

# Cindy Crain: First responders should not be our first response to homelessness

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Three months ago, a patrol officer called me regarding a person experiencing homelessness who was trespassing. I asked the officer to hand his cell phone to the man. I calmed him and recommended a solution, and he agreed.

Unfortunately, my staff and I were not immediately available to help. The Dallas Police Crisis Intervention Team was working on stacked calls. The two street outreach workers were knee-deep in cases involving the Interstate 45 tent city removal.

I called the officer back. I could clearly hear his frustration and agitation. He had been on this call for more than an hour, and it was hot outside.

"Ma'am, if y'all cannot get here soon, I am going to take him in."

They say when all you have is a hammer, everything is a nail.

Police are equipped with a citation book, handcuffs, and so-called APOWW, or apprehension by a peace officer without warrant. An officer can call the crisis intervention team, but they are charged with far more than homelessness.

The day after the closure of the second major homeless encampment at I-45 and Coombs two weeks ago, I visited the site. I happened on the clean-up crew preparing to load possessions on a truck just outside the perimeter, a line difficult to discern for all the brush.

There, a homeless woman was deeply distressed and a police officer was working to understand the circumstance and necessary response.

Texting and calling, we resolved the situation together. As I resumed the walk-through, the officer asked, "Why didn't she get housed like all the rest?"

My response was that we were only able to house a few.

The officer, "So, they were all just scattered all over?"

"Yes, sir."

He shook his head, and I handed him my card and to call if I could be of service.

I have listened to officers lamenting the load that homelessness places on their time, patience and conscience. I recently started to listen to police band radio over the internet. I began to listen to Dallas Police 1 Central and 2 NE division locations.

Within the first 15 minutes I heard a call and recognized the address. Half an hour later, another. For days I listened and kept hearing descriptions and addresses that told me homelessness was a prominent culprit.

Nationally, Dallas has a reputation for its criminalization of homelessness. I know personally that this reputation in no way squares with the sentiment of the men and women who wear that Dallas badge.

Last week, members of the City of Dallas Homeless Commission expressed concern that the budgetary needs of Dallas Police were now in conflict with proposals to address homelessness.

I see no conflict.

In fact, the work of the Homeless Commission is a critical component to the goals to strengthen law enforcement resources. The Commission recommendations fall solidly within the learned best practices identified throughout the country.

Data improves our knowledge and accountability. Adopting the philosophy that housing ends homelessness -- and the more rapidly navigated the better -- will dramatically adjust the course of the homeless response system.

Aligning new street outreach with shredding entrance rules for homeless shelters will better define a clear and accessible path off the streets.

And then there is the housing. Last week at the National Alliance to End Homelessness Conference in Washington, I met with peers from Portland, Oregon, Salt Lake City, Denver, San Francisco, San Diego and Houston.

All shared the same challenge: There's no available affordable housing, the unsheltered homeless population continues to grow, and the homeless response systems are blamed. We are all wringing out every possible last-drop solution to counter more than four decades of declining investment in affordable housing.

In Dallas, systemic solutions are now in play. We will retool existing resources. But we need the commitment and strategic, targeted investment to counter the market and societal change. We all must respond, not just the Blue.

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