



Fight Crime, Addiction with Housing

By Tom Carr, Seattle City Attorney

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I thought about Herman James all day. I prosecuted him back in September of last year in the Seattle Municipal Community Court. He was charged with theft, agreed to plead guilty and entered into this special court program. My records and the court's records say that I was there; yet, I cannot remember his face among the many street alcoholics I have seen over the past two years.

A few weeks ago, I received a DVD of a Seattle Channel program about the community court. It lay among the papers on my desk for a week or so until late one night, I popped it into the DVD drive on my laptop.

That's when I met Herman James. He spoke eloquently about his life as an alcoholic and about the help he had received. He was living at 1811 Eastlake, a controversial program that provides housing for long-term alcoholics without requiring abstinence or sobriety.

Although he was permitted to drink in his apartment, he, like many of the residents there, had chosen to be sober. He was happy in his new apartment and excited about his new sobriety. Sober, life just seemed easier for him. He talked about the good jobs that he had lost to alcohol and his hope to make a permanent change in his life. He wanted to help others.

James died Jan. 15. Even though his life was on track, his body could not recover from the ravages of 30 years of hard drinking and life on the street. James changed because he got a little bit of help and a warm place to lay his head. He died because he did not change soon enough.

In my time as city attorney, I have seen hundreds of people just like Herman James. I am not a social worker. I see these individuals because they have committed crimes and it's my job to hold them accountable. We do so because a civilized society has rules and consequences when those rules are broken. We also hope that punishment, with progressively lengthening sentences, will stop the illegal behavior.

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Yet, for some defendants, we put them in jail and they seem to reoffend before their jail bed is cold. We try to get them help to straighten out their lives, but it rarely makes a difference to someone living on the street.

Based on my experience, I have become convinced that one of the most important public-safety needs for our community is affordable housing. I believe that to have a chance at all, a person must be in a stable environment that only real housing can provide. It stands to reason and my ex-perience confirms that if you treat the addiction, you reduce the attendant criminal behavior.

From where I sit, the "housing first" model is an anti-crime program. Let's get people off the street first and then deal with their addictions. It's not easy to beat any addiction. I can only imagine what it must be like to beat alcoholism or drug addiction. It must be nearly impossible to do for a person living on the street with alcohol and drugs so readily available.

Yet, when we get a person housed, good things happen. This seems to be the case with 1811 Eastlake. Before it opened, the 75 residents of this housing program were regular visitors to our court and jail. Since the project opened, we hardly see them at all.

Being in court and meeting the defendants who commit what we refer to as quality-of-life crimes is a transforming experience. It's so easy to demonize those whom you do not know. They seem so much more human when one hears their stories. They are criminals, but they are also people first and when treated as such can thrive.

I do not recall Herman James as the street alcoholic whom I prosecuted. I will remember him, however, as a good soul who died with dignity among people who cared, because he got help through the Seattle Municipal Community Court and 1811 Eastlake. He died sober, without the crutch of alcohol, with a roof over his head.

It's not enough, but it's a start.



Tom Carr is the Seattle city attorney and is involved with the King County-wide Committee to End Homelessness.