

My name is Diane Powers and I am a Homeless Planner with Pierce County Human Services.

I was made aware of this ongoing blog yesterday and I believe that I really must respond.

Myth no.1 “There are plenty of resources out there if a person wants help”

As you know, we are in the throes of a very deep recession. Many working and middle class Americans have lost their jobs, healthcare and even their unemployment benefits. These men and women for the first time are seeking the very limited resources that are available to people experiencing poverty. At the same time, resources that normally fill the City and County coffers are dreadfully reduced because of a reduction in taxes (real estate, etc). As a result of less money coming in, there are fewer resources available to organizations that serve people experiencing poverty. Food banks, shelters and low-income housing providers are woefully unable to serve all of the individuals who are knocking on their doors. Individuals who previously volunteered at food banks now find themselves standing in those same lines seeking sustenance. There are long waiting lists for people seeking emergency shelter and a recent study in Pierce County estimates that we are in need of approximately 30,000 affordable housing units to house low-income individuals.

So, no, there are NOT enough resources out there if a person wants help.

Myth no.2 “These people don’t want our help”

Please try to imagine that for some very strange reason, you yourself: A. Lost your job, b. Lost your healthcare, C. Ran out of financial resources, D. Ran out of family members who are willing to help you, E. Became depressed because not in your wildest dreams did you ever think that YOU would find yourself in this situation F. Began to self-medicate (using alcohol or drugs) in order not feel those dreadful feelings, G. Couldn’t find a bed to sleep in at night and didn’t have place to care for the basics (i.e. washing up, using the toilet, keeping your belongs safe).

If all of this happened to you (and I am sure it would not), how would you feel when people looked at you in disgust, turned their heads away when they encountered you and simply wished you did not exist?

People who experience long term poverty and homelessness often must learn to hide their feelings and need for connection to other human beings in order to emotionally survive. They may **SEEM** like they don’t want help, But all human beings really want the same thing; safety, security and feeling connected to other human beings.

Reality no 1.

“The increasing presence of homeless people in public spaces has led to acrimonious conflict between advocates for the homeless and municipal officials. Local officials correctly perceive that homelessness

has begun to adversely affect not merely the homeless, but society at large. Regulating the conduct of individuals on public land is necessary to preserve the civility of those common areas that all citizens enjoy. In the long run, municipal regulation of public spaces can satisfy neither the needs of individuals who find themselves homeless nor the concerns of the public over the disorder associated with homelessness. Until we as a society alleviate homelessness, the continued occupation of public spaces by individuals who are homeless will continue to afflict our cities—with all of the squalor, misery and conflict it entails”. (“Homelessness in America”, National Coalition for the Homeless, 1996).

Reality no. 2

Pierce County is currently engaged in an innovative initiative to end homelessness. Major funders, housing providers, City and County governments, work force organizations, faith based organizations, school districts and children administration groups are all collaborating to prevent and end homelessness. The major component of this initiative is “System Change”. We believe that the things we have done historically to end homelessness are no longer sustainable. It is time to build something new and better that is more innovative and sustainable and that significantly moves us toward ending homelessness. If you are interested in reading more about the details of our plan, please go to the County website a www.piercecountywa.org Click on the Department of Human Services and scroll down to Plans to End Family Homelessness.

It is true that fortunately, many of us in the human services field (the place of milk and honey, rainbows etc,) believe that every human life should be valued, with no exceptions, and we strive to treat each person the way we ourselves would want to be treated if in a similar situation. Most of us also believe that at any time **WE** could lose our jobs and find ourselves without resources and this helps us to remain compassionate and focused on solutions that incorporate justice and equality for everyone.