here. While we should be grateful to have those services it is nowhere near good enough.

Prime example: There is a man I see sitting at Centerstone every day on my way to work. He lives at night in a doorway of a church that is blocked from the wind, hidden from view, a dumpster on one side and a cold brick wall on the other. I run into him all over town, but every day he gets up at 6 am, rolls up his "house" and walks over to Centerstone. I asked him one day last summer, "why are you always up here?" he replied, "I signed up for housing, and there's a year's wait. I come here every day hoping today's the day I get in and don't have to sleep outside." Six months later I still see him there every day. It made me realize how much we all take for granted, the simplest of things like heat, a house, a car, money to buy food. The basic necessities that separate us from an animal chained up outside in the winter. It saddens me that instead of our city headed in a direction of rejuvenation, of small business and its people -we have tried to ignore this problem for too long. Spring, summer, and fall the homeless are fine, cooling centers? We had none. Cold weather hits, our neighbors across the river have warm-up St. Louis that really starts at the end of summer, here it is December and Alton has just now approved warm centers and temporary shelters.

Educate yourself and drive through upper Alton, downtown and middle town, at any time of day (not the housing projects). Perhaps you'll see People walking and carrying their belongings, their "houses", pushing shopping carts, huddled in the back of stores by the dumpsters trying to keep warm, sitting on benches with their backs turned to the world trying to be invisible, panhandlers, people searching trash cans, beggars for food and drug addicts nodded out at bus stops or on the sidewalks leaned up against trees and retaining walls. The number of homeless seems to multiply by 2 every month, and as this problem becomes more prevalent I believe it's time for a more permanent solution than the City Council TEMPORARY "relief".

We have space, the buildings, and even places that throw all cooked unsold food out at the end of the day instead of donating it, and many restaurants use this practice. There is so much waste in this town, a waste of food, material objects, money, houses and time. Someone in power needs takes control and do something constructive about the suffering this population faces.

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