

An Association Perspective on **Rescue Missions and HUD-Driven Approaches to Housing**



Gospel rescue missions have been providing help and hope for homeless individuals and families in North America since the 1870s. Their leaders have faithfully obeyed what they believed to be a God-given mandate: caring for the displaced, disinherited, and abandoned.

Throughout their history, rescue missions have been non-discriminating in their efforts to sustain and transform lives, embracing each person who cried out for help in the midst of his or her difficult circumstances or indulgent behaviors. Missions have compassionately served:

- Immigrants from every shore who, for numerous reasons, were never able to realize the American dream.
- Veterans of wars and skirmishes who found readjustment elusive and were spiraling downward into disillusion and depression.
- Investors and those depending on their decisions who, in depressions or recessions, lost possessions, jobs, and dignity.
- Runaways from asylums and domestic violence who no longer had a sense of reality or the ability to trust.
- Alcoholics and addicts who abused and used to the point of financial ruin and personal destruction.

And the list goes on.

From the time rescue missions emerged on the scene until now, both Republican and Democratic administrations have taken turns developing and delivering solutions for social woes. All the while, rescue missions have been carrying on crucial ministry, born of

deep conviction. Countless volumes have been written about the lives changed because of rescue missions. History has shown that rescue missions have comfortably collaborated with government-run and government-endorsed programs that did not conflict with their core values and practices.

Today, some rescue missions and their local governments enjoy a healthy synergy in their efforts to get our neediest citizens off the streets and back on their feet. But unfortunately, in some U.S. cities, the sentiment toward rescue missions—fueled by federal influence and funding—has moved from appreciation to tolerance. In certain places, it is leaning toward contempt.

Yet an increasingly diverse country needs a multipronged approach to alleviating homelessness—and one of those prongs has been, and must continue to be, the faith-based community.

The Association of Gospel Rescue Missions (AGRM) is presenting the following perspective to help decision-makers and influencers outside the rescue mission community better understand these vital organizations. AGRM desires to clearly communicate that rescue missions are not at odds with the government's end goal regarding homelessness.

For AGRM members, this perspective seeks to clarify what the association believes is the overwhelming member-held consensus on HUD-driven approaches to housing and closely related issues. These statements also underscore where rescue missions' intentions, in general, may have been misconstrued or misinterpreted in the past, and how some missions will possibly need to reposition themselves going forward.

1. ABOUT HOMELESSNESS

- A. We believe that to have individuals or families living on the streets and wandering their cities is a travesty, and something that figuratively breaks the heart of God.
- B. We believe many factors contribute to homelessness, including mental illness, various addictions, family disintegration, broken relationships, and a growing disregard of moral absolutes—as well as unemployment and a lack of affordable housing.
- C. We believe homelessness, broadly defined, is not decreasing as rapidly as some official reports declare or infer, and, in fact, is increasing in many U.S. cities.
- D. We believe homelessness can be effectively reduced one individual and one family at a time.
- E. We believe our communities must act quicker, more comprehensively, and more collaboratively to shorten and lessen crisis situations, and to restore individuals and families to wholeness and self-sufficiency.
- F. We believe homelessness-prevention education must be provided in towns and cities everywhere if we as a society are ever to bring an end to this problem.

2. ABOUT HOUSING

- A. We believe that shelter, broadly defined, is a basic human need that must be met.
- B. We believe that shelter, narrowly defined, is a temporary solution for those in crises or transition, and every effort should be made to move individuals and families toward permanent housing as soon as circumstances allow.
- C. We believe that lodging people while

they are in life-transformation programs is not crisis or transitional sheltering, nor is it permanent housing; rather, it is a temporary link between the two.

- D. We believe sheltering and housing, both narrowly defined, are two very different things, and that using these words interchangeably has caused confusion in many of the circles surrounding rescue missions.
- E. We believe establishing innovative, collaborative partnerships in every city can ultimately create safe, affordable housing options that every individual and family can access.
- F. We believe all of society benefits when homeless adults become self-sustaining taxpayers and can relinquish their need for tax-dollar-funded support services.
- G. We believe that instilling a sense of community (i.e., belonging to a place and a local populace) is a critical component for longstanding success in housing.

