

Commentary: Rules needed to protect homeless, property owners

March 2, 2012 - There are many reasons for homelessness. For some, life on the street is a temporary phenomenon of a struggling economy; for others, it is due to drug abuse or untreated mental illness. Whatever the reason for being there, all homeless people are likely without the means to provide meals for themselves.

There are 38 known groups and organizations that provide food service to the homeless or others in need of a free meal. Some of these organizations, like the Star of Hope, Palmer Way Station, Bread of Life and the Salvation Army, feed inside their facilities. They have licensed kitchens, trained volunteer staff, are in compliance with the city of Houston's health and safety standards and feed the hungry on a routine schedule.

Unfortunately, there are many other street feeders that do not adhere to routine schedules. For example, there is one location at which a dozen different charitable organizations line up every Saturday morning, all seeking to provide breakfast to the same group of people. There is more than needed for the homeless who show up. In the end, a lot of it winds up left behind on the ground - creating a nuisance for nearby property owners.

There is also concern about ensuring charitable feeding operations abide by minimum health standards. This helps reduce sickness that can create additional public health concerns that can burden our public health care providers.

It is clear there is sufficient food available for the homeless and hungry. What is lacking is sufficient coordination of the food to make sure it is available every day in more locations and to ensure private property is not abused. The solution is registration and coordination of the various charitable feeding operations - a way to require permission to use private property, ensure adherence to minimal health standards and to help the organizations better determine the locations and days that their efforts would be most beneficial. These are the reasons for a new ordinance under consideration by Houston City Council.

This new ordinance will require organizations and individuals wishing to provide food for the homeless or indigent to:

- Register with the Houston Health Department. There is no charge for this registration and it is valid indefinitely or until the organization ceases operations.
- Complete a food-handlers training course provided at no charge by the health department. The training will include safe food handling procedures, ordinance requirements, strategies for working with the homeless and information and referral for health and social services.

- Obtain written permission from the owner/manager of public or private property at which food will be served.
- Prepare/assemble food in a licensed kitchen (which are readily available throughout the community).
- Require a plan for clean up of trash following food service.

Coordination of the various feeding operations will be handled by the Coalition for the Homeless and the Houston Food Bank, which will serve as a point for entry for new organizations wanting to help or for individuals wanting to work with an established operation.

Registration and coordination of street feeding operations is not a new concept. Ten of the largest U.S. cities already require it, and nine of these cities also require routine inspection for adherence to public health standards.

We seek not to regulate, but to organize and coordinate, street feeding. What is being proposed will not inhibit the many acts of charity conducted daily by Houstonians. In fact, this more efficient and effective food delivery system may well renew interest in helping the homeless, while at the same time protecting private-property rights.

We do not have two standards of food safety in our city; what is good for those who have is also good for those who have not. Ensuring minimal food safety standards and working to coordinate food availability is the least we can do for the homeless.

This article was submitted by Stephen Williams, director, Houston Department of Health and Human Services and chair of the Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County; Rudy Rasmus, pastor, St. John's Downtown; Hank Rush, president and CEO, Star of Hope Mission; and Bob Eury, executive director, Downtown District.



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My Word: Beyond public park feedings

Editor's note: This column is a collaboration of five downtown organizations that assist homeless people.

www.articles.orlandosentinel.com/2011-06-19/news/os-ed-homeless-feedings-myword

June 19, 2011 - Orlando has been in the national media lately, but not because of our wonderful attractions and weather. Central Florida's major city and its mayor have been vilified across the country because homeless advocates are limited to the number of times they can feed large groups of homeless individuals in city parks.

As the leaders of the five major organizations in downtown Orlando who serve the poor, hungry and homeless of our community, we are not novices. We must respectfully disagree with the picture being painted.

First, we are advocates for the homeless and hungry and agree that much more needs to be done to help the disenfranchised. We work toward that each day. However, we want to clearly state that people do not have to go hungry in Orlando. The downtown service providers collectively serve close to 842,000 nutritional meals a year in safe, well-managed environments. The majority, if not all, of those meals are served by thousands of volunteers from businesses, civic organizations, student groups and faith-based organizations. These volunteers help provide, prepare and serve those meals to the hundreds who walk through our doors each day.

Meal service is available to anyone in the community in need of food — not just residents of the homeless shelters. That is why we firmly believe that feeding in public places, such as Lake Eola, is a duplication of services, services that are available just blocks from Lake Eola.

Second, though we understand the motivation of those who wish to alleviate the suffering of the homeless in our community, solving homelessness involves more than a warm meal and a place to sleep. Homelessness is symptomatic of much larger issues.

Such public feedings may well contribute to homelessness and actually keep the homeless from the essential services necessary to get back on the road to self-sufficiency. One of the vital keys to assisting these men, women and families is providing comprehensive case-management services. This includes access to the tools needed to attain independence, truly giving them a "hand up" to a better life.

Last, the City of Orlando continues to collaborate with our organizations in the quest to better serve and advocate on behalf of the homeless in our community. Yes, there's more to be done; but it's cooperation in addressing the larger needs of the homeless in Central Florida that will get us where we need to be.

This column is a collaboration of Renee Alivento, president, Christian Service Center for Central Florida; Allen Harden, president/CEO, Orlando Union Rescue Mission; Maj. Andrew Kelly, area commander, The Salvation Army, Orlando Metropolitan Area Command; Ray Larsen, executive director, Central Florida Commission on Homelessness; and Brent A. Trotter, president/CEO, Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida.

The columns on both sides of this flyer were published in Orlando and Houston as part of a campaign to restrict the sharing of meals with the hungry. The same message has been issued by foundation supported homeless services in other communities seeking to hide hunger and poverty.