

Addiction and Homelessness Examined

By Jim Rachels



In this article we will be taking a look at homelessness and addiction. This is a problem prevalent in the addiction community. Many people have lost everything due to their substance abuse. Some have lost their friends and family and are now looking at being homeless or already are.

The question is how do we help these people? What are some measures that could be taken to help keep addicts off the street? Is there a one size fits all situation? I don't think so. I think everyone is different and has their own journey in recovery so they should be treated as such. So I think we need to remember that when trying to come up with an approach that might help this situation we are facing.

Let's take a look at some research that has been done on this topic.

"The National Coalition for the Homeless has found that 38% of homeless people are alcohol dependent, and 26% are dependent on other harmful chemicals."

If you ask me those are some pretty big numbers. So what are some of the reasons for this happening? One big thing about living on the streets is that it is very stressful to have to fend for yourself and find ways to eat, a safe place to sleep and other basic needs that need to be met.

There are reports that state that 33% of homeless people are facing problems with mental illness. This is another major cause of homelessness, which often leads to drug and alcohol abuse. We must keep this in mind as we try to solve this problem.

Many of these people are simply self-medicating to numb themselves from the reality that they are currently in. Just imagine having to deal with all the challenges that come while being homeless and then adding addiction to the mix. It is something that many people face.

Another thing that needs to be addressed is homelessness and the youth.

From Addiction Center:

"Many homeless youths and young adults are victims of substance abuse. Youths aged 12 to 17 are at greater risk of homelessness than adults, and many homeless youths have been the victims of severe abuse. 71% of missing, runaway, throwaway, or abducted children reported a substance use disorder (SUD)."

These are staggering numbers when you truly look closely at this. On average in 2013 when surveyed there were 600,000 homeless people in the U.S. on the streets nightly.

So what is it that we can do to help lower these numbers? I believe the first thing that needs to be addressed is trying to spread the word about this topic and get more people on board that are willing to try and help this cause. We need to bring this into the public eye. Maybe we can have services where people go out on the streets and speak with some of the homeless people and find out more about their specific situation and maybe have some suggestions and resources available to help these people. Maybe we can have specific shelters for the homeless with a substance abuse problem. And maybe in these shelters we can have drug and alcohol counselors trying to help get them sober and then maybe provide other services such as setting people up with a social worker to help with their situation. Maybe the social worker can help with finding temporary housing while these people are getting back on their feet slowly. Maybe the social workers can also assist in finding employment.

This is from (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2007).

“Breaking an addiction is difficult for anyone, especially for substance abusers who are homeless. To begin with, motivation to stop using substances may be poor. For many homeless people, survival is more important than personal growth and development and finding food and shelter take a higher priority than drug counseling. Many homeless people have also become estranged from their families and friends. Without a social support network, recovering from a substance addiction is very difficult. Even if they do break their addictions, homeless people may have difficulty remaining sober while living on the streets where substances are so widely used (Fisher and Roget, 2009). Unfortunately, many treatment programs focus on abstinence only programming, which is less effective than harm-reduction strategies and does not address the possibility of relapse (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2007).“

It also shows that even if a person is able to get sober it is hard to stay sober. They may be sober but they still have to deal with being homeless and everything that goes along with it. Just imagine not knowing where your next meal is coming from, imagine not knowing where you are going to sleep that night. Then comes also worrying about being the victim of crime and being in a dangerous situation unable to get out of it due to you're current situation. We need to help these people get out of the situations they are in. I believe this is the only way to help these people.

Many of these people that are looking for treatment have a hard time finding resources to help with both mental illness and addiction. Many programs for homeless people with mental illnesses do not accept people with substance abuse disorders, and many programs for homeless substance abusers do not treat people with mental illnesses.

“According to the United States Conference of Mayors (2008), additional substance abuse services were reported by 28% of cities surveyed as one of the top three items needed to combat homelessness. Many Americans with substance abuse dependencies, both housed and homeless, do not receive the treatment they need. In fact, the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors (NASADAD) estimated that in 2005, over 19.3 million people needed, but did not receive, addiction treatment services. “

Again when you look at the homeless population and these stats they are extremely negative as far as the impact these resources are really having on the homeless community. The high costs or individuals not having insurance were the biggest reasons many people did not get the help they so desperately needed. We need to find ways of paying for the treatment of these people that so desperately need it.

I think the one thing that we truly need to do is start surveying the homeless population to see what their needs truly are. Let's go out and see what services they think would get them out of the depths of homelessness.

So what is it that we can do to help combat this problem? What are some of the things that we can provide specifically for these people in need? I think the first thing that needs to be addressed is housing. We need to give these people some relief from the streets and the harsh conditions that go along with being homeless.

We also need to provide the proper resources. If so many people are facing homelessness maybe we can provide places that have integrated services such as having social workers available to discuss not only the homeless issue but also the issue of mental illness. Maybe we can provide a shelter that can not only house the homeless but provide services for mental health and addiction issues. Maybe having these services all under one roof would help. We also need to provide the right type of staff that are properly trained to handle these specific issues.