

Mean, or Misunderstood?
The Mayor (and others) on How We Should Deal with the Homeless
By Amanda Haymond

Mayor Oscar B. Goodman is in the spotlight again, getting more negative publicity because of his arguable proposals that seem to be aimed at disposing homeless people rather than helping them.

“I get in trouble and [people] call me the meanest mayor,” said Goodman. “Whatever you want to talk about I have controversy surrounding me, which is cool [because] it gets people thinking about it and talking about it.”

In particular, the Mayor’s notorious stance on homelessness has led to criticisms that he is either hateful towards the homeless or misunderstands the essence of the issue. But the Mayor believes the public, and particularly the media, have misunderstood him.

Perhaps most surprisingly, Goodman believes that homeless people approve of his tough position on homelessness. When talking about homeless people, Goodman said, “They do not disagree with the way I address the problem.”

John, a homeless man who spends his days at Frank Wright Plaza next to City Hall, strongly disagrees. “He’s nuts! That’s not the case!”

Goodman said at the 65th Anniversary of Catholic Charities, he shocked a few people by giving a speech criticizing the homeless people there. He told them they were getting a good meal that day, but that they would go right back to sleeping on the streets.

“That’s shameful,” Goodman told them. “That’s not the way I want my city to be and that’s not the American Dream.”

“They gave me a round of applause and [the homeless people] came up to me one after another and said, ‘You’re right on Mayor’.”

Goodman then motions to three bottles of alcohol on his desk and says, “The average person who you see on the street will not leave their booze behind and their drugs behind.”

On May 5, 2006, when inquired about the police kicking homeless people out of parks and public property Goodman denied it vehemently.

“Let’s put that one to rest right now,” he said as he walked over to his window in his City Hall office, which overlooked the small park below. “I built a beautiful little park for people downtown to enjoy themselves. They can’t, because it’s turned into a homeless park.”

Referring to homeless sweeps at the park, he continued, “No one gets bothered there. We don’t hassle anybody. We don’t bother anybody.”

Not long after this interview, the city park issues arose and more ordinances criminalizing homelessness were passed.

“Running out there and arresting them all isn’t going to solve the problem,” states Linda Lera-Randle El, founder of the homeless outreach program Straight from the Streets. “They act out of frustration because they don’t know what else to do.”

“[The homeless] can’t be on public property and they can’t be on private property,” said Metro Sgt. Tom Stoll, who used to work closely with the homeless while on the community policing squad. “There’s no place else [for them to go].”

When I expressed my interest to Goodman about working with homeless people, he simply said, “Tell them not to be homeless.”

Goodman reiterated his cliché comment, “I have no tolerance for an able-bodied person, who’s sound of mind, to be panhandling.”

“How does he know?” questions Lera-Randle El. “When a person looks able-bodied that doesn’t mean the heart, soul, and mind is all intact. You can’t jump to that conclusion.”

Goodman’s comments do not reflect well on the City of Las Vegas, but Judge Dayvid Figler explains that when you look into what the city and homeless programs are actually doing “you do see something more sympathetic than what has been reported in the media.”

Trina Robinson, administrative officer for Neighborhood Services, has been working with the City of Las Vegas with the issue of homelessness for 2 years.

According to Robinson, the responsibility of the homeless lies with the county, who gets funding from the state. The City of Las Vegas gets zero dollars to help the homeless but the Mayor and Council actually go beyond and do allocating.

“[The Mayor and Council] are very innovative,” she said. “They started a program called EHAP—emergency housing assistance program.”

EHAP prevents families from becoming homeless by offering assistance to pay utilities and rent to keep them in housing, and has had a 96% success rate, according to Robinson.

“It’s a lot more cost-effective to keep them in housing,” said City Deputy Manager Orlando Sanchez. “If they are on the street and you’re trying to get them back into housing it’s very difficult.”

In the fiscal year of 2006/2007, Robinson says, “From a general fund, we actually contribute \$350,000 in just direct homeless services [which are] homeless intervention and homeless prevention.”

\$350,000 is also contributed to Westcare each year.

The city also started the EVOLVE program, which helps ex-offenders reintegrate back into society.

“I thought that when you were in jail, they teach you life skills,” said Sanchez. “It was a big reality check when I found out they don’t do anything. They give you \$25 after you spend your time and say ‘have a good life’. So the likelihood is either they’re going to be homeless or they’ll commit another crime and go back into jail.”

EVOLVE has a staff of case workers, job trainers, and guidance specialists who provide housing, work, training, life skills, and 18 months of intense case management to ex-offenders.

In January of 2006, the city started a pilot chronic inebriate program, targeting 50 individuals. The program gives these individuals case management, housing, medication if needed, and whatever is required of them.

“It’s a holistic approach and is a pilot program for the city,” said Sanchez. “We’ll be able to see if we’re able to get these individuals off the street, make them self-sustaining, and make them integrated back into society.”

Robinson thinks we’ll see “a huge momentum growing in the region now.”

“The state just allocated \$4 million for the first time in it’s’ history to serve homeless individuals,” said Robinson. “In that \$4 million we’ve set aside so many different advantages for the homeless.”

Robinson described O.U.T.R.E.A.C.H., a team of seven social service agencies who, under HELP of Southern Nevada, go out to assess, triage, and provide housing to homeless individuals.

“Before, the system was more twisted,” admitted Robinson. “[A person] would have to be sober and be on medications. That’s not really realistic when you have somebody who doesn’t have a home to go to.”

The region is moving toward a more holistic approach, services are becoming more integrated, and there is now more collaboration between service providers.

“We’re reviewing the current set-up of the funding we give our current providers,” said Sanchez. “We spent millions and millions of dollars over the years on homelessness and I’m not sure if we’re getting what we’re paying for.”

