

PENNY SMART, POUND FOOLISH

*Richard Joyce**

My name is Richard Joyce and in December of 2001 I found myself a forty-five-year-old homeless veteran on the streets of Los Angeles with a big alcohol problem.

I had had some experience with the Salvation Army (SA) in the past and, having basically nowhere else to go, I found myself at the door of the downtown SA Harbor Light facility at midnight asking for admission to their facility, which was a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. I believe that because I was a veteran they didn't send me away and allowed me to enter their program, which I completed, staying for an entire year.

After living for another year at the Weingart Center, a homeless transitional center, I was introduced to Skid Row Housing Trust (the Trust) by a fellow veteran, and the Shelter Plus Care Program (S+C), administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Development. I was eligible for the S+C Program due to alcoholism and having been diagnosed with severe depression.

In January of 2003 I was able to secure my own room at the Trust's Las Americas Hotel and entered into the S+C program. The Las Americas is located here in downtown Los Angeles, where I've lived ever since. While living there, I've been given the opportunity to successfully continue my treatment for both alcohol addiction and depression, and to be involved with the supportive housing.

* Richard Ruprecht Joyce is a writer of political and social commentary and satire, screenwriter, and the author of two memoirs, "Salvation Diary," and "Skid Row Diary," the first two in his "Diary Trilogy," the last of which, "Help, I'm Dying Diary," has not been written yet. Mr. Joyce is a veteran of the United States Navy and worked in the customer service field for over twenty years.

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Moreover, I have been able to get off General Relief as a source of income, and instead claim benefits under the Social Security Disability Insurance program, which I had paid into during my entire adult working life.

The Trust and S+C quite simply have allowed me to get my life back. I pay my rent, attend the meetings I need to in order to stay sober and stabilize the depression, interact with my wonderful case managers, and attend meetings and activities they provide (such as a Garden Club, Cooking Club, and Drama Free Support Groups, among other things). With my life intact, I had the good fortune to discover my lifetime avocation of writing political and social commentary and satire on my blog, www.joycestake.blogspot.com.

The current recession and economic downturn have affected everybody, especially community-based organizations like the Trust, which rely heavily on donations and federal, state, and county funding. The Harbor Light facility, which helped me get a start when I needed it most, is no longer operating due to insufficient funding, and people now in the position I found myself in back in 2001 no longer have that resource available to them.

It has long been recognized that providing assisted housing for those in poverty and the homeless is more cost-effective than allowing homelessness to increase unchecked. The savings on emergency room visits, hospital stays, and incarceration, etc., almost cover the cost of assisted housing itself, which better alleviates the misery, degradation, and danger associated with living on the streets.

Accordingly I have never understood the knee-jerk reaction by those responsible for administering the state budget of cutting funding for those very programs that assist those that need it the most—namely social programs aimed at helping the homeless, mentally ill, and those with drug and alcohol dependency issues. The cuts may look good on paper for the short term, but actually exacerbate the overall problem, making it much worse and more expensive to deal with in the long run, not to mention increasing the duration of pain and suffering for those afflicted.

I say more, not less, funding is needed. I've recently had two close friends who lived in the Las Americas die of what appears to have been heart attacks. In response, I've asked the Trust to sponsor training in CPR and first aid for those residents who care to attend the classes, and I've received support for the idea by some of their

senior staff. I believe this training could be beneficial to assist those in need until paramedics arrive and take over. This *may* save lives. But this training is expensive, and paying for all who would wish it, including staff, for each of the hotels that the Trust administers is cost-prohibitive, especially during a recession, and especially with the budget cuts the Governor has implemented.

I hope we can still do this. But cutting funding for those who need it the most has never been a viable answer to short term problems, and it never will be.