Let's Accept Homelessness AND Try to Help!

My first job after getting my Masters In Social Work was as the Outreach Team Leader for a program helping "service resistant" mentally ill homeless men. It was at the Volunteers of America's "Reception Center" in New York City. We went out to the streets and subways to meet the homeless men – starting case files on them while they lived on the streets. They did not have to accept our offer of shelter.

I am appalled by the increasing criminalization of homelessness since the Covid crisis.

I think people should be allowed to sleep in public places as long as they do not damage those places and remove their belongings during the day.

The idea of "ending" homelessness misdirects the attention from the person to the problem. Let's focus on helping the people who need help. Let's respect their personhood instead of criminalizing them for doing no harm to anyone. If they've harmed someone, then that's another thing.

Requiring housing – instead of offering housing – for homeless people is inhumane. It is possible that a person does not want the restrictions of a permanent residence, or of the particular sleeping option being offered. For example, I want a place to call my base, a place to return to, but I want to be able to venture out from that place to photograph events and to sell my art.

Below are a few quotes from the National Homelessness Law Center, and the independent.co.uk.

"Because people experiencing homelessness are not on the street by choice but because they lack choices, criminal and civil punishment serves no constructive purpose."1

"In 2022, HUD introduced a funding package aimed at addressing unsheltered homelessness and homeless encampments. The $365 million package includes grant funds and vouchers meant to enable localities to connect unsheltered individuals to housing, health care, and supportive services."2

(This brings the homeless person back into the marketplace, making them a consumer of housing. That is very helpful to those that want it. It would also be helpful to allow people to sleep in public places (as long as they don't set up anything that interferes with other public use of the space)).

"As the home ownership part of the American Dream becomes more of a fantasy, untold numbers of citizens have taken to living in Forest Service woods, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) wildlands, and remote trailheads in wild areas across the country. They are hoping for a safe haven and a bit of peace in a country that makes it exceptionally difficult to find and keep a stable home unless you are rich or lucky….

"The Roberts family was living on the edge long before police knocked at their door. Judy Roberts of Emmet, Idaho, was the sole source of income for her two adult sons, Brooks and Timber, both of whom have disabilities. In March of 2020, shortly after the pandemic began, she was injured in a car accident and lost her job at a manufacturing plant. Soon the family was evicted from their rental home.

"They had nowhere else to go," Craig Durham, a lawyer representing Brooks, told The Independent.

"Unable to afford somewhere new, the family began camping in the ample public land outside of Boise. Soon, they caught the attention of federal agents from the BLM and Forest Service, who began warning the family they had to move, as most federal lands outside of national parks only allow camping for two weeks at a time.

"As the warnings piled up, the family had to keep seeking out new places to live that weren't in a 25 mile radius of each other to avoid running afoul of the authorities. As the Roberts family shuffled from one place to the next, homeless and jobless, they lived in a small camper and for a time an old school bus.

"They eventually kind of ran out of new spots to go to," Mr Durham added…."

After being shot in an unprovoked situation…

"Brooks was paralysed from the waist down as a result of the shooting, and he and his mother are now living in a motel. Now Brooks is preparing to potentially bring a $50m tort claim against the agencies involved in the sting. He no longer has control of his bowels and may never be able to work again." (Read the rest at the link in the footnotes.)

References:
1. National Homelessness Law Center, By Eric Tars, Legal Director, Title: Criminalization of Homelessness, p. 3.
2. Ibid, p. 4.
3. The independent.co.uk. From "Violent sting operations and an unbothered Biden: Inside the 'ridiculous' federal fight to end homelessness | The Independent" retrieved on 12/30/2025