Robinson agreed, “We’re going to be creative in finding the funds and also utilizing the funds to get the best bang for our buck.”

“They have good programs and dedicated people, but sometimes they aren’t coordinated together,” comments Lera-Randle El on the effectiveness of these city programs. “Every single case has to be dealt with individually which takes a lot of time and money.”

Admitting that the city could do more to help the homeless, Sanchez also feels that it’s not a city or county issue, but a community issue in which the community needs to step up and get more involved.

“The community will never get involved,” said John.

“It’s not just a community problem,” says Lera-Randle El. “The problem is the system itself. We can’t fix it because it’s not broken just in Las Vegas. It’s a problem across the country.”

“We’re deemed the meanest city, which is unfair,” said Sanchez, referring to the National Coalition for the Homeless, who dubbed Las Vegas as the 5th meanest city to the homeless a few years ago. Sanchez said they did a rebuttal on that “because it was very old information they were including in there.”

“We were #1 [meanest], and I feel sorry that we’re falling,” said Goodman. “Mr. Stoops, who’s with this coalition, has no idea what we’re doing here. He’s scared to meet me.”

“It’s not one side or the other,” said Figler. “Everyone has to work together.”

According to Goodman, help from the community does not include “enabling” the homeless.

“We’re trying to get them into programs and as long as you feed them and make life comfortable for them to live on the streets, you may feel like you’re a religious person doing something which is morally right, but you’re enabling them to continue a lifestyle which is unacceptable,” he said.

“As far as I’m concerned they can survive if they leave their booze and drugs behind and go over to Catholic Charities and Salvation Army,” said Goodman. “Anyone who wants to be helped can get a bed around here.”

Goodman often states that anyone who wants a bed can get a bed around Las Vegas, but John feels differently based on his own homeless experience. “When he says there are adequate services, he’s totally wrong!”

John feels that any self-respecting homeless person would not want to go anywhere near the shelters in Las Vegas because they are so filthy. He challenges Goodman to experience it for himself.

“Disguise the Mayor and his security guards as homeless for a day,” he dared. “Have *him* carry 40 lbs. of bags, and eat the meals at the shelters!” John offered to be Goodman’s ‘tour guide’ and take him around to the filthy bathrooms of shelters and bus stations, and show him first-hand what it is like to live as a homeless man.

For Robinson, community members giving money to panhandlers is enabling as well.

“It would be great if those individuals could contribute that money to the homeless trust fund [instead],” said Robinson. “That would be our cry is that our community comes around this issue and support those providers that are doing things...and work with our homeless trust fund and contribute to that.”

“We’re not mean,” said Sanchez. “There’s a reasoning why we have shelters and that’s why they’re there. They serve a need.”

The homeless trust fund has been in existence for over two years, and only has a balance of approximately \$10,000.

“We don’t advertise all the things we do,” said Goodman, speaking of the regional inclement weather shelter program, which provides motel rooms for the homeless in extreme weather.

John, who has never heard of this program, believes that it most likely doesn’t even exist. He wouldn’t be sleeping right next to City Hall in 115 degree heat if city workers from this program were to reach out to him and offer him a motel room.

“We are doing a lot,” said Robinson, “and [the public] is not aware.”

At the Las Vegas City Council meeting on June 21, 2006, Councilman Larry Brown lamented the bad image the media portrays of the City of Las Vegas and the Mayor.

“It’s a sad commentary that all of the good that’s being accomplished we never get to see or read about,” said Brown. “There’s this perception that [the Mayor] may be the meanest mayor in the world ... but we’re not getting enough good news out there about all the good work that’s being done.”

“That’s because it hasn’t been accomplished,” retorted John. “That’s why you read about it.”

“They bring [negative media] on themselves,” says Lera-Randle El. “If council people are concerned, then they wouldn’t back Oscar Goodman’s tactics all the time.”

Goodman detailed the way the media had taken his idea about using the prison in Jean as a homeless shelter completely out of context.

“A prison is only a prison when you have bars. You take the bars, it’s a building,” said Goodman. “They have a kitchen, a medical commissary, and air-conditioning. It would have been the ideal solution. We could have had social workers, we could have had psychologists, and we could have had training.”

According to Goodman, the day after he discussed this idea with his staff, the Las Vegas Review-Journal had a headline on the front page, ‘Mayor Wants to Send Homeless to Prison.’

“I told them to drop dead, and that ended that,” said Goodman. “Nobody wanted to understand what I was talking about. They blew it because they’re wise-guys with the headline.”

Goodman welcomes homeless people as well as homeless advocates to talk with him.

“We have public citizens’ participation every Council meeting. They could come down, I’d be happy to hear from them. They never show up. I have ‘Coffee with the Mayor’ once a month, they don’t show up. I open up City Hall once a month to hear anybody who wants to come down on the third Friday of every month. I’ll sit there as long as they want to talk. Nobody ever shows up regarding the homeless.”

“It breaks my heart when I hear bad things about the Mayor,” said Robinson.

“They’re just kissing his ass,” John quips. As long as Goodman is their boss, John knows that government officials will never say anything bad about him.

“I am not a mean person,” said Goodman. “I’m a kind person and I want to help these people.”

He described a time when he went to Catholic Charities and approached a young man who had a baby with him.

“I asked him why a young, strong, good-looking kid like himself was homeless,” said Goodman. “He said he had a criminal record of battery with a police officer and nobody would hire him. A guy’s entitled to a mistake. I went to a gentleman who owns a business here in town and I got him a job right on the spot.”

Untactful comments made by Goodman overshadow his self-proclaimed compassionate side.

“I get a bad rep and that’s fine, I’m a big boy,” he said.