Opinion: Homelessness isn’t one-size-fits-all

By Quinn French

The homelessness issue in America can feel like an overwhelming and abstract problem. As such, it’s understandable that politicians talk about it in broad terms and propose broad policies that treat all types of homelessness as the same.

But as someone who was homeless until quite recently and is committed to finding solutions, I believe the key is to address homelessness with incremental policy initiatives, targeting specific groups. And I think we should start with homeless young people, who have immense potential to change their lives with assistance.

I was 18 and living with both my parents in Santa Monica in 2008 when the economic downturn came. My dad, a salesman in the commodities industry – primarily via telemarketing – and the sole breadwinner, was no longer able to maintain his level of income. My mother, who has Huntington’s disease, was deteriorating at a progressive rate and couldn’t take care of herself. We fell behind on our rent, and I couldn’t continue at Santa Monica College, where I had been enrolled for a semester. Finally, we were evicted and my mother went into a nursing home, partially funded and cared for by her brother. Dad and I stayed in a Culver City motel for about a month. Then we moved into his car, a compact Geo Metro.

That began a six-year journey for me. At first, my dad made a go of it in the car, finding secluded spots to park and moving around from night to night to avoid the notice of the police. My dad was trying to get work, and I was spending a lot of time at the public library reading.

I learned about the Ocean Park Community Center (OPCC) shelters and wanted to access their services, but my dad, too proud to accept a handout, refused. So we split up; I moved into a shelter, he stayed in the car. We lived separately from then on, but stayed in touch and continued to support each other.

I desperately wanted to get work and develop skills. I started with telemarketing, trying to emulate my father, but I couldn't make any real money at it. I worked retail at Sears in Santa Monica, but that was a dead end. Over time, I couldn't make enough money to meet the savings goals that the OPCC shelter set for me. I left their program.

Eventually I decided Santa Monica was the problem, with a cost of living that's too expensive for someone trying to pull himself out of homelessness. So I moved east into downtown Los Angeles, looking for work everywhere and moving between shelters, including PATH (People Assisting the Homeless) and the Weingart Center. When my situation grew particularly bad, I even slept on the streets. The transportation system often defeated me; I'd miss a bus back from a job and miss the inflexible curfew at PATH, and spend the night visiting coffee shops, diners, and other 24-hour places.

One day in 2014, desperate for a place, I called L.A. County's 211 phone line for housing services and learned about Jovenes, a program serving young homeless young men, ages 18 to 24. I was 24, nearly too old. But after a wait, I got in, and it made a difference.

Jovenes' focus on a specific subset of the homeless population made its services much more effective. It was designed for people like me – there was greater flexibility with regards to curfew and such. If you were running late because of an interview or a class, you could call your case manager and explain the situation. And because my fellow Jovenes clients were around my age, it was easier to compare notes and make

connections than in a typical shelter.

At Jovenes, I found it easier to make progress. When I got into the program, I had just finished a six-month gig at the L.A. Food Bank. Jovenes helped me find warehouse positions that allowed me to save enough to put down first and last months' rent for an apartment owned by the organization. I now pay rent on $500-a-month unit in the South Park neighborhood near downtown. (Thanks to an additionally subsidy program, I'm slowly building up to the full amount over 12 months.)

I also have found time to go back to school at Santa Monica College. It's a hike, but Santa Monica has a strong transfer rate; in two years, I expect to have an associate's degree, and then transfer to USC (just a mile away from my house).

I don't want to make the Jovenes program seem perfect. It isn't. And I know it doesn't work for everyone. Still, I think they have very innovative and effective systems in place, designed for a specific demographic. I understand why the other shelters I stayed at had certain regulations and rules. Parents with minor children, recovering drug addicts, disabled veterans and the mentally ill all have different needs. And so do homeless youth. The biggest mistake that's being made in the homelessness services field is trying to use a one-size-fits-all approach.

I'm still working to improve my life and those of my peers. In particular, I'm motivated to address and combat the issue of youth homelessness. One part of this was serving as a counter in the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA)'s Homeless Count. The goal is to improve how we figure out the size of the homeless population. One focus has been to get out in the field and do more counting of homeless youth (who might be living on the streets or in a car, as I once did). The counts are also reaching into new regions that were missed before; I was part of the first youth count in East Los Angeles.

