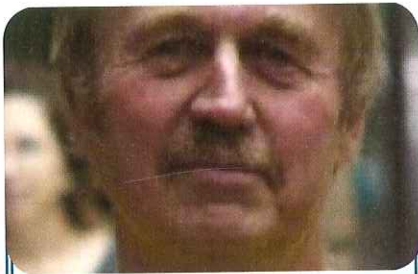


Homelessness began with '80s economy, policy

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Every homeless coalition across the United States got its start in the 1980s, the result of economic changes that had already begun and politics that accelerated them, says Ed Shurna, executive director of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH).



Ed Shurna

Prior to 1980, there was only one shelter in Chicago: Pacific Garden Mission, Shurna said in a telephone interview. There were no city-run, city-sponsored or city-paid shelters. The city was not involved at all.

What started to become apparent, he said, was that one shelter was not enough to solve the problem. "People started to show up at night at airports, train and bus stations, and in the daytime at public libraries although they were not reading books."

In response, Catholic Charities, Traveler's and Immigrant's Aid, and other service providers, founded CCH in 1980. Its milestones that decade include obtaining first-ever city funding for a homeless shelter in 1982; helping to pass the federal McKinney homeless assistance legislation in 1987 that authorized programs for emergency food and shelter, transitional and permanent housing, supportive services; establishing the Low Income Housing Trust Fund Commission in 1988 to expand affordable housing in Chicago.

The first widespread homelessness in the 1980s was the result of an economy that started the previous decade as manufacturing — auto parts, steel mills — moved to the suburbs or to Mexico, South America and the rest of the world.

"The jobs that used to be there that allowed people to make a good living — to have a home, have a car, send their kids to college — those jobs weren't there anymore," Shurna

said. "In the '60s, the '70s, you could graduate high school, get a job, enough money to get a house — those jobs left Chicago. In place of those jobs, people who came out of high school could only get service jobs — Starbucks, Walgreens, Walmart — that didn't pay anywhere near what was being made in manufacturing."

A second factor, he said, was that the cost of housing skyrocketed. Apartments that formerly rented for \$300 were now \$600 or more, out of reach for minimum-wage workers. Previously affordable housing became condos and lofts; the former residents were priced out.

As an example, he uses the South Loop. When CCH moved there in the late '80s, the neighborhood was "rundown but affordable," he said. By the time its office moved several years ago, it was in the middle of condos, lofts, and restaurants with valet parking. "All of those people who had lived there had to find new places. They weren't that many, so many became homeless."

The third and biggest factor causing homeless is government policy since the 1980s era of Ronald Reagan, Shurna said. Mental institutions released people to the streets. Criminal justice expanded so that simple drug usage and possession led to people being sent away to prison for years. Tens of thousands of units of public housing were demolished but not rebuilt, as they would have been years before. The safety net was frayed.

"When you have that combination of the economy and government not working for people at the bottom you create homelessness. It became a "Tale of Two Cities" and Chicago was symbolic of what happened across the nation," he said. On the one hand were gentrified neighborhoods and on the other hand, others like Englewood or Lawndale that don't receive enough help because since the Reagan era, people no longer look to government to solve problems.

In the meantime, the picture of homelessness has changed: from a 45-year-old white alcoholic in the '70s, to a person of color in the '80s, a woman in the '90s and now, in the millennium, a child. The downturn has made it worse, with the number of homeless students in Chicago Public Schools growing each year, to over 16,000 at last count.

Yet homelessness disappeared after the Depression-era 1930s and did not exist from the postwar 1940s until the 80s, Shurna said. The world-leading U.S. economy was one factor, but so was the attitude that government was good for the health of society.

"I don't believe the private sector can solve homelessness because it is not in their interest. The public sector has to take that responsibility. The story of the '80s is in what Ronald Reagan would say: 'government is not the solution, it's the problem.' Because of that we say we shouldn't build public housing, we shouldn't subsidize. We have this belief that the private sector is going to solve the problem. But they haven't done it and if they have, they've done a poor job."

Krzysztof Wodiczko, Homeless Vehicle, Version 3, 1988-89. Pictured: New York, NY. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York. © Krzysztof Wodiczko. Ed Shurna asks who would want to live in this purported solution to homelessness.

