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A wake-up call on 'rough sleeping'

Britain sets out to drastically cut homelessness

By Thomas K. Grose
Special for USA TODAY

LONDON — Kevin Cull began living on the streets of his hometown of Winchester at age 16, three years after he was orphaned.

Now 37 and HIV-positive, he has lived for nearly two years at Edward Alsop Court, a state-of-the-art hostel for the homeless in the shadow of the Houses of Parliament. It's run by the British branch of the Salvation Army.

During the intervening 21 years, Cull has lived on the streets of several English cities, as well as in countless shelters and rooming houses.

He is among the hardened homeless targeted by Prime Minister Tony Blair, who last week announced an aggressive campaign to drastically cut the number of people "sleeping rough" on British streets.

"It should be a source of shame for all of us that on the eve of a new millennium, rough sleeping is still such a visible problem," Blair said in announcing the program at another London hostel on Dec. 15. "Rough sleeping belongs in the past."

The government estimates that on any given night in Britain, 1,600 people are unhoused, 600 of them in London alone. The new initiative aims to cut those numbers by two-thirds within three years. The plan would:

- Create 5,000 new beds for the homeless, 550 in central London.

- Commit \$600 million to help children who are cared for by the state avoid becoming a new homeless population once they go out into the world in search of work and independent lives. Some of that money will be used to hire more drug- and alcohol-abuse counselors for people already on the streets.

- Provide \$320 million for more housing.

If successful, the program could be a model for other countries dealing with chronic homelessness, including the USA. In a report released the day after Blair's announcement, the U.S. Conference of Mayors said there was a 12% increase in the demand for emergency shelter in the year ending in October 1999 — the largest rise since 1994. Nearly 70% of the 26 U.S. cities in the survey reported growing homelessness.

Half of all rough sleepers in England are alcoholics. 20% are addicted to

drugs and 50% are mentally ill, according to government statistics. Nearly half have been jailed, and 25% are veterans.

The opposition Conservative Party calls the government's program "smoke and mirrors" because it earmarks no new money. Instead, they say, it just repackages funds already in place.

But Britain's leading homelessness charities applaud the government's program. "We are delighted with the strategy's emphasis on getting people off the street for good, in particular its preventative approach," says Chris Holmes, director of Shelter, a program for the homeless. He also praises the provision to alleviate the current shortage of beds, noting that most hostels are full by 9 a.m. each day.

Louise Casey, whose Rough Sleepers Unit oversees the government program, stirred controversy last month when she said charities often exacerbate the problem by giving the homeless handouts of food.

But Capt. Bill Cochrane, Salvation Army spokesman, says Casey was correct

in noting that handouts won't solve the problem: "We only view soup runs and street work as a first step in getting people off the street and into homes."

Cull says he entered the Salvation Army's resettlement program with the goal of eventually living on his own, managing his own needs. He's making progress but has a history of "not being able to cope" once he's living independently. Every time that's happened in the past, he says he's run off to another city and hit the streets, usually ending up in another hostel.

If he succeeds this time, it will be the type of success Britain's Labor government hopes to replicate many times over with its new campaign.

With his poodle-cut long hair, three-day beard, black jacket and jeans, Cull resembles an aging rock star. He admits that, for some hard-core homeless, the streets remain seductive.

"Some people just get used to it on the streets. On the streets, you never go hungry; there's always someone taking pity on you," he says, recalling how he and

friends would follow the soup wagon around London, getting fed.

Other than the cold, "the only real disadvantage" to living on the streets was receiving a smaller benefit (similar to welfare in the USA), Cull says.

If they apply for it, regardless of whether they're living rough, the homeless in Britain are eligible for twice-a-month payments of \$160. Cull gets an extra \$75 disability benefit with each payment, if he's residing somewhere.

Others living on the streets also complain that many shelters are often full and some are too dangerous.

Because not all homeless people are willing to come in from the cold and because so many who do enter shelters often return to the streets, Cochrane admits that the government has set itself a "bold goal," though an achievable one.

Maj. Margaret Hardy, who runs Edward Alsop Court, says the government is correct in addressing the roots of homelessness if it wants to drastically cut the numbers. But she cautions that it might take some time.

"When you start looking at why a person is homeless, it's like peeling an onion. The process of resettling someone is a long one," she says.



Agence France-Presse

Blair: Calls problem 'a source of shame'