I think there’s real potential for homeless young people to help each other – to learn from our mistakes and to bond over our successes. A young person can go from an orphan or homeless or in a gang to being a fully formed successful adult – in the space of two or three or five years. I’m fortunate to be one of those who have changed.

Quinn French is a student at Santa Monica College who has worked on youth homelessness issues with Jovenes, Inc., the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), and Young Invincibles. He lives in Los Angeles.

Letter: SLT marijuana ordinance working

To the community,

Last week a neighbor filed a complaint against me with the city of South Lake Tahoe for marijuana odor and an illegal grow op. Standard procedure for responding to such a complaint is a full scale home invasion by SLEDNET, destruction of all plants, shut off of electricity and removal of the electric meter.



Steve Kubby

Standard procedure here in South Lake Tahoe, also mandates that the cops first contact the SLT Building Dept to see if I have a permit, which I do. I am one of only 12 SLT resident who actually has gone through the considerable expense of setting up a legal garden in my garage.

Instead of a home invasion with heavily armed cops, I was visited by a polite man who simply wanted to see my garden and to see what we could do about the odor. Upon inspection I was told there was no odor being emitted and that I was not in violation.

All that odor was from me toking up in my own back yard and that is still 100 percent legal.

I'm still toking, my garden is thriving and life is good.

Steve Kubby, South Lake Tahoe

Opinion: Time to stop subsidizing religion

By David Niose, Washington Post

The arguments for taxing churches have been around for many years, but there is reason to believe that America's changing religious demographics will soon give them more traction. As more Americans abandon organized religion, many of the newly secular are unsympathetic to subsidizing religion via the tax code.

Recent polling shows that almost one in four Americans, and more than one-third of those aged 18 to 33, now claim no religious affiliation. Back when virtually everyone subscribed

to a religious faith (the unaffiliated number polled in the single digits for most of the 20th century) an across-the-board tax break for all religions was arguably fair – or at least inoffensive. But times have changed, and so have attitudes about the extraordinary perks that churches enjoy.

Perhaps the most egregious example of religious privilege under the tax code is the so-called parsonage exemption. Under current tax law, "ministers of the gospel" may deduct virtually all costs associated with housing from their income. At its worst, the exemption subsidizes the unseemly: televangelists enjoying multimillion-dollar estates on the taxpayer dime. But even in a more ordinary context, the allowance represents an indefensible benefit running to organized religion, subsidized by taxpayers.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Tahoe a leader in fighting AIS

By Joanne Marchetta

Aquatic invasive species are one of the most serious challenges facing Lake Tahoe. They continuously threaten to damage its unique environment and famed water clarity and degrade the world-class recreational experiences residents and millions of visitors enjoy each year.

Fortunately, Tahoe is a national leader in fighting AIS, with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and 40 public and private partners working to prevent, detect, and remove harmful infestations.



Joann
Marchetta

That partnership was showcased this month when the Western Regional Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species had its yearly conference at Tahoe. The conference brought together nearly 100 experts from public and private agencies and academic institutions who are dedicated to fighting AIS in the Western United States.

The gathering helped those visiting experts learn more about our invasive species successes and challenges at Tahoe, informed us about what programs are working in other areas, and allowed us all to build relationships so we can better work together on a broader scale.

Fighting AIS at Tahoe is making a difference and our collaborative AIS program is often touted as a national model. TRPA recently joined the Western Regional Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species and has been invited to join the Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force, a federal advisory group that helps guide national AIS policies.

Tahoe’s boat inspection program has successfully prevented the introduction of any new invasive species since its creation in 2008, overseeing the safe launch of nearly 200,000 boats. This program helps ensure contaminated boats are kept out of Tahoe, and the importance of frontline prevention cannot be overstated. One contaminated boat carrying an aquatic hitchhiker could set in motion dire consequences for our environment.

