

SunSentinel



Sun-Sentinel Editorial

Good Samaritan's next needed step

Arnold Abbott's life mission is to feed the homeless. For decades, he's organized pop-up soup kitchens in church parking lots, public parks and on Fort Lauderdale's famous beach. But following his latest test of wills with City Hall, he's now known as the 90-year-old Good Samaritan who got cited — not arrested — for defying a new ordinance that regulates outdoor food lines for the homeless.

While Abbott's advocacy goes back decades, his story could reach another climax today if, as expected, he again flouts the new law and convenes his Wednesday feeding line on Fort Lauderdale Beach.

City officials know better than to arrest this World War II veteran. They know tourism leaders have been in crisis mode since a video went viral last week that showed police confronting Abbott. No one wants a repeat of Whoopi Goldberg criticizing Fort Lauderdale on *The View* and telling her audience: "He's 90 years old! Why do you want to mess with the old man?"

Abbott has scored big-time notoriety for his cause. He's not only grabbed headlines around the world, he's grabbed this community's attention. For that, and for relentlessly trying to help the downtrodden, he deserves credit.

For let's be honest here. Most of us want to ignore the homeless, until we can't.

Yet this region has a big homeless problem. And shelters are at capacity as we approach winter, when the world's axis encourages destitute people to roll south.

The question facing Abbott is whether he can transform his new-found fame into something that will leave a legacy after he's gone. And the question facing city, county and suburban leaders is whether they can turn this public relations nightmare into a win-win for Abbott, his cause and our community.

Mayor Jack Seiler blames the media for failing to tell the whole story of what happened here. But if that's true, the mayor and city commission also share blame for failing to proactively tell citizens about new ordinances that outlaw panhandling, storing belongings on public property, sleeping in parks and yes, feeding the homeless en masse. Some people characterize the new laws as "criminalizing homelessness."

"Shame on us," Commissioner Dean Trantalis told the Editorial Board. "We did not roll out these ordinances properly. We didn't bring context to our goals. We didn't engage stakeholders who work with the homeless throughout the year. People feel marginalized and are rebelling, which is why we end up on Good Morning America."

So what to do now? Some suggest the city call a timeout on the new public-feeding ordinance, which says social service groups can only host outdoor soup kitchens if they have a place for people to use the bathroom and wash their hands. There's one other important requirement, too. Organizers must secure the property owner's permission, which means that to use the city's beach or parks, the city's permission is needed. And because the ordinance now allows mass feedings at alternative sites, such as church parking lots, officials think that denying public feedings at parks and beaches will pass constitutional muster.

Over the weekend, Abbott said he welcomed a church parking lot as an alternative to his feeding site at downtown's Stranahan Park. But he seems determined to keep his Wednesday feedings on the beach because, he says, the homeless enjoy the beach, too. He suggests he's within his rights because he follows sanitation rules and a public restroom is nearby. But he's missing one key element: the city's permission.

Mayor Seiler says alternative sites have been offered Abbott. The Fort Lauderdale Aquatic Center is one possibility. The Church by the Sea is another. Perhaps Abbott also could ask about using the 200-seat dining room at The Sanctuary on North Federal Highway, where he prepares his food. That way, downtown homeless folks wouldn't have to walk two miles to the beach.

The question is whether Abbott will accept an alternative, or whether his newfound notoriety – and the people it's brought to town – will keep him agitating.

We couldn't reach Abbott on Tuesday. Someone who answered his phone says he was resting and not up for interviews.

If we had reached him, we'd have encouraged him to keep the big picture in mind. The needs of the homeless cannot be solved by one person alone. It takes a village to address this challenge, and you don't get public support by poking people in the eye.

Abbott has had an impact. He's gotten our attention. But for the sake of his constituents and his community, he should agree today to an alternative that keeps people fed and keeps people feeling positive about this beautiful place we all call home.

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