

Out in the Cold

In D.C., a street emergency . . .

On Feb. 7 more than 50 people gathered at Miriam's Kitchen in Foggy Bottom to pay their respects to Arnold Scoggins. Arnold had died on his way down the stairs to eat breakfast in our dining room. Although the medical examiner was unwilling to declare that Arnold had died from hypothermia, he died on the street in extremely cold weather.

Most winters, the number of homeless people we serve decreases. This winter, that hasn't happened. On any morning at our soup kitchen, men and women eat leaning against the walls because we don't have enough seats for all of them at our tables.

The downturn in the region's economy has hit hard. But even harder is the blow from the attacks on Sept. 11. Of the thousands who lost their jobs because of the subsequent slump in the area's hospitality industry, dozens of these newly unemployed show up at our door each morning.

D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams has been quick to respond to the tourism and restaurant downturn, and rightly so. But the death of Arnold Scoggins and other homeless men has made it clear that the mayor needs to direct his energy to the newly homeless too.

A first step would be for him to appoint a coordinator for the agencies responsible for assisting homeless adults and families. Last month members of the D.C. Council urged the mayor to create and fill just such a position. This person should have authority to mobilize all the resources the city can bring to bear on the homelessness problem. He or she should lay out concrete goals—and be held accountable for achieving them. Finally, this person would need to be familiar with D.C.

Next, Williams needs to put resources into the hypothermia program he launched last fall. He promised a bold program that would rely on the energies of city agencies, service providers, local businesses and citizens to ensure that people on the streets do not freeze. The D.C. employees who drive the streets distributing blankets and directing people to shelters are doing incredible work, but we need more of them, and we need them to coordinate their efforts with private groups.

Finally, the mayor must raise the issue of homelessness to the top of the agenda within the National League of Cities and other national organizations. In 2000, 15,870 persons, or 2.77 percent of the District's population, were homeless at some point during the year. This is twice the homelessness rate of other large U.S. cities. Now, more than ever, homelessness is intertwined with other local and state problems that affect national issues such as unemployment insurance and welfare reform. Solutions will require coordination among different levels of government.

The mayor can and should give the issue of increasing levels of homelessness the spotlight it deserves. To do so, he must address homelessness as a central element of his overall effort to get the District back on its feet. Dozens of organizations and thousands of people of goodwill stand ready to help him. Our kitchen was designed for breakfast, not memorial services.

—Ruth Dickey

—Jonathan Kirkendall

*are, respectively, executive director
and director of social services
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