The boat inspection program is now sustainably funded through a mix of boater fees and public state funding because California and Nevada see its value in protecting our shared resource from aquatic invaders. With the inspection program in place stopping the introduction of new AIS, Tahoe agencies are turning attention to finding funding for added control projects to combat AIS already in the Lake before they spread and do any more harm. Two new initiatives will help us meet Tahoe's AIS challenge.

Last month, researchers at UNR released the Implementation Plan for the Control of AIS in Lake Tahoe. This important plan provides a science-based roadmap for TRPA and its partner agencies to fight the invasive species that found their way into Lake Tahoe before our boat inspection program was created. It identifies the species we have the best chance to control or possibly eradicate and where we should pursue projects over the next three to five years for the greatest possible effect. It will be updated as progress is made and new, more effective treatment methods are discovered.

The plan points to the control of aquatic invasive weeds Eurasian watermilfoil and curlyleaf pondweed as well as the warm water fish that follow their spread as the highest priority actions. These are harmful species we can efficiently control or eradicate with the right projects in the right places. The plan proposes additional research to discover more effective methods to control other invasive species such as Asian clams, signal crayfish, and bullfrogs, and recommends agencies continue to fight the spread of those invaders in iconic locations such as Emerald Bay.

In another milestone step, the Tahoe Keys Property Owners Association is creating an integrated weed management plan to address its invasive weed problem, long considered ground-zero for AIS problems in Tahoe. While still in draft stages, the plan seeks a comprehensive approach to get the extensive weed infestation in the Keys under control and keep it from

spreading to other parts of Lake Tahoe. The approach combines different techniques and could include hand removals, bottom barriers, and potentially even the limited use of herbicide in select areas if found to be environmentally safe and approved by permitting agencies.

While the final plan to address invasive species in the Keys remains to be seen and fully considered, we applaud these property owners for starting this critically important process to address the issue. Doing nothing is not an option. The negative impact invasive species can have at Tahoe is clear, and history shows we can tackle the problem working together.

In 2010, several acres of Emerald Bay's sandy beaches and clear waters were choked with a spreading infestation of Eurasian watermilfoil that fundamentally altered its habitat and made the heavily-visited area increasingly unappealing to boaters and swimmers. Working together we got rid of that infestation and the area remains weed free today. We can achieve that same level of success in other areas by fully confronting our AIS challenge at Tahoe and by working together to meet the challenge for the continued health and enjoyment of our Lake for generations to come.

Joanne Marchetta is executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

Opinion: This land is our land

By Nicholas Kristof, New York Times

The other day, my teenage daughter and I were idly browsing

real estate porn, a monument to American inequality: a private island in the Bahamas selling for $17.9 million; a 900-acre retreat in Washington State for $11 million; and an 83-acre estate in Colorado for a cool $100 million.

Then we snapped out of the covetousness, for we had just been enjoying a vacation on even more exclusive property, so valuable that no hedge fund manager could ever afford to buy or rent it.

We had been hiking day after day past pristine mountain lakes, serenaded by the babble of snow-fed streams, greeted by vivid wildflowers in alpine meadows. And it’s all my land!

Of course, it’s also your land. It’s our extraordinary national inheritance, one of the greatest gifts of our ancestors — our public lands.

My daughter and I were backpacking a 210-mile stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail in central California, from Donner Pass to Yosemite. The cost? It was all free.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Tahoe-Reno area needs clean energy

By Andy Wirth

Last week the Reno City Council voted to support the Clean Power Plan, which will help to move our country away from dirty coal power toward clean and renewable energy. With their

vote, the council became yet another important entity in the region to pledge support for the Clean Power Plan, joining a great many private sector companies. These very different voices have come together to press our utilities and ultimately our society towards clean energy by way of the Clean Power Plan. I sincerely applaud their actions.



Andy Wirth

The times aren’t changing – they have already notably changed. A new, healthy, sustainable, diverse and growing economy is upon us – providing opportunity for all in the region. We’ve already made a great deal of progress in building our clean energy economy and thankfully, the companies leading the way in this transition are keeping the pressure on our utilities and elected officials. We need truly clean energy – now, not at some distant point in the future.

