

City must have a heart for our homeless neighbors

Letter to the Editor

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By John Hay, Jr., Indianapolis

Grappling with homelessness in our communities is gut-wrenching. The angst felt by many about the Davidson Street bridge ordeal isn't isolated. Homeless issues are complex and answers aren't one-dimensional, easy or final. As a longtime resident of Indianapolis, as well as having served as an urban pastor, executive director of the John H. Boner Community Center and Horizon House homeless day center, I've felt the full range of concerns.

I hope our city's decision makers take these three things to heart as they continue to address homelessness:

Housed or homeless, we are all neighbors. Labeling people without addresses as "the homeless," "homeless people" or worse is neither accurate nor helpful. A person without a permanent dwelling is still our neighbor. Neighbors without houses are usually taxpaying, law-abiding and desire to contribute to the common good. How we conceive of the other is decisive in where we go in our responses.

The city has not yet filled critical gaps in the Blueprint to End Homelessness. The most glaringly omission is an engagement center. The most vulnerable of our homeless neighbors do not stay in rescue missions because of chronic alcoholism or drug additions. Every year, many of these neighbors die unnecessarily on our streets. Homeless neighbors who are intoxicated, chronically addicted and without other recourse can find life-preserving shelter and professional help at an engagement center. City after city has saved lives taxpayer dollars in public safety, jail and emergency room expenditures by robustly supporting this. It's time for Indianapolis leadership to make an engagement center a local reality.

The majority of homeless neighbors in Indianapolis and across Central Indiana are not single adult males, but women and children. They all require our best responses because their future and the region's are woven together. Difficulties and complexity notwithstanding, our commitment to help our neighbors end their homelessness is part of what will make this the shining city that our forebears envisioned.