CASE STUDY

How Do You End Homelessness for a Person like Virginia?¹

Virginia is a 57 year-old woman living in a passageway of a subway station, her shopping carts overflowing with lotions, soap, bleach, ammonia, pine sol, carts of baby wipes, empty (wine) bottles, full bottles, containers of urine, cans of spaghetti, black plastic bags, silver Mylar and yellow crocheted blankets. Sometimes she speaks with passersby, sometimes she feigns sleep when she wants to be left alone.

Commuters generally ignore her, though some will occasionally buy her flowers or lunch. Another group has called the police a number of times, but a dispute about jurisdiction between the local law enforcement and the subway police has left her undisturbed.

Outreach workers have visited her regularly for years and learned the following, which has been confirmed by relatives: Virginia is a former medical secretary who worked regularly for six or seven years until her six month old child was taken from her by the child’s father. Virginia then left her four other children to search for the child. Her sisters say that’s when her “schizophrenia” started. For the next 30 years she lived off and on the street or with her sisters. At times, she has had her own apartment and cycled in and out of various housing programs (including low-demand safe havens and supportive housing units for singles). She has had substance abuse problems off and on in addition to her mental health issues.

Outreach workers were able to coax her into a low-demand group home a year ago, but Virginia left after one week and fled to the tunnel. Now she refuses to leave the tunnel and insists she will be getting her own apartment soon. She welcomes family and outreach worker visits but refuses to leave the tunnel.

After an article about Virginia appears in the newspapers, an embarrassed community improvement task force led by local businesses convenes a meeting of police, community leaders and service providers to develop strategies.

1. How would you or your organization address this situation with the resources you presently have?

2. How would you or your organization address the situation if you had access to additional resources, and what resources would you need?

3. Anticipate what your critics would say about your approach. For example, how would the community respond when you say it takes time to establish a rapport with a person like Virginia? Note: Local outreach workers have been working with her for years, successfully placed her in the housing of her choice a number of times, and she still opts to stay in the metro tunnel.

4. How should the police respond to a person like this?

5. Assuming the community has ample housing options available for her— emergency shelters, safe havens, group homes, supportive housing, independent living, etc., as well as treatment and services— how do you end homelessness for a person like Virginia?

¹ This hypothetical situation is based on a recent Washington Post article (“A Tunnel to Call Home”) written by DeNeen L. Brown, published on Sunday, April 29, 2007. The complete article appears online at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/04/28/AR2007042800981.html.