

Los Angeles Times

A Better Way of Dealing with Society's Neediest

Steve Lopez
Points West

April 19, 2009

Reporting from Washington -- So what exactly am I doing on Capitol Hill? I'm at a congressional briefing, which wouldn't be entirely out of the ordinary, except that I'm not taking notes and not planning to beat up on anyone.

I'm the keynote speaker.

Yes, friends, the republic is in trouble.

I've been asked here to share what I've learned since meeting Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, a former Juilliard student who has taught me about this nation's triumphs and failures in helping those who battle mental illness and end up homeless.

I'm well aware that Capitol Hill briefings are a dime a dozen and that public policy is not likely to be greatly influenced by my testimony. But I was invited here by officials from the Corp. for Supportive Housing, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the National Alliance to End Homelessness and other agencies.

My instinct was to decline the offer. It's not in my nature as a journalist to become personally involved in a story.

But that struck me as too convenient an excuse for avoiding my civic duty. There's a new administration now and stimulus money needing to be spent. Maybe there's finally hope for more programs to help the Nathaniels of the world.

So here I am, Mr. Lopez goes to Washington, and just as I'm beginning to experience an unwelcome sense of self-importance, I'm told the actual congressional representatives are in recess and out of town.

What? You mean they skipped out just as I got here and sent their minions to hear me?

I swallow my pride and look out on a few dozen congressional staffers, policy wonks and service providers. I've been given 15 minutes. I confess to listeners that I'm not the expert on housing and mental illness that my fellow panelists are, but I have a story.

I tell them about Mr. Ayers, who lost nearly everything at the age of 20 to schizophrenia. By the time I met him four years ago, he had been living on the streets for decades, with little to keep him going but his love of music.

In helping him find a home at Lamp Community in Los Angeles, I learned firsthand how permanent supportive housing is not only the humane approach, but often the cost-effective one too.

Lamp has rescued hundreds of people from lives of despair and saved taxpayers the cost of churning them endlessly through emergency rooms, criminal courts and prisons.

The homeless population is growing across the country because of the recession and returning veterans who are physically and mentally wounded. It's not that we don't know how to help them rebuild their lives, I tell my audience, but that we haven't provided nearly enough support for alternative courts and for programs like Lamp.

And so vets sleep in Santa Monica parks, not far from abandoned VA barracks; L.A. County Jail serves as a mental institution; and there's a waiting list at Lamp and other agencies with good track records but limited funds.

On behalf of Mr. Ayers, I urge my audience to support a better way of dealing with society's neediest, then step aside so the professionals can speak.

Bob Carolla of the National Alliance on Mental Illness talks about how, while working as an aide to former Sen. George Mitchell (D-Maine), he was overcome by debilitating depression and found himself in handcuffs near the Capitol.

"No one is immune from mental illness," he says.

Hyacinth King, a business school graduate, tells how schizophrenia left her homeless until Project HOME in Philadelphia gave her back her life, including a job as both an advocate and computer specialist, and a home with enough support services to help her thrive.

Deborah DeSantis, chief executive of the Corp. for Supportive Housing, lists a number of cities that have reduced homeless populations and asks congressional staffers to go back to their bosses and tell them how it was done.

"Study after study shows we're going to save money by putting people into permanent supportive housing," she says.

DeSantis and other speakers have a specific request: They want a budget allocation of \$2.2 billion this year in the Housing and Urban Development Department's McKinney-Vento grants. That would be an increase of about \$500 million over this year's funding, and it would pay for 15,000 new supportive housing units.

They also are arguing for \$120 million to support programs that help keep formerly homeless people from ending up back on the pavement.

And what are the chances these pleas will be answered?

Gil Duran, a spokesman for Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), tells me the senator "supports these programs" and "will continue to work to ensure that California cities get the help they need." But it remains to be seen whether President Obama's budget will include the necessary funds.

A staffer for Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Beverly Hills) tells me that given the current fiscal crisis, it would help convince doubters in Congress if there were more hard evidence that supportive housing can save money over the long term.

I leave it to one of my fellow panel members to make that case. Sister Mary Scullion of Philadelphia is convinced beyond a doubt that with a combination of public investment and private support, investing in permanent supportive housing is humane and cost-effective.

The last time I visited Sister Mary in Philadelphia, she took me to a formerly devastated neighborhood that has been rebuilt by Project HOME, which she co-founded two decades ago. When I asked who did all the work, Sister Mary said, "our people," meaning formerly homeless, mentally ill people who were given homes and jobs rebuilding the neighborhood.

Sister Mary is the last speaker at the Capitol Hill briefing and no doubt the most compelling.

If Congress can find \$80 billion to bail out the inept insurance giant AIG, she says, surely it can come up with \$2.2 billion for supportive housing. As for the request for \$120 million in support services, Scullion adds, that was roughly what AIG paid in executive bonuses.

"I'm not kidding," Sister Mary says as I scribble in my notebook, happy to be back on the other side of the podium.