

Editorial

How not to solve homelessness

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Combating homelessness is a difficult task. But Beverly Hills has some ideas: Hire private security people (rebranded as “ambassadors”) whose job is at least partly to “send panhandlers out of town.” Fund housing for the homeless – outside the borders of the city. Incentivize businesses and restaurants to shoo away homeless panhandlers — by threatening them with a possible “shame list” of owners who don’t support the city’s homelessness policies. Then: Declare success! Have the city’s “human services administrator” stand up at a public meeting and exult not just that Beverly Hills’ homeless count numbers has declined had gone down from 29 to 14, but also that West Hollywood’s homeless numbers have gone *up*. Because when it comes to battling homelessness, what’s wrong with a little friendly competition among neighboring municipalities?

Cities have to balance the rights of the homeless against the need to keep city streets safe, healthy and navigable. But Beverly Hills is just getting homeless people off the streets without getting them out of homelessness. Not their problem, you say? Yes, it is their problem. There are 47,000 homeless people in the county of Los Angeles. Beverly Hills obviously has a tiny number of those, but, last time we looked, Beverly Hills was still one of the 88 cities in the county. That means it has to contribute to helping the homeless people in its midst.

To be fair, Beverly Hills does contract with the nonprofit, Step Up On Second, for two case managers to do outreach and help homeless people get housing and treatment. But, in a February media release, the city attributed the reduction in the numbers of homeless people to its ambassador program, which began a year ago. The ambassadors spend 35% of their time with visitors and 17% of their time with outreach workers, according to city officials, but they also spend time keeping homeless people out of city garages and cracking down on panhandlers.

James Latta, the city’s human services administrator, says that Beverly Hills does not encourage panhandling because doing so merely prolongs the time that people are homeless “as they have a source of support that keeps them fed.”

That makes homeless people sound like feral cats. Giving money to homeless people does not solve their homelessness but neither does harassing or arresting them. Until Beverly Hills figures that out, they should put themselves on whatever shame list they concoct.