This is the moment … the chance for all of us to ask more from our elected officials … to ask for more than just compliance, but actual leadership. We can make this region the leader and the example on truly clean energy for the 21st century and create a healthy and stronger economy along the way. Now is the moment we should ask our elected officials to use long-term, rational and logical thinking, not give in to well-heeled special interest groups. We know that a healthy and vibrant economy is actually made possible, not hindered, by policies such as the Clean Power Plan.

The topic of clean energy is apolitical. In our region’s case, it’s about the stark reality of the unacceptably poor quality

air we breathe, the drought and increased forest fires. It's about the immutable truths of our carbon footprint and our region's contributions to the climate woes of our hemisphere. It's about the fact that despite having access to some of the best solar and geothermal energy in the nation, we're still burning coal for electricity at the Valmy coal plant. But it's also about
opportunity, the fact that we have the chance to help usher in clean energy sourcing at the same time we welcome some of the world's leading companies, such as Tesla, Microsoft and Apple. These companies are very clearly stating that clean energy is the future while at the same time they are helping to supercharge our region's economy with quality jobs.

I submit we find ourselves at an important moment in time, if not a crux move (as climbers put it) of a great opportunity to achieve something remarkable as a community: by supporting the Clean Power Plan and going beyond it to a truly clean energy future, we advance this important cause while also benefitting from a growing economy. Along with many others in the business community in our region, I ask our elected officials – those in Congress, those in state government and local civic entities such as the forward thinking city of Reno – to advance rapidly to maximum clean energy while we simultaneously advance a robust regional economy.

Andy Wirth is the chairman of the board of the Reno Tahoe Airport Board of Trustees and president and CEO of Squaw Valley Ski Holdings. His views are not officially representative of the RTAA board of trustees.

Opinion: Cutting Pentagon pork could fund free childcare in U.S.

By C. Robert Gibson, Al Jazeera America

The cost of childcare is bankrupting America's parents. But providing free, universal childcare for all parents is easily affordable by simply cutting a small handful of military programs whose absence almost nobody would notice.

Joy Richmond-Smith is a full-time social worker and mother of two small children. Her husband also works full-time, so daily childcare is essential to the couple. In the Boston area, where she lives, Richmond-Smith pays $400 for four days of childcare per week just for her 3-year-old son. If she were to put her 1-year-old daughter in childcare for two of those days, the cost would jump to $500 per week. And if she were to pay for both children to have full-time daycare at that same facility, the cost balloons to $700 per week. Richmond-Smith says her household's childcare costs are more than double the amount she pays for her mortgage.

"These early years of life and brain development are so important," she says. "I'm not skimping on childcare, so I'll pay whatever I need to pay."

Read the whole story

Letter: Questioning EDC zoning changes

To the community,

I’m wondering if Tahoe residents have been well informed about the El Dorado County General Plan and zoning changes in progress and how they might be impacted.

I’m from the west county and just recently discovered that 14,500 of the 37,000 parcels being changed are in Tahoe. We are told they are name changes only for alignment with the county’s zone district names. While I’m sure that is generally true, there are anomalies similar to what we’ve found in our area.

People up there need to know that the county is not going to inform them of changes as they would in the typical rezone process; it is up to residents to look into it themselves. Some of us here in the west county have had big surprises.

Here is the link to view proposed parcel changes. If they have any issues, it’s not too late to contact their supervisor, Sue Novasel.

Ellen Van Dyke, El Dorado County

Opinion: Following your conscience isn’t the same as

being right

By Brian D. Ellison

We can say this of Kim Davis: She understands freedom of conscience. Standing defiantly behind the counter, submitting to federal marshals, emerging to a hero's greeting with presidential candidates by her side, Davis understands that no law, no court, no other human being, can bind her mind and heart. The clerk of Rowan County, Ky., has grasped that being true to what she believes is more important than her professional future, her public image, her personal well being. She has suffered for her beliefs, and in so doing she has followed a great tradition of letting one's conscience be one's guide. In this, we can admire her. Maybe, just maybe, she'll even be remembered in a positive light.

That does not, of course, mean she is right.

