



Vouchers may be best for beggars



FEW of us are so callous or cynical not to feel uncomfortable when confronted by someone sitting on the footpath asking for a couple of dollars for a meal or somewhere to sleep for the night. Yet many of us decline to respond to the request. Usually this reluctance to give is not for lack of generosity, and often the discomfort felt is quite genuine. Our reasons for not giving are fairly predictable, and, if my experience is anything to go by, often the basis of lively and slightly anguished discussion at middle-class dinner parties, or even at outdoor restaurants virtually within earshot of the person whose need has prompted the discussion.

Typically, the reasons for not giving are our concern that a token dollar or two will do nothing to deal with the real issues behind the beggar's (as some would describe them) plight, and indeed may be used to maintain the substance dependency, bad habits, socio-economic disadvantage, or emotional disorder that have led to the need to beg.

And, let me own up: I believe these are often proper considerations, by which, rightly or not, I am frequently persuaded.

At the same time, community agencies that seek to provide support for the homeless, whether in the form of short-term shelter or longer-term help, usually depend on endless and distracting fundraising campaigns and the efforts of volunteers, and are forced to operate with resources so limited that they cannot do the work they wish and are constantly turning away those in need.

So all parties are left unsatisfied, and their needs unmet, by this situation: the beggar continues to beg, the many

generous citizens who would genuinely like to help feel unable to do so, and the **¶ . . . the vouchers would nevertheless end up with someone who would benefit in the way intended. ¶**

service providers are frustrated at constantly being short of the funds they need to do the work so clearly required.

There is a better way. I, for one, and I am sure many others, would be quite willing to buy, from a reliable community agency, a book of vouchers that offer a meal, shower, bed and transport — and perhaps longer or more substantial support, too — to a person in genuine need, and willing to accept, those services.

These vouchers could in good conscience be offered to people seeking help, on the basis that those who accepted them needed and would benefit from them; those who declined the help the vouchers offered would presumably be seeking a few dollars for the sort of uses would-be donors remain reluctant to support.

And even if, as a more hard-headed analysis would suggest might occur, these vouchers would sometimes be accepted by those who intended to trade them rather than use them — and who, paradoxically, perhaps are therefore in the greatest need of the assistance they offer — the vouchers would nevertheless end up with someone who would benefit in the way intended.

I do not for a moment suggest that the problems of homelessness and distress can so easily be solved, but using this method, albeit on a small scale, all three parties involved can gain. Those in genuine need of help can secure it, and

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those with a true wish to be generous in an effective way can offer it.

Moreover, if marketed on a substantial scale and over time, the agencies that issue the vouchers would have a new or at least larger and more predictable income stream from donors than is currently available to them, as well as an opportunity to better plan and expand their services. Perhaps, too, such an arrangement could be developed on a collaborative basis between several agencies working in this field.

Government, too, could support such a program, with subsidies based on the more targeted use of funds to provide services that this approach would allow.

One current popular expression in the community sector is social enterprise.

Among other things, this exhorts charities to be more business-like in their work, with more effective approaches to sustainability than reliance on government grants and donations from the public. At the same time business is urged to recognise that profitable activities be directed at social as well as commercial purposes, and to form partnerships with community agencies.

Here, too, this suggestion, with the more systematic approach it envisages to matching supply and demand in servicing a very specific market, might be one example of how this type of thinking might be advanced.

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