

Since 1990

Homeless men's signs don't tell entire story

On several occasions during the past few weeks people have appeared in Provo and Orem brandishing signs that say "Homeless — will work for food." Typically they have deployed themselves around the University Mall and other shopping centers.

My curiosity was provoked by the fact that the signs were identical to some that had appeared on many Salt Lake streets almost exactly one year ago.

On two separate occasions last week I spoke with a homeless man who was stationed in front of K mart in Orem. He had also been seen in front of ZCMI in Orem and Price Savers in Provo. In response to my inquiries he said that he had eaten and had a place to stay.

The man informed me that he receives an occasional offer, but he described what he does as "advertising" — "Making people aware that there are homeless people everywhere in America." Such "advertising" isn't very profitable, unless it is intended to be a form of "consciousness raising" — in this case an effort to cultivate guilt.

There is an awareness of the problems of the homeless in Utah County, and remedial mechanisms are in place. According to Gwen Vance of Community Action, efforts have been made to contact the sign-carrying homeless people in Provo/Orem. So far none has been interested in the resources available for short-term help.

Such short-term help is designed to satisfy basic physical needs and provide the basis for immediate self-reliance. Food, clothing and vouchers for emergency shelter are available from Community Action and the Shelter Coalition. Job



Will Grigg

FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUMENT

A representative of HOPE, a homeless activism group in Salt Lake, insists that "A lot of people stay outside because they don't like the way shelters are run." Some are deterred by a stigma attached to receiving charity. But it is curious to believe that it is more humiliating to receive confidential assistance than it is to display oneself in public with a sign advertising his misfortune.

Furthermore, it is peculiar that people seeking work would congregate around shopping centers. "Help Wanted" signs have blossomed from dozens of local restaurants; Dave Carlson of the Provo Housing Authority points out that "There are minimum wage jobs out there, but many people don't choose to take advantage."

Those who are smitten by adversity have a claim upon our sympathy and material generosity. However, that claim is proportionate to the initiative exercised in taking advantage of the help that is offered.

The greatest seduction of statism is the idea that life can be made "idiot-proof" — that is, that one can be protected from oneself, from every conceivable combination of misfortune and misjudgment. To be poor or otherwise unfortunate is certainly no sin; to compound such hardship by making bad choices is, up to a point, forgivable. But to refuse offers of help in such circumstances makes no sense.

It is not unreasonable to suspect that the inspiration behind such "advertising" is not a desire to solve a problem, but rather to husband "correct attitudes." There is also something odd about how the signs have appeared in Salt Lake and Utah County about one year apart, just as the Legislature was finishing business.

Such suspicions do not relieve us of our obligation to the unfortunate. Let us help where we can, but let us not succumb to unproductive guilt.

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