

Task Force chair: 'Call off the dogs'

Your cover story on the Task Force for the Homeless building at Peachtree-Pine accurately reports that the impending foreclosure has been averted, but it left some false impressions that need to be corrected ["Peachtree-Pine shelter escapes foreclosure," Feb. 26-March 4].

First, the article implies that our organization somehow "warehouses" homeless men. Nothing could be further from the truth. Peachtree-Pine and the Task Force have placed more people into supportive housing than any other organization in the city. These placements are achieved by the Task Force staff and in partnerships with other agencies, including the United Way and its Homeless Commission. The main problem is for every person we place into a better form of housing, we get one or two more people immediately taking their place in the shelter.

Second, there is no way that the existing service network in Atlanta could house 500 to 1,000 extremely vulnerable men if they were suddenly put on the street. Please also understand: The Task Force would welcome having far less men in the emergency overflow shelter section our building if there were other,

better facilities available for them. Frankly, we have plans and a desire to transform our building into something more than just being a shelter.

In your article, Mr. Little says that if our building is forced to close, he is "confident the Atlanta community would respond to this situation." My strong belief is we should start that response today and not wait for the building to be foreclosed on as a catalyst for emergency action.

Simply put, the hundreds of people who stay each night at Peachtree-Pine and the approximately 2,000 other homeless people on our streets represent Atlanta's unmet need. The city

of Atlanta, the United Way and its Commission insist that there is no place for shelters in the continuum of care, and that apartments with case workers are the only answer. Sure, apartments over shelter beds are an improvement, but we are more than 3,000 housing units short. Our residents are the human face of this unmet need; for some reason, our serving them and our existence drives the Atlanta power structure crazy.

In fact, the behavior of the city of Atlanta and Central Atlanta Progress has reached such a fevered pitch that they have lost all perspective and have now, in our opinion, broken the law to

try and put our shelter and our nonprofit out of business. That is the essence of our lawsuit: These two entities have conspired to do everything in their power to interfere with our business operations, to cut off all of our public funding, to harass and threaten our private donors and spread lies and falsehoods about our organization.

I still don't understand what crime we at the Task Force committed to deserve such harsh treatment. For the past 12 years, we have taken care of human beings that no one else wants to be responsible for. We have helped transform thousands of lives for the better.

We are accused by some of "coddling" the homeless. Well, what is actually wrong with that? We show love to other human beings, meet them where they are, and encourage them to make positive steps. It works; we make good things happen. The city might not like our approach (we are too nice to people), but does that really warrant such treatment?

I hope Atlanta's business community will weigh the facts and tell the city and CAP to call off the dogs. Then maybe we as a community can once and for all make progress on this most complicated issue, for the betterment of both housed and homeless people.

Cramer is the chairman of the Task Force and a volunteer since 1986.



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Bob Cramer