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Priority Theme:

Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness

Open Hearts Create Warm Hearths: Shifting the Paradigm to End Homelessness With Respect and Compassion

Statement submitted by
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In today's rapidly developing world, homelessness is a chronic problem affecting the world's population. The irony is that despite the social and economic development of cities, the number of people who are homeless is steadily increasing. Although much is being done in an attempt to address the issue, actual remedies are both elusive and expensive. What if there were a solution that went to the very heart of the problem? What if this solution were simple, sustainable, and healthy for all?

Homelessness is a symptom, a departure from healthy function. It is a phenomenon that arises from and accompanies a particular disease or disorder and serves as an indication of it. When treating homelessness, we must first identify its causes. Mitigating factors such as the rising cost of housing, domestic violence, lack of education, and lack of quality health care are all part of the problem. These issues have been addressed by well-meaning policies, social services, organizations, and charities; still, the percentage of people who are homeless continues to increase.

Therefore, we need to look deeper. Why should homelessness be a priority? Are affordable housing and social protection systems for all the solution to homelessness? Why should we stop shaming and start helping the homeless? Until we effect a paradigm shift, a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic, every effort simply scratches the surface of the issue.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University is dedicated to personal transformation and world renewal: we empower and uplift our communities by helping individuals transform their perspective of the world from material to spiritual. We support the cultivation of a deep collective consciousness of peace and of the individual dignity of each soul. By creating a global circle of compassion, we address every possible cause of which homelessness is symptomatic, be it addiction, financial loss, mental illness, apathy, or societal rejection of one's identity. When we treat each other with respect and compassion, we eliminate the space for apathy and

discrimination to take root and thrive. Within this paradigm, we examine ways to eliminate homelessness across the world.

One of the underlying causes of homelessness is a desensitized society, unable to empathize with the tribulations of the homeless. Here, a values-based system and fundamental, spiritual principles would be highly effective. Such practices unify us; and, with that unity comes compassion, which in turn heightens the awareness of universally debilitating issues like homelessness. These practices also inspire, empower, and encourage each member of the society to perform acts of kindness with the awareness of being part of a global family.

Although no one believes that homelessness is acceptable, it is easy to marginalize and disenfranchise the homeless. We feel repulsed and inconvenienced by their presence on busy city streets, begging at traffic lights, or sleeping under bridges and on snow-covered park benches. When we're not contemptuous of them, we ignore them: their unfortunate state of homelessness becomes their entire identity and the human beings themselves become invisible.

The idea of a global human family isn't new but creating and sustaining this connection to each other is challenging. We segregate and diminish each other instead of pulling together. Why do we do this? Excuses include race, gender identity, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. If we could, instead, embrace our differences and celebrate our commonalities, we would garner respect and appreciation for each other. In truth, respect, empathy, and compassion are innate within us, waiting to be awakened.

What happens to one family member affects the whole family. So many people living without necessities impacts everyone. Upholding values that bring us together empower us to build a strong world family unit in which everyone flourishes. What is most empowering is that this effort can be made both collectively and individually. We don't need to wait for the government or each other to begin making a difference. One act of compassion can change someone's life.

Karen Perusse, a Brahma Kumaris student residing in Tampa, Florida, keeps a "Compassion Kit" in her car. It's stocked with basic supplies. Whenever she encounters a homeless person, she's always got something on hand to give them. The impact of this is two-fold: first, there is the physical interaction, the sharing of something tangible that will help this person right now, at this very moment; and second, there is a spiritual interaction, one of kindness, of expressing respect and care, without judgement.

These values go to the heart of every human being and are a catalyst for change. Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace." When someone feels that they are an important member of this world family, an emotional healing can start to take place. It is this component of valuing the human spirit that is critical to transformation.

Raksha Bandhan is a tradition honored throughout India, a celebration of the bond of protection between brother and sister. The most vulnerable segment of the population is excluded from this celebration: orphaned children. From various Brahma Kumaris branches across the land, members visit orphanages on this day and tie a "rakhi," a thread bracelet, around every child's

wrist. Mother Teresa said, “We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked, and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty.” The act of being included in this celebration is of great significance to these children. The thought that someone cares enough about them to make that promise of protection is the boost that their emotional immune system desperately needs.

Our open hearts helped to create warm hearths back in 2017, at the Oinofyta refugee camp in Greece. The effort was organized by Do Your Part, a grassroots non-profit organization that focuses on disaster relief. The Brahma Kumaris joined a group of about 20 individuals from different faith-based traditions, together dubbed the “sacred activists.” The Oinofyta camp today shelters 750 people; at the time, there were 600 refugees, of which almost 200 were children. Our physical efforts included cleaning the camp, feeding the refugees, and teaching the children about hygiene. However, the most significant things we did were to spend time with them, help them recover some semblance of normalcy in their lives, and instill in them the conviction that they matter, that everything they suffered at home and during the arduous, months-long journey of their escape wasn't for naught. In the words of Hillary Clinton, “This is the least we can offer people fleeing persecution and devastation.”

Homelessness is indicative of a deeper problem, requiring a holistic approach to solve. Those at the forefront of addressing this issue must look within. We must first examine our own motives and implicit biases. What needs to change inside me that could be blocking my actions from being more successful and empathetic? Which characteristics are needed to empower the downtrodden to overcome adversity?

What deficiency in the human spirit has created this issue? Values such as compassion, respect, and dignity enable people to fulfill their greatest potential. If we find these qualities lacking in others, we must first look within and see how strong they are in us. Then, we need to focus on strengthening them: it is vital that our every thought, word, and action originate from a morally strong and stable core. This habit is communicable and pervasive, positively influencing everyone around us.

Exploring the root of homelessness, we offer corrective recourse. Nonviolence, respect, courage, and dignity are at the heart of the solution. We must first nurture these within ourselves so that they may influence every decision and action. By effecting change within, each one of us can make a real difference. Creating a foundation of compassion, we address every possible cause of which homelessness is symptomatic, be it addiction, financial loss, or societal rejection of one's identity. When we treat each other with respect and kindness, we eliminate the space in which apathy and discrimination grow.

The Brahma Kumaris believe that world transformation begins with self-transformation. When we each change from within, a global paradigm shift can occur. This inside-out approach results in a global family that values life and empowers each person to nurture and capitalize on their strengths so that they may achieve their greatest potential.