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It takes a village to find answers

Let's start with some fundamentals.

Living under a bridge, especially in winter in a Northern city, is not good.

Leaving trash strewn about and creating disturbances, wherever one happens to reside, is not being a neighbor.

Finally, resolving situations such as the one provoked by the Davidson Street encampment will not be a simple matter of talking it over or getting tough. Nor will handouts help.

Commendably, all the various parties, including city officials and philanthropists as well as the folks who are facing each other every day, have been trying to work together in the interests of both tolerance and tolerability. Regrettably but predictably, they've made limited progress.

Further progress requires, first of all, self-examination by the individual campers as to why they are not indoors and why, in those cases where they need help and could get it, they are not seeking it. Many are the causes of homelessness, and they must not be taken lightly; but where there is refusal to take advantage of shelter and services that are available, the grounds for that refusal -- for example, distaste for religious missions -- have to be weighed against the potentially lethal consequences of sleeping in the elements.

Beyond those personal decisions, the community and its government have a role. Timothy Joyce, executive director of the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention, says serious talks are under way toward establishment of an "engagement center" that would give people from the streets a bed for the night and present them the following day with an array of optional services, such as addiction treatment, job counseling and supportive housing.

Today, he notes, many unsheltered persons who are intoxicated or sick wind up in the Arrestee Processing Center or in the hospital via ambulance, costing taxpayers an estimated \$11 million a year and often yielding less benefit than an engagement center offers. Funding would come from private sources, and much of the cost would be made up in law enforcement and emergency services savings.

The engagement center would join an array of programs and facilities, from Horizon House to Progress House to Wheeler Mission, that comprise the long-term answer to the challenge playing out on Davidson Street and in other makeshift villages. The task will be with us a while; consider, after all, that the greatest growth in homelessness is not even in the street population, but rather among families with children. Getting it done will require more than meetings; but the meetings, of people and minds, must continue.