

“FREE FEEDS”

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE IN TULARE



Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share some insights regarding the issue of “free feeds” in Downtown Tulare’s Zumwalt Park.

Only July 24, 2018, a citizen came forward at the city council meeting asking the city to waive park fees so that she and her friends could offer free food to “the homeless.” The focus of this paper is to address the inefficiencies of feeding the homeless in a park or parking lot, and demonstrate that food and funding is better allocated to agencies specializing in full-service assistance rather than subsidizing free “feeds.”

Definition

“Homeless” has been used too liberally to represent a class of citizenry that ranges from those who have no homes to the criminal vagrant. Typically, the term “homeless” has been used to identify people who may be:

- Houseless
- Mentally Ill
- Drug addicted
- Criminals/Vagrants

Free food is *not* a “solution” for many of these individuals.

The Nature of Park Feedings

In the downtown area, we’ve found that most people identified by the public as “homeless” actually have a place to live; they are classified as “homeless” through “profiling” by the public. Most “providers” utilize Zumwalt Park for their philanthropy. Statistically, indigents stay within a 5 mile radius of feeding/care sites which means an inordinate aggregation of indigents in the city center. The “provider” group should be encouraged to consider their church parking lot or perhaps their own front yard as a more suitable venue.

Unintended Consequences of Park Feedings

Most individuals identified as homeless in downtown are dealing with some type of mental health issue. At our Cinco de Mayo event this year we discovered an indigent woman sleeping in the circle planter in the middle of the patio. She awakened, stepped out of the bushes onto the patio and promptly urinated through her clothing in full view of event staff and several guests to the event. She didn’t need free food; she needed other assistance. Free feedings encourage these individuals to sleep, urinate and defecate in the park, rendering it unhealthy for the general public. There are reports of hepatitis A epidemics arising as a result of “free feeds.”

Once thought to be a great way to help the homeless, “free feeds” are now considered archaic and more detrimental than helpful.

In an article entitled *“Food for thought: Do free meals help the homeless?”* Amy Gonyeau, chief operating officer at Alpha Project, “told 380 people gathered for a recent forum at the Balboa Theatre in downtown San Diego. ‘Stop feeding them in parking lots. It’s not helping.’

“The El Cajon City Council unanimously passed an emergency ordinance last month banning food distribution on city-owned property in response to the outbreak of hepatitis A that has *killed* 20 people and *sickened more than 530* in the county, many of them homeless.

“Robert Marbut is a consultant in San Antonio, Texas who... has helped hundreds of communities and agencies across the country dramatically reduce homelessness. “I’m all about getting people into 24/7 programs that treat the root causes,” he said. “Lack of food is not a cause of homelessness. Never has been, never will be.”

He encourages churches and other charity groups to align their feeding efforts with agencies that steer the homeless into recovery and rehabilitation. “Don’t just cook hamburgers on a barbecue in a parking lot,” he said. “Don’t hand out sandwiches in the park. That’s probably the least-productive thing you could do.”

<http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/homelessness/sd-me-homeless-meals-20171102-story.html>

“...Feedings do encourage isolation instead of breaking [the homelessness] chain,” said Jennifer Chen, director of Loaves and Fishes, a charity dealing with the homeless. “It’s also not the most efficient way to help people. It[’s] better for people to donate to an organization that already does food distribution rather than going out there and buying food on their own.”

<https://www.mercurynews.com/2017/06/27/san-jose-pushing-popular-homeless-feeds-out-of-st-james-park/>

Protect Them from Themselves

“According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention CDC), 48 million Americans - one in six - become sick each year as a result of foodborne diseases.

“Another risk associated with donated food involves food allergies. About 15 million Americans have food allergies, according to the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network, and the number is growing.

“When you're giving food to food banks and other nonprofit organizations, you're protected from criminal and civil lawsuits by the [Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act](#), a federal law signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996.

“The law encourages donation of food to nonprofit organizations such as homeless shelters, soup kitchens and churches for distribution to needy people, and protects the donors - from criminal or legal liability, according to Amanda Browne, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

<https://www.netquote.com/home-insurance/food-donation>

Conclusion

Free feeding doesn't address the causes of homelessness, but can encourage it. Attracting indigents to public parks, where they may take up residence and misuse facilities deprives the public of the use of those same parks. Public feeding opens liability for food poisoning and allergens for those doing the distribution. Such liability can be easily avoided by working with or donating to a service agency.

Therefore, it is the recommendation of the Tulare Downtown Association that the City should not waive fees or contribute to free park feeds; rather funding should be directed to non-profit agencies specializing in a range of services including mental health and interdiction.

This report prepared by John Harman, Director, Tulare Downtown Association, member of California Downtown Association, and California Main Street Association.

