

Please don't fine my homeless neighbors

I live in a small city outside of Baltimore called Aberdeen. It's a modest town, born of the canning industry and railroad, where most people work hard to live peaceful lives in little neighborhoods. Unfortunately, just under two hundred of our neighbors are unable to afford homes for a variety of reasons, ranging from addiction to mental illness to financial hardship and everything in between. Some of these Aberdonians live in tent villages in a few spots around the area; the most notable of which is a transient community located along the railroad tracks in the woods next to our library and fire station.

Recently, the Aberdeen Police Department has decided to issue a \$50/day fine to anyone staying in a tent in these high-traffic areas for more than 24 hours. It's created a controversy in the city of Aberdeen and beyond.

As a local and a Christian, I am not bothered by the tent villages. As a matter of fact, we were driving past one the other day and Collin said, "I want to start a company one day where we sponsor homeless people and build them their dream houses." At the age of seven, my son already sees the need for compassion for the homeless. I found it a testament to the Christian values my husband, myself, and St. Joan of Arc School are teaching him. But, it will be many years before he can start this company (and he will!), so what do we do in the interim?

Fining the homeless is not an option. They need places to sleep and knowledge of where those places are. (Particularly because good sleep reduces the severity of many mental health problems.) Their basic human needs are not being met, so why would the fine prohibit them from mere survival? And if there aren't enough places for them to sleep, are tents in the woods really the worst possible option? Where else would they go? Would they be bounced around to another town and back? What are the realistic long-term solutions available?

We could also start treating the cause. It's no secret that addiction and mental health are two overwhelming problems that our nation faces, particularly our

homeless populations. In Harford County alone, heroin use is an epidemic. Rather than tracking car accident deaths on their billboards, the Harford County Sheriff's Office now posts overdose deaths. Some people argue that the root of addiction is mental illness, which alone costs America \$317 billion dollars a year. It's a seemingly impossible puzzle to solve, but that doesn't mean we ever give up. We can educate not only our youth, but adults, about drugs, mental illness, and homelessness, as well. We can offer proven rehabilitation and therapy programs (there are many in downtown Aberdeen). We can build better group homes, halfway houses, and shelters. And we can pray.

Sadly, homelessness is a problem that has existed as long as humanity and it's not likely to go away. We may never have enough resources to eradicate homelessness in Aberdeen, but, a \$50/day fine is not the answer. Where are the homeless supposed to come up with money if they have no income? Where will the money collected from the fines go? Where will the homeless people sleep if they can't camp in the woods?

When logic and emotions intersect, confusion begins. But, as Christians, we are called to listen to our conscience. I don't know what the answer is here, but I do know that we must treat all of these human beings with dignity, with compassion, and with optimism. May God bless all of their souls.