

## Motion picture gives glimpse into the world of homelessness and mental illness

**Monica Rodriguez**

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POMONA - The recently released film "The Soloist" offers the average moviegoer a glimpse into the troubled world of the homeless living with mental illness.

It also keeps the issues of homelessness and mental health in the public eye serving as a catalyst motivating people to learn about the topic, said Gilbert Saldate, a member of the board of directors of the Los Angeles County Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness.

The film, which was released April 24, is based on a book by the same name written by Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez. In the book, as in a series of columns, Lopez writes about Nathaniel Ayers, a Juilliard School-trained musician who is homeless and schizophrenic and the friendship they develop.

"Here is a guy who had talent, was at a renown school but had a psychotic break," Saldate said.

When Ayers began to show signs that something was wrong people failed to notice, which is not unusual, he said. It's not uncommon for some people to simply ignore the signs and write people off as misfits.

Often mental health problems are the result of chemical deficiencies in the brain and rather than being helped, families and friends ostracize the afflicted, something they wouldn't do for other medical conditions, he said.

"Nobody looks at you weird because you need insulin," he said.

Homelessness combined with mental illness often comes a stigma that results in society forgetting the afflicted are human beings, said Ralph Ortiz, deputy director for emergency services for the San Bernardino County Department of Behavioral Health.

"That person has a story," Ortiz said. "That person has talents and wishes and wants."

To some people, a homeless person could improve their life if he simply pulled himself together, took his medication, and got a job, said Jan Cicco, Pomona's homeless services coordinator.

That's easier said than done.

Some medication can result in side effects - such as a constant sleepiness or a dulling of the senses - that can prompt patients to abandon treatment, she said.

Chronically homeless people with mental health problems often need to be eased off the streets and into a different environment where they can make permanent changes in their lives, Cicco said.

More services are needed that offer such opportunities rather than highly structured programs.

"We need more flexibility," she said adding, "we really need programs to support them with their illness."

Ignoring people with such problems "is just not right. It's a blight to our own hearts and our communities," she said.

Lamp Community is a Los Angeles-based organization that works with people who are homeless and who have mental health problems. The organization, which worked with Ayers, is also featured in the film.

A film like this one can play a part in changing the public's "perceptions of people living with severe mental illness," said Casey Horan, executive director of Lamp Community.

Although Ayers stands out for his musical talent, the people who walk through the doors of Lamp have gifts, talents and value as human beings, Horan said.

"They are the most courageous and creative people I've ever met," she said.

Lamp's approach to working with the homeless involves offering to help with their needs, which sometimes can begin with getting them a permanent place to live, Horan said.

This is a different method than the one that started being used about 20 years ago which involved simply opening a shelter and offering a person a cot to sleep on, she said.

Getting a person to a shelter won't end their homelessness problem, Horan said.

Lamp's approach, which is used in other cities on a larger scale, is to offer a client a place to live in which they will also find various services such as medical care, mental health specialists, job placement assistance and more, she said.

The services are available and clients access them at their own pace as they begin to adjust to living off the streets and to realize this is not something that will lead to institutionalization, Horan said.

The approach has led to positive results giving people a means to make permanent changes in their life and is much more cost-effective because clients are less likely to have problems that land them in hospital emergency rooms or jail, she said.

Through the film, people may become interested in educating themselves more about the challenges those without homes and mental issues face. They may be prompted to help someone they know or may be inspired to do more on a larger scale.

Becoming involved with the National Alliance on Mental Illness is one way to do that, Ortiz said. The non-profit organization provides education on mental illness in addition to offering support and advocacy for those with mental health problems.

Others may be compelled to give money or clothing to a person on the streets not realizing that is a short-term fix to an issue that needs a long-term solution.

Helping people access care is critical, he said.

"Listen to their story and maybe direct them where they can get help," Ortiz said. "Sometimes they don't even know where they can get it."

It's best to avoid pressuring a person to seek care. Also, handing a person an address where they can find help isn't productive.

Offering to accompany the person to find help can be more productive and shows him someone cares, Ortiz said.

Organizations exist locally that work with the homeless and mentally ill who are often in need of assistance, Cicco said.

"Professionals that want to extend beyond their normal practice are highly needed," she said.

Trained mental health professionals who can go out with outreach workers to assist in assessing a person's condition or to help build relationships are needed.

People don't have to be mental health professionals to assist, Cicco said.

Volunteers can help out organizations answering phones, assisting with paperwork and eventually going out with outreach workers.