

Soapbox: Ending homelessness good use of taxpayer dollars

Florence Field 12:11 a.m. MDT June 6, 2015



(Photo: Erika Moore/Coloradoan library)

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This soapbox is addressed to those readers with generous hearts but who have a tight hold on their pocketbooks, particularly when it comes to public programs for helping the down and out.

Some taxpayers may think it is a waste of money to provide those without resources the services for which the rest of us have worked very hard. But, aside from critical humanitarian concerns, is it really a waste of money?

Let's take as an example a problem that seems intractable — the chronically homeless population. Many of these individuals have serious mental health problems, which may include alcohol and substance abuse, and physical health issues, all needing supportive services. A recent report by the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless examined the emergency service records of 19 participants in the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless' Denver Housing First Collaborative. The researchers analyzed the actual health records

the 24 months before and the 24 months after enrollment in supportive housing. The study finds supportive housing led to declines in total emergency-related costs (72.95 percent), emergency room costs (34.3 percent), inpatient costs (66 percent), detox visits (82 percent) and incarceration days (76 percent). Once the cost of housing is factored in, these reductions resulted in a net savings of \$4,745 per person.

Another costly challenge is the issue of the homeless and law enforcement. According to a [recent Coloradoan article](#), Larimer County has seen an increase in the numbers of self-identified transients and homeless arrested. In July and August of 2014, 246 transients and homeless were booked into Larimer County Jail compared to 171 during the same period in 2013. Per-day inmate cost for the county is estimated at about \$85, which can easily eat up the county budget. Clearly, the cost of continuing with the status quo is becoming prohibitive

In Utah, where a permanent supportive housing program called Home First has been in operation for a decade, the ranks of chronically homeless individuals have been reduced by 91 percent. Home First provides an apartment and social services at a cost of \$11,000 annually per person. Prior to the Home First program, Utah was spending an average of \$20,000 per year on each homeless person because these individuals more frequently jailed, in hospitals or shelters.

Fort Collins has taken a giant step forward — by [building Redtail Ponds](#), Northern Colorado's first permanent supportive housing program, offering 60 units to meet housing needs of homeless individuals with disabilities, homeless veterans and other low-income people. The League of Women Voters applauds the leadership role the Fort Collins Housing Authority has taken in realizing this project and in developing sustainable partnerships and funding sources to ensure long-term success.

The League's Affordable Housing Team studies local housing issues and sponsors programs on this topic. The team is confident investment of taxpayer money in permanent supportive housing programs, such as Redtail Ponds, will prove fiscally and socially rewarding. The league believes meeting the challenge of chronic homelessness is a worthwhile, cost-effective use of taxpayer money.

The League of Women Voters of Larimer County is a non-partisan organization of men and women who are committed to making democracy work. In addition to providing voter services, we also have teams that study, educate and advocate on a variety of issues, Visit our website to learn more at www.lwv-larimercounty.org

Florence Field is on the League of Women Voters-Larimer County Affordable Housing Team.