

The New Faces of Homelessness

DuWayne Sipper, Executive Director-The path

Just like everyone else, when I started The Path, I had preconceived ideas of homelessness.

Without realizing what had happened, I was trained by our current TV programs. I saw in my mind pictures of people in the cities sleeping in cardboard boxes, pushing shopping carts and standing in soup lines for a daily meal. Don't get me wrong, are people hungry when they check in? Sure, but they are not starving to death as you might see in a third world country. It still breaks your heart to hear that someone is hungry.

The harder part to get your mind around is that almost all are suffering malnutrition from a lack of funds and buying cheap food.

I lived in the shelter for the first four years The Path was open and I answered the intake calls. In a rural area, for several reasons, it was much better for the clients to call in first to make sure they understood the rules and that we had space. The last thing we wanted was for our people to spend their last resources to get to us and find out the shelter was full. So, it did not take long to see how far off my perception was in a rural county and find out what Citrus County needed. Sure, we received some of the transient population but to this day we found out and proved that the mass of any homeless population is your current people who find themselves in stress.

In other words, every county in America has homeless. The question is: how are we servicing them? 90% to this day are what I term "displaced," due to domestic violence, crime, jail, prison, alcohol, drugs, eviction, loss of jobs and more. All of these spell homelessness for us.

And from the beginning, we have recognized what comes with this type of check in at The Path: daily paperwork, birth certificates, probation, court, family visits, parenting courses, budgeting, job coaching, group counseling and one on one counseling. Our case management now offers what we call "full program". When my wife and I are giving tours, the phrase we often hear is "I had no idea!". Not only does the person not know what homelessness looked like, they had no idea of the services being offered to change the circumstances right here in our backyard.

I encourage everyone to come and take a tour and see. I can almost guarantee you that it is not what was preconceived.

The Path is a local 501-c-3 in operation for over a decade as a shelter and life-skills program for men and women to recover and become self-reliant. To learn more, contact 352-527-6500 x5 or visit their website at www.PathOfCitrus.org.

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