

As the holidays approach, along with the cold weather and snow, I can't help but worry about the more than 1,000 men (often veterans), women, and children in our community that are homeless. I know I am not the only one that frets over this growing challenge. As the number of homeless camps increases, I am often asked about this issue by prospects considering our community and other anxious citizens. After many years of working with our local governments, businesses, and other concerned citizens, I believe that we finally **have a plan**. Together, we can solve this difficult problem that most other communities have accepted as unsolvable.

Zero homelessness is possible: A collaborative methodology was first pioneered in the healthcare sector to combat the spread of deadly infections. The only program that has proven to reduce or eliminate homelessness is a similar collaborative methodology. According to the New York Times, "nine communities in the United States have reached a rigorous standard known as "functional zero" for chronic homelessness — a standard that indicates homelessness is rare."

Our Plan – Phase One: Prevention, coordination, and planning. There are things we are already doing to prevent long-term homelessness. A great example is the relocation and expansion of the Eddy house, with a new focus on training homeless youth to help them acquire the skills they need to get a job to escape a life of chronic homelessness. As for planning, over the past year, our local governments established the Community Homeless Advisory Board (CHAB), which meets regularly to work collaboratively to develop solutions. The CHAB commissioned a study by OrgCode Consulting, implemented some of the report's recommendations, and recently joined Built for Zero. This national program helps communities achieve the goal of "zero functional homeless."

Phase Two – Provide facilities that enable the separation of men and women/children. The Record Street campus is overcrowded and unsafe. With the state's help, our local governments acquired the former Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services (NNAMHS) campus. The campus was recently renovated and now provides homeless women and children wrap-around services in a safe environment as they engage in programs that move them on a path to self-sufficiency.

Phase Three – Acquire land near the downtown and relocate the Record Street shelter. Setting up a safe and drug-free campus that provides a place for all citizens experiencing homelessness requires a larger area. There are ongoing plans to set up a campus that offers tents, accommodates pets and even campers in a secure environment where shelter, feeding, security, and wrap-around services are readily available.

Phase Four – Address the funding needed to execute the plan. While there is some funding available to address our homelessness needs, the growing number of camps and working homeless, some as a result of pandemic related unemployment, is a clear indication that we must do more. While emergency shelter and food are vital, we need adequately funded wrap-around services and programs to help the homeless address and cope with some of the root causes of chronic homelessness, like drug and alcohol addiction.

Phase Five – Aggressive enforcement and maintenance of the effort. Once the resources are in place, we must redirect our homeless to the resources and facilities to survive first, and eventually thrive. Getting more ambassadors and adding river rangers will help us identify and address new homeless. By avoiding the costs associated with cleaning up homeless encampments, countless emergency room incidents, and the diversion of our policing efforts, we will save resources that can address other community needs.

Phase Six – Increase affordable housing. We continue to fall short of our growing housing needs, causing the cost of housing to go up due to supply and demand. These rising prices make it more difficult, if not impossible, for many people to find a place to live. That is why we must make every effort to encourage and support more housing construction, especially affordable housing.

So, we finally have a plan! Our local governments are more committed to addressing this challenge now than ever before. However, they need our help as we move from "accepting" or "managing" homelessness to "believing" we can end it. It will take commitment and support by the entire community, community leaders, care providers, businesses, and citizens. But what better gift can we give to each other and our kids and grandkids than to be the next community to achieve "zero functional homeless"? We can do this!