

# BILL TOWNSEND

*Our New Voice in Congress*

P O L I C Y O V E R V I E W

## HOMELESSNESS

*Southern Nevada has one of the highest per capita rates of homelessness in the nation.  
25,000 homeless create a three-quarter of a billion dollar drain on our resources.  
There are solutions.*

Nevada has about 26,000 homeless people, with 25,000 of those in Southern Nevada. The number of unsheltered homeless people in Nevada is about 8,000. These are people on streets, in parks or vehicles. They are the people that tourists call “vagrants” and business owners call “nuisances”.

Studies show the cost of leaving a homeless person on the streets is \$30,000 while the cost of housing them is just \$10,000. Addressing this crisis is both the moral and fiscally responsible thing to do.

There is much we can do to alleviate their problems and improve Nevada. Their plight reflects on us as a state, and in a state with such a large tourism industry, it behooves us to work on finding solutions to chronic homelessness.

**Southern Nevada ranks among the nation’s highest in homeless population. In 2017, Las Vegas’ population ranked 28th in America, yet our homeless population ranked 8th,** behind San Francisco and ahead of Boston and Philadelphia. Clark County ranks fifth among large metropolitan areas with the highest rates of unsheltered homeless and only the California cities Fresno, Los Angeles, San Jose and Oakland had higher rates.

Economists say the rule of thumb for personal housing costs is that they should be no more than 30 percent of your income. Compare the average per-capita income in a given region with the average per-capita housing cost. The more it exceeds 30 percent, the more homeless people you will have. This is why places with high costs of living, specifically cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco have severe homeless problems, but why does Nevada where

housing is affordable compare to other cities of similar size or larger? What draws the homeless to Nevada? The answers are varied and complex. Tourism. Fair weather. Ease of obtaining alcohol and drugs. Places to hang out and shelter such as parks, underground tunnels, casinos, and 24-hour restaurants. An influx from California which has 25% of the nation’s homeless, or about 135,000 people.

Many times young people move to Nevada to start their lives and find the service industry is low paying and hours long. They end up without enough money to keep their apartment, then live in their car, and when they can’t pay their loan, they end up on the streets. All of these steps contribute to the homeless problem in our state. The same happens with workers in construction who are often employed or not based on our local economy.

### How do we address homelessness?

First, we have to admit that we are not doing enough to solve the structural causes of homelessness—lack of affordable housing, wage stagnation, the ever-increasing wealth gap, racism, and inadequate health and social services—especially mental health care—for people living in poverty.

Our federal government has led the way in fighting homeless with states and local communities trying to pick up the slack. Over the past 50 years, billions of dollars have been spent to combat homelessness with little to show. As soon as one person gets housed, another ends up homeless.

The approach we need to take involves admitting that we’ve been wrong and focusing on four areas that, if managed correctly, should dramatically cut homelessness and help those

less fortunate find stable employment.

Second, we have to understand that, like other hot topic issues such as gun control and 2nd Amendment rights, healthcare, education, immigration, and crime, there is no single answer. It is a complex mix of actions that must be taken to solve the problem once and for all.

### **Tactics to solve the homelessness issue:**

#### **1. Housing**

Homelessness is defined by lack of housing; therefore housing is the essential foundation to ending homelessness. Simple enough, right?

Housing is safety and security. Housing provides a stable base from which people can get and keep a job, address mental illness and substance abuse, take care of their health and nutrition, and find purpose in their lives.

We cannot address housing person by person, family by family. It must be scaled. In the 1980s, politicians slashed investment in affordable housing. As an example, **in 1970, there were 300,000 more affordable units than low-income renters** (6.5 million units for 6.2 million renters). By 1985, demand had grown sharply, with 8.9 million low-income renter households. Unfortunately, affordable housing didn't increase to cover those people; instead, it decreased down to only 5.6 million affordable housing units by the mid-80s—a gap of 3.3 million between units available and those who desperately needed them. America has never recovered from these policy decisions.