She is not right about religious freedom – not by a long shot. Her stand at the Rowan County Courthouse, true to her conscience though it may be, was not a free exercise of religion. On the contrary, it was an act that, according to reason and the laws and founding principles of our nation, is exactly the opposite. It was an infringement on that freedom.

She is also not right about what Christian faith would demand. While she might not regard me – an openly gay minister who has been working for more inclusive and affirming stances toward LGBT people in my church and society – as a credible source, I would argue that even her conservative evangelical brand of Christianity does not at its heart tolerate behavior like hers.

Though Davis is now free from the confines of the Carter County Detention Center, it is not too late to reflect on her act of conscience and the cries of the thousands who gathered to celebrate it. It is also not too late for her to present a

truer picture of biblical faith, one that both obeys its commandments and leaves her conscience intact.

The right of people to freely practice their religion was enshrined in the First Amendment's protections – and, for most of our country's history, in the largely unchallenged habits of Americans (at least when it comes to practicing conventional, mainstream Christian religion). This enshrinement has meant, among other things, that pastors preach what they want (and marry whom they want, not incidentally), that partakers of the Eucharist drink what they want, and that certain tribes smoke what they want.

For a long time, religious liberty wasn't discussed much in the political news because the subject is so, well, religious. Until the last couple of years, that is.

To many today, "religious freedom" has come to mean the freedom to interfere on religious grounds. Today, "religious freedom" is given as grounds for an employer not to provide health care coverage. As a cover for parents who create a public health risk for other people's children by not vaccinating their own. As a pre-emptive strike in support of the hypothetical florist who so abhors same-sex matrimony that he cannot abide giving it his imprimatur of calla lilies and hydrangeas.

These are complex cases, to be sure. They reflect a dynamic legal question that we will surely be sorting out for years to come.

But the Kim Davis case is uncomplicated: Religious freedom is no justification for a court clerk to refuse to issue marriage licenses in accordance with a decision of the Supreme Court of the United States. In fact, religious freedom means exactly the opposite of what Kim Davis seems to think it means. Religious freedom protects couples from her. In the current drama, Davis is the state, and her infringement on the

religious freedom of the couples appearing before her for licenses is the very definition of violating the First Amendment.

There are fair and practical questions here. Must Davis' conscience really bind her actions as clerk, anyway? Does the IRS worker who processes tax returns bear moral responsibility for the wars those taxes support? Was Davis personally vouching for the moral character, practical wisdom, or even the legality of each of the marriages behind the licenses she freely signed in the past? If so, she bore a bigger responsibility than one might think a county clerk should be obliged to accept.

To be clear, Davis does get to enjoy certain religious freedom protections. No court can force her to issue licenses, and the judge who sent her to jail made no such demand. She had the option then, and still has it now, to resign as clerk. No one has a right to public office. Consider the numerous county clerks who resigned last summer in the week after the Supreme Court ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges. Several of them made thoughtful public statements explaining that since they could no longer uphold the law of the land, they would do the only thing they could with a clear conscience: step aside. This is the real act of conscience – the act that earns you mention in the same breath as other great leaders who have sacrificed for a cause. If, of course, the cause was just.

I've been ordained for 16 years, including 13 years pastoring a congregation with whom I could not be fully open about my identity as a gay man because of denominational policies. For the last three years, I've led a national organization that has worked for LGBT inclusion in my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). We've been pleased in the past year to play a part in giving our pastors and congregations the freedom to offer the blessing of marriage to all couples, regardless of gender. These changes in our church took effect just weeks before the Supreme Court made it a relevant issue

in every single state.

Which is to say: I'm not a lawyer; I'm a minister. And what I'm struck by most in this national conversation around Kim Davis is not actually the debate about religious freedom. What strikes me most is the lack of conversation over the morality of her decision, the uncritical acceptance of the idea that her act of "conscience" is faithful and true to her religion. I've been struck by the people rallying around her outside the jailhouse during and after her incarceration, and their praise for the principles Davis has purportedly upheld so well.

