

Address homelessness with compassion, not cruelty

From Staff Reports

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The impact of unhoused people in Las Cruces rightfully belongs in discussions about public safety, but those of us with power and the means to amplify our voices must uphold the welfare and dignity of the unhoused. 'Public safety' includes safety for them.

Local business leaders and developers have taken a public stand in recent days to publicize concerns about broken windows, vehicle break-ins, urine and feces at the entrance to businesses and frequent encounters in public with people apparently in the grips of drug abuse or behavioral disorders.

These are people in crisis.

Take Marcial 'Mousie' Cruz, a 34-year-old man who slept in a gully on the corner of Avenida de Mesilla near Interstate 10. When he died alone by the side of that road in February, workers at the nearby gas station, who had come to know him, arranged a memorial service . Mousie was known for his generous spirit and cheerful presence; he mattered. Those who gathered at the remembrance were middle-class homeowners, service workers and some who were also unhoused. No city or county officials or public safety officers made an appearance.

These local policy makers wouldn't be able to look the other way for long. At a Las Cruces City Council meeting last week, homelessness was at the center of complaints about crime laid before city officials. They're topics often conflated, wrongly spoken in the same breath during these discussions. Much of the language at this event, as well as a recent press conference called by business owners to address the same topics, was marked by vilification of the unhoused and lacked evidence-based proposals that might improve our city for all.

One local business owner even suggested in public comments, 'maybe that's why there's a Second Amendment,' after he mentioned feeling threatened by some unhoused people. Mayor Ken Miyagishima and city manager Ifo Pili responded to such comments by pivoting to bail reform and calling for public pressure on state lawmakers to reverse a state constitutional amendment granting pretrial release to defendants who cannot afford to post bail, if they are not deemed a threat to the community. To placate a vocal and influential group, city leaders repeatedly framed the solution in terms of incarceration and criminality, while other prominent voices in the community used images of crime to lobby against expanded housing for those who cannot afford rent — much less a night out at a sports bar. Even the few city councilors who have stepped up to combat this hateful rhetoric haven't done nearly enough to push back. There is a moral blind spot in these debates and we at the

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admit to being part of the problem. Too often we quote familiar sources, turning to those with power — elected officials, business leaders and law enforcement — and rarely to those experiencing homelessness.

Without including those voices, we as journalists exclude the relevant context that explains the systemic failures that leave people

—
our people — sheltering, suffering and dying in the midst of our commercial centers.

It is easy to boost the loudest voices and miss the softer cries of 'the least of these brothers and sisters.' Not all people in their position are as easily approachable as Mousie Cruz; but making us feel comfortable is not their responsibility. We must do better in our role as journalists, and we promise to do so even as we call on our leaders to put humanity and evidence-based solutions at the center of every debate about law enforcement, public safety and homelessness.

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