**To end homelessness, we cannot take current resources and reallocate them.** This is a common strategy in Washington, DC, but the negative side is inevitably pits one group against another (singles vs. families vs. seniors vs. veterans). This approach also causes conflict between services for housing and shelter for housing.

We must create a national commitment—public and private sectors—to ensure affordable housing for all. This can be accomplished by looking at new building methods ranging from construction of cinder block and concrete walled homes and apartments to converting abandoned buildings to utilizing new housing methods such as reclaimed shipping containers to create low cost shelter. This is the fundamental starting place of any policy.

#### **2. Services**

Housing is essential, but it is not sufficient. Housing alone, without attention to physical health, behavioral health, employment, education, and other community support, will continue to result in instability and recurrent homelessness for many people. Services provide stability and prevent future

homelessness. Before you poo-poo a call for services, please realize we all need services. Health care is a service. Childcare is a service. Public transportation is a service. Substance abuse, case management, and employment services are also services critical to ending homelessness.

Housing alone cannot address the myriad complex challenges facing so many people living in poverty and experiencing homelessness. We must find a way to ensure that services are available, accessible, and affordable across the lifespan. Without such comprehensive support mechanisms in place, how can we expect housing alone to end homelessness in a way that is real, deep, and sustainable? We can't. We must make structural changes to how we address services for the homeless.

#### **3. Social Connectedness**

Many homeless who are moved into government housing find their lack of connection to the community leads to loneliness, depression, relapse, or worse, suicide. In many cities the homeless are stigmatized by those who believe they should “*just get a job*”, and many should, but without a home in which to safely sleep and shower, they can't find employment.

America should study nations that have focused on strategies for social inclusion—countries like, Canada, Scotland, Denmark, Singapore and Japan—that work actively to destigmatize mental illness, substance use disorders, homelessness, and poverty. Greater Tokyo's total population is over 36 million yet their number of homeless amounts to only about 700 people. Singapore's homeless problem is virtually non-existent. These countries actively build affordable homes that homeless can purchase over time, giving them an established place to reside and work—through social services programs—to reestablish themselves and become productive members of the community.

Another option is to work with technology firms and corporations that are upgrading their computer systems to donate those machines to provide low-cost Internet connected devices so online classes (Word, Excel, etc.) can be offered and newly resettled citizens can use the Internet to connect with others.

#### **4. Prevention**

Homelessness prevention means more than just intervening at eviction court and providing a short term housing subsidy to stabilize a family who is about to be thrown out of their home. While that is an important tactic, prevention requires we look across multiple systems—housing, healthcare, homelessness, education, child welfare, criminal justice, employment, and others—to identify pathways into home-

lessness, then design solutions that catch people before they fall. That is hard work. We must do it. We must understand how to stem the flow of people into homelessness. If we do not, we cannot expect to end homelessness.

## **5. Action**

We know what works. We can refer to what has worked in other countries as well as what has worked in America. Still, after decades of research we never seem to generate the political will to fund such programs at levels necessary to meet the need. As a nation, we continue to not do enough for the hundreds of thousands of individuals, families, and youth still experiencing homelessness each night in America.

**We have 26,000 homeless in our state, most situated in Clark County, creating one of the most dense homeless populations in America.** We also spend among the lowest in the nation in terms of percentage of welfare, health services, housing, and community development.

As your voice in Congress, I will introduce legislation to create a \$200 million pilot project to dramatically change our approach to homelessness through the initiative outlined above. If it works in Nevada, it can be deployed nationwide. If successful, and I believe it will be, we can get people off the streets and into homes and jobs, thus providing them the opportunity to restart their lives to become valued people in our communities. And that makes Nevada a better place for all.



**Bill Townsend is a candidate for United States House of Representatives in Nevada's 4th Congressional District.**

*What else can we do to improve the lives of the homeless?*

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*To learn more about Bill Townsend's policies and our*

*"12 Big Ideas for Nevada," please visit*

**www.TownsendForNevada.com**