Solving Homelessness- Taking the First Step toward a Second Chance

2020 has presented all sorts of challenges due to the pandemic. The loss of income and wealth creates significant uncertainty and anxiety, coupled with fears and concerns over our family and friends' individual health and welfare. Parents struggle with balancing childcare and maintaining secure employment. Many children are in despair, trying to keep up with school while mastering a whole new way of learning. These insecurities are new for many of us. Yet, for 500,000 men, women, and families experiencing homelessness in America, these same thoughts and struggles are present every minute of every day.

Many mission-focused non-profits in Atlanta employ a "housing first" approach to solving homelessness, I am proud to serve as Chairman of First Step Staffing, a non-profit organization that applies an innovative “income first” solution to the homelessness problem. Each day, First Step Staffing puts hundreds of Atlanta's most vulnerable population to work and on a stable path out of homelessness.

In 2020, even amidst a global pandemic that has proven to hit vulnerable populations the hardest, First Step Staffing offices in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Nashville, and Orlando put more than 3,000 homeless men and women to work. Combined, they earned more than $38.5 million in wages. It is important to keep in mind that a job is so much more than income for individuals at risk of experiencing or coming out of homelessness. It is dignity, a source of socialization, and empowerment. It is the first step toward a new life path.

First Step Staffing is just one of many organizations that help those facing homelessness and extreme poverty. Together with Hope Atlanta, Westside Works, The Westside Future Fund, the Atlanta Mission, Partners for Home, COR, Goodwill Industries, and Salvation Army, among others, we are implementing innovative solutions to tackle one of the most pervasive social injustices facing our community.

Lack of appropriate housing, income, healthcare, mental health, and substance abuse challenges are connected to chronic homelessness. The solution to the homelessness problem is complicated and requires some source of sustainable income. Housing and income are critically linked. Stable housing makes it possible for people to obtain and retain employment; employment makes it possible for people to sustain housing.

Approximately 11% of the adult homeless population are veterans. Formerly incarcerated people are nearly ten times more likely to be homeless than the general population, and African Americans represent 13% of the U.S. population, but 40% of all people experiencing homelessness. These homeless populations face barriers to employment, including limited or no past work experience or marketable job skills, chronic health problems, and lack of transportation access.
According to the Bloomberg City Lab, mass incarceration created generations of people with criminal records who have been locked out of job and housing markets, leading many from prison to homelessness.

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), a coalition of 19 federal agencies responsible for addressing homelessness recently released a report that concluded, "Employment provides people experiencing homelessness with income to afford housing and improves recovery outcomes for individuals with a mental or substance use disorders (SUDs), or both. Long-term sustainable solutions need to provide a pathway out of dependency on government assistance so that the cycle of homelessness and poverty can be broken."

Last week USICH recognized First Step Staffing as one of seven organizations in the U.S. that have gone the “Extra Mile,” by using data, research, and the consumer to reframe the approach to ending the human tragedy of homelessness.

Preliminary results of a recent study funded by the Foundation for Social Change highlight the importance of meaningful financial support as a core part of the solution to homelessness. Initial findings showed that homeless individuals with regular access to finances could find stable housing faster than those without.

Today, more than 10,000 individuals are experiencing homelessness in Georgia, with one-third of these men and women located in the City of Atlanta. Each evening 3,200 of our fellow citizens are trying to find a place to sleep. They huddle in a crowded shelter, sleep in abandoned buildings, and pitch tents under an overpass.

Amid the season of thanks and giving, it is a good time to consider the challenges facing and the needs of the most vulnerable populations in our community. Moreover, as we count our blessings and give thanks for our families, homes, and financial stability, there is no better time than now to reach out and offer a hand to a neighbor in need.

*Mick Cochran is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of First Step Staffing Inc. and a partner with Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP.*