

# MY THIS

MIKE MUSTAIN FOR CLARKSVILLE TOWN COUNCIL

# ON THAT:

## MY THIS ON THAT: Homelessness

It is late January 2019, and a “polar vortex” storms across half of the United States bringing with it wind chills reaching what would be considered cold even in Antarctica. Many of us are dreading high energy bills. Many have raced out for kerosene, electric blankets and portable electric heaters so we can stay “normally warm” in our air tight houses built to withstand the 30-40 mph wind gusts.

As the local meteorologists tell us to stay in, some in our communities are going out, looking for those who have no “inside” to stay in. The homeless. We’ve seen them, we see them every day, some have looked and pointed, often with disgust, because they represent a side of our society that we are least proud of. I find it hard to imagine going home to something that isn’t a warm structure, but so many do.

For many, their structure is an overpass, or a couple sheets of plywood leaning against a tree, maybe a discarded tarpaulin found in the trash somewhere, or a shopping cart loaded with their every earthly possession. Maybe nothing more than a sleeping bag pulled over their head or a “port-a-pot” that isn’t often used. Many say things like: “get a job, get a life, they are probably on something”. These are the individual human beings who are sought out by a small, very small, army of volunteers. These volunteers leave their families safe at home, while they go out, brave the elements, walk into dark homeless camps not knowing what or who they will encounter. Sometimes welcomed, sometimes not, but always with the best intent to help a fellow human. They never know if they will face someone high on something or in need of their prescribed medications. Regardless, these brave volunteers care enough to overcome their fears and serve humanity.

I’ve spent the last two nights working with Paul Stensrud, Exit 0 and some of that small army at an emergency shelter set up at the Maple Street Baptist Church in Jeffersonville. It was an honor meeting and serving those from both groups described so far. I’d like to share what I experienced both good and bad.

### First, the bad:

(In full disclosure, it was my first time responding to the call for help from Exit 0)

There is homelessness within our communities. It is real and has many different levels and unique needs. Many say, “it’s not my problem” but it is. Sadly, most of us are only one bad break or one lost job away from a similar situation. Some couch surf, some “live with” and some are on the street.

Sadly, many who were invited wouldn’t come into the emergency shelter or any shelter that was offered. There were those who just simply wouldn’t come in, I can’t tell you why, they just wouldn’t.

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MIKE MUSTAIN FOR CLARKSVILLE PROGRESS

# ON THAT:

## PART 2

Secondly, the good:

Allow me to introduce some of those I met. I'll begin with the volunteers. To include all would be impossible and to include names would be unfair as none ask for recognition.

Paul Stensrud I've known for years and knew him even before Exit 0. An ordinary guy doing extraordinary things with hopes, prayers, donations and volunteers. Paul is organized, focused and driven. Paul takes no pay for his services and his services are many. Paul's mission isn't to just address a specific need but the many needs of the homeless.

A typical "intake" includes assistance getting ID's, birth certificates, health insurance, food stamps, housing, showers, clothing, food and shelter. Not every intake needs all these but Paul works with different agencies and knows who to contact in those agencies. For those willing to go, Paul or one of his volunteers will take the individual to the BMV (for example) to get a photo ID. Paul is through, kind, and respectful. Each intake is keyed into a spreadsheet on his laptop with next of kin and emergency contacts when available. Paul maintains maps of who are in which camps and has those camps marked. As Paul sends out his Outreach van (which is a converted ambulance) loaded with supplies he knows who are in the camps and their anticipated individual needs. Sterno, blankets, sanitary supplies, hand warmers, clothes, food and Narcan line the walls of the Outreach van. The Exit 0 approach to addressing the needs of the homeless should be mirrored and should represent the "standard" of services offered. While admittedly Paul has ruffled some feathers in courthouses locally, Paul is unashamedly passionate about helping others. Paul's mantra: "Don't talk about it, be about it"!

The Outreach van, on the nights in question another item on the van was a Doctor who lives and practices two counties away who comes and volunteers his time, talents and training. Imagine, in a day when many doctors and medical professionals won't see a patient without insurance or a way to pay, this doctor makes camp calls wearing insulated coveralls instead of his normal white coat.

Also, on the van a mother of 4 from New Albany who works the camps on both sides of the river seeking those in need while her family is safely home out of the elements. A beautiful lady with a heart bigger than the van she is riding in.

An EMT and nurse came in the first night, just walked in and volunteered. No pay, no glory, just to help as they were uniquely able. They were there the second night as well.

There were other volunteers far too many to mention that were there, helping, just because they care.

The others, those being served, their stories are impressive and painful. Some who's only "friend and companion" is their dog, while others lonely though surrounded by people. Some willing to share their stories, others willing to share what they had. One gentleman came in with only a backpack and a container of food that someone had given him along the way, he wanted to share his food with others not knowing the feast of food that had been donated for him and was waiting. Down on his luck, temporarily, he only needed to get warm and rest. Another came in with frostbite, delirious from being so cold. Still others walked from as far as Eastern Blvd to get to the shelter in the near zero temperatures and wind chills.

Others, while waiting for the weather to pass, jumped in and helped organize the clothes rack, shoes and wiped down tables. Willing to work, to help out others who couldn't. Those who were being served were serving. Food was donated and delivered by churches and businesses. Everyone friendly and well behaved.

One Jeffersonville Police officer came in and spoke to the group. A positive experience with police many had not had in the past. Among other things the officer told them before coming on shift, he'd prayed for them. Another officer came in and she joked and interacted with some whom she'd helped on the street many times.

Normally "invisible" humanity had names, hearts, hurts and needs. Those needs were met, all day, every day and for as long as needed.

There are other homeless community service efforts and they are greatly appreciated. I know of their works and appreciate their efforts. We all owe a debt of gratitude to each and every one.

As in the homeless community there are new faces and needs every day so too in the volunteer community there is room for new faces, and new talents. We don't all have the same talents or abilities, but we all have talents, abilities and time.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt said:**

**The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much, it is whether we provide enough for those who have little.**

**MY THIS ON THAT: EXIT 0 and those who volunteer are impressive and should be the model for serving the homeless in our communities.**