



**Commentary
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**Presented by Steven S. Bruton
Longwood, Florida**

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We are privileged to live in one of Florida's most beautiful, prosperous, and forward thinking communities. But when it comes to serving the needs of our ever-growing homeless population, the prevailing Seminole County attitude continues to be: "not in my back yard."

It's time for local government, law enforcement, businesses, churches, and especially Seminole County residents to commit to working together to help our homeless neighbors turn it around. That begins with open dialogue and a productive, positive, can-do campaign.

We've all heard the statistics...and several thousand more Seminole homes will foreclose in 2010. The face of homelessness has changed from the dirty, disheveled vagabond to our own friends, family and neighbors, including thousands of school age children and their parents...who sleep in cars, tents and wherever else they can lay their head at night.

Some good news is that compassion agencies such as Harvest Time International, The Sharing Center, Hope Foundation, Pathways to Home and others continue working together to provide many basic necessities. Seminole's needy can easily obtain food and clothing, but housing and temporary shelter is another story.

When I was homeless for sixteen months back in the mid-90s, my biggest challenges were to get adequate bodily rest from a decent night's sleep, and to find a place to shave and shower so that I could maintain my health and personal dignity.

Today, there are still only 200 beds for Seminole's homeless population. We need five times that amount. And currently, there are no drop-in centers to shower, change clothes, and freshen up to go to work or even a job interview.

To make matters worse, many of our local law enforcement officers aggressively force people, who are dwelling in cars, to leave rest areas and retail store parking lots. They also target and arrest tent campers and people on the street, treating them as criminals. The ongoing cost to Seminole taxpayers is hundreds of thousands of dollars with nothing in return.

One viable solution would be to consider developing "safe zones"... designated secure fenced-in areas where people living in cars can safely park at night. Safe zones would also bring campers out of the deep woods and upgrade their basic survival situation. We could also set up inexpensive fiberglass domes that are being utilized in disaster areas and in homeless Dome communities such as Genesis One in Los Angeles.

Folks, it's time to work together and think outside the box. We do that, first, by changing the overall pervasive negative attitude towards the homeless. They are people. They are fellow citizens...not statistics, nor criminals.

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor. We do that by showing up in people's lives. The rest will come naturally.

Because addressing Seminole County's homeless issue matters...this is Steve Bruton.