Much can and will be written about Davis' failure to demonstrate all manner of Christian virtues. How she did not show love and grace to the same-sex couples who stood before her. How there may have been some logs in her own eyes while she was identifying specks in the eyes of others. How her views conflict with ample biblical scholarship and a growing Christian movement – that includes many evangelicals – to support same-sex marriage as a faithful expression of covenant love.

Why have so few Christians – who can and do disagree about the morality of homosexuality – stood up and said what we almost all agree on – that it just isn't OK to break promises? I don't know any Christians – or, honestly, people of any religious faith – who would otherwise defend a failure to honor vows. Here, according to the Associated Press, is the vow taken by every county clerk in Kentucky upon assuming office:

> *"I, ————, do swear that I will well and truly discharge the duties of the office of ————— County Circuit Court clerk, according to the best of my skill and judgment, making the due entries and records of all orders, judgments, decrees, opinions and proceedings of the court, and carefully filing and preserving in my office all books and papers which come to my possession by virtue of my office; and that I will not*

knowingly or willingly commit any malfeasance of office, and will faithfully execute the duties of my office without favor, affection or partiality, so help me God.“

Filing and preserving all papers. Without partiality. So help her God.

The instruction not to bear false witness is one of the Ten Commandments of Judeo-Christian tradition. It grounds us in our relationships and allows our public officials to enjoy the confidence of the people they serve. When people in leadership do not do what they say they will do, the system breaks down, along with our trust in each other. And, our faith teaches, willful failure to honor our commitments is sin, which leaves us broken and disconnected from the source of our life, our joy, our hope.

Kim Davis is neither evil nor saintly. She is the county clerk of Rowan County, Ky., who has found herself in a firestorm not entirely of her making, for which she was not prepared. She has been at the mercy of ideological lawyers she did not hire, secular media prone to portray rural Christians as backward, and a brutal Twittersphere full of ad hominem attacks. In the midst of it all, she has sought to sound a moral voice of conscience, and for that she deserves some admiration, even though her views are mistaken. What she does not deserve is a pass from doing the right thing – keeping her promises, doing her job, or making the sacrifice that goes with her principled stand.

And religious leaders, rather than angling to stand by her side at a rally, should be holding her accountable for that.

Brian D. Ellison is a Presbyterian minister, executive director of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians and a host/contributor at KCUR, the NPR affiliate in Kansas City, Missouri. You can follow him on Twitter at @PTSBrian. He wrote this for Zocalo Public Square.

Letter: New law violates Prop. 215

To the community,

The American Medical Marijuana Association has announced that it is filing a lawsuit over the violation of Proposition 215 by the California Legislature and Gov. Jerry Brown. The recent adoption of the Medical Marijuana Regulation and Safety Act attempts to modify a voter initiative, Prop. 215, something specifically forbidden by the California Constitution.

Our medical cannabis rights, protected for nearly 20 years by Prop. 215, have been hijacked and Prop. 215 is under attack like never before. The new law is an unacceptable and illegal infringement on our rights under Prop. 215.



Steve Kubby

These are the four areas that were of the greatest concern to patients and their physicians:

1. Patient gardens now limited to 100 square feet.
2. It is now a crime to share a joint from your garden with anyone.
3. Must now use your regular doctor for recommendations, most of whom have no experience with the medical use of cannabis

4. Allows city, county or both to ban cultivation, storage, manufacture, and transport.

I’m getting calls from frightened patients who fear their own state government is planning on going after cannabis doctors as if they are some sort of dangerous threat that must be carefully supervised. Sick people cannot handle this kind of stress. Thousands of patients will die because of this calculated attempt to thwart the will of the people and deprive them of medical cannabis and the doctors who write recommendations to use the healing herb.

David Allen, a retired heart surgeon and expert on cannabinoid medicine, warns against the unintended consequences of the new Medical Marijuana Regulation and Safety Act. According to Allen, the proposed law “will create more crimes of cultivation, processing, storage, transportation, sales, and possession. It will create an army of bureaucrats that will increase the police state and create super drug task force solely for cannabis and no other drug,”

Steve Kubby, American Medical Marijuana Association executive director and South Lake Tahoe resident