

#### 4. Taking Notice

People who experience homelessness are often lumped together as “the homeless.” Lumping them does not take into account their very different situations or multiple reasons for being homeless. Some among them, however, are considered chronically homeless, especially when they live completely unsheltered or do not go to any type of emergency shelter, even in the harshest weather conditions, such as the Michigan winter of 2013.

Those termed chronically homeless often have some combination of mental or physical disabilities and substance abuse problems. They also have little or no income and dislike living in emergency shelters or similar institutions because of the rigid environment. It can also be difficult to fit the chronically homeless into the bureaucratic institutions intended to meet housing needs: most such programs require at least a modest rental payment, for which many homeless people do not have the means available. Thus, they often “live rough,” either in tents or other outside areas such as doorways and the space under bridges. But this requires a location where a tent or sleeproll can be maintained, and one which is near services and jobs or other income. Sleeping in these areas can create conflicts with property law.

Camp Take Notice (CTN) was a tent community with several dozen residents set up on Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) land in Ann Arbor. It was organized with rules to promote safe and healthy conditions, and the group stayed at that site for a couple of years. MDOT officials finally served notice to vacate in June 2012.

After the notice to vacate its original site, CTN residents and their advocates partnered with a nonprofit group called M.I.S.S.I.O.N. This collaborative effort allowed the group to receive donations and contributions. In November 2013, the group was able to buy a house and a 3.5 acre property on Stone School Road at the south edge of Ann Arbor. They had hoped to allow tents to be pitched and to support a self-governed, drug-and-alcohol-free living community there. In addition, there has been some talk of installing “tiny houses,” following other communities (such as Portland, Oregon) that have committed public land and some funds to their chronically homeless residents.

The tent community proposal requires approval by the Ann Arbor City Council. Local elected officials and city residents have been discussing several unresolved issues the plan presents — from zoning laws and their application to residential neighborhoods, to the requisite infrastructure (water, sewer, lights and heat) for habitable, safe and sanitary housing. Some council members have stressed that the rule of law, including a

variety of city ordinances and respect for public and private property, must be enforced. The proposal also raises questions about the responsibilities of the city in ensuring a safe and adequately structured community in this context, as well as any liability the city might incur. Likewise, financial questions have been raised about the city's role in such a project, suggesting that the city does not have a source of funds to create such a micro-community and pointing out that the targeted money is already directed at replacing aging public housing.

The fact is that shelter for all in the city remains an aspiration. The winter of 2014 is fast approaching.

**Study Questions:**

1. Who has responsibility for the homeless? How far do these responsibilities extend?
2. Given that the Council has limited funds, is it ethical for it to divert money that had previously been earmarked for another purpose towards CTN's project?
3. What are the principal ethical issues concerning the site selection process for such projects? Should these be relevant to the Council's decision?