3. ABOUT CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO HOMELESSNESS

- A. We believe a lack of basic education and life skills keep numerous individuals from even attempting to enter the job market.
- B. We believe the low wages that many entry-level, service-industry positions offer make housing unaffordable and, for many, are a disincentive to obtain or maintain a job.
- C. We believe some people are trapped in poverty through overdependence on government subsidies, and, without active intervention that includes incentives and instruction, can languish there indefinitely.



4. ABOUT THE U.S. GOVERNMENT'S CURRENT RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS

- A. We believe Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing are viable and, in some cases, the best solutions for certain segments of the homeless population.
- B. We believe that because homelessness is a multi-faceted problem that requires a multi-faceted solution, Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing are not sufficient in and of themselves to end homelessness.
- C. We believe decisions regarding the administration of government funding drive the agenda for services for the homeless in many local continuums of care, often without regard for best practices and customized solutions.
- D. We believe the most effective plan for reducing homelessness must address the causes of homelessness and not simply treat the symptoms.
- E. We believe a strong sense of community connection and intensive support can decrease unnecessary deaths resulting from the isolation, alienation, and unchecked drug and alcohol usage that can happen in Harm Reduction models.
- F. We believe a federal government with an Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships must truly and fully be open to partnerships with the Christian community.

5. ABOUT THE TRADITIONALLY HELD POSITIONS AND PRACTICES OF RESCUE MISSIONS

- A. We believe that, when it comes to HUD-driven approaches to housing,

many rescue missions have been put off by what is perceived to be a one-way-only approach to end homelessness and have thus taken a position of avoidance rather than investigation, engagement, and collaboration.

- B. We believe legitimate concerns regarding the stipulations and possible intervention that come with accepting government funding has caused some rescue missions to detach from most or all government connections, cutting off important communications and leading to a lack of mutual understanding.
- C. We believe many view rescue missions as having a huge “front door” but a small “back door,” meaning numerous people go in, but few people outside each individual rescue mission know how and when they leave or what happens to them.
- D. We believe that, regarding Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing, rescue missions, in general, have focused on and communicated more about the problems than the benefits, leading decision-makers and participants in continuums of care to view a local rescue mission as more of an adversary than an ally.
- E. We believe rescue missions have not readily had a place at the table in collaborative efforts to alleviate homelessness for two reasons: 1) Some in government do not accurately understand what rescue missions do, and 2) many in the public sector are reluctant to include faith-based organizations in their joint efforts because of a) misnomers about the separation of church and state and b) the popular culture’s increasing derision toward anything Christian.

6. ABOUT RESCUE MISSIONS' NEED TO REPOSITION THEMSELVES FOR THE FUTURE

- A. We believe every rescue mission should have some type of long-term housing strategy, whether it is wholly its own, a collaborative effort, a referral service, or a combination of the above.
- B. We believe every rescue mission should be proactively involved in government relations on both the local and national levels.
- C. We believe collecting, analyzing, and presenting relevant data about outcomes are critical for demonstrating the impact of programs and services rescue missions offer.
- D. We believe every rescue mission should speak out loudly against homelessness in its own community and clearly explain the harmful results of homelessness in society.
- E. We believe that more rescue missions should respond to the needs of those living in government-provided houses, offering adequate non-residential support services such as addiction recovery, physical and mental health

services, spiritual care, and long-term life-skills training that emphasizes eventual independence from government subsidy.

- F. We believe rescue missions need to tell more success stories about ending homelessness for individuals or families, in addition to success stories that involve addiction recovery.

7. ABOUT WHAT IS CORE TO RESCUE MISSIONS

- A. We believe many individuals and families are homeless today because of spiritual and relational poverty, which are matters that lie outside of the government's scope and authority.
- B. We believe success stories abound in every sector and on every front in the war on homelessness; notwithstanding, we hold that there is divine power in the gospel of Jesus to eternally redeem and permanently restore a life gone terribly off course.
- C. We believe rescue missions should, regardless of the popular culture and without defense or disguise, be passionately and distinctly Christian in their makeup and approach to ending homelessness.

Discussed and compiled by an AGRM-appointed task force, May 13, 2014; vetted by the AGRM Board of Directors, May 26 – 28, 2014.

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