

Social Responsibility of Entrepreneurship
By Marissa Levin, CEO, Information Experts

As Fall approaches, many of us think of the wonderful gifts that the season brings us: the beautiful changing foliage, the opportunity to wear our favorite sweaters & jackets, evenings with friends & family as we share warm meals and blazing fires. But for too many in our society, the changing season brings a sense of dread because of plunging temperatures, lack of substantive food to warm our bodies, and a warm, safe place to sleep.

Homelessness is happening everywhere we turn. It is not somebody else's problem. It is everyone's problem. Regardless of where you live, it is highly likely that you have come across a homeless individual or homeless family. Perhaps you've simply walked right past them as you carry on a conversation on your cell phone. Or maybe you've rolled up your window as they pass by cars stopped at a city traffic light.

As entrepreneurs, we can do better.

As entrepreneurs - leaders who are driven by a need to improve the world around them - we have an obligation to do better.

Business owners have tremendous reach and influence. They have the ability to inspire others to take positive steps, and they call others to action.

Did you know that children under 18 make up 27% of the homeless population? Families with children are now among the fastest growing group of the homeless population. They account for about 40% of the people who become homeless each year. **38% of the people already homeless are families with children.** 50% of America's homeless women and children are running from domestic abuse.

Did you know that of all of the homeless men, 40% of them have served in the Armed Forces? Compare the total adult male population, in which only 34% of the population has served in the Armed Forces. 19% of the urban homeless population is Veterans. Think about that next time you roll up your window when someone walks by your car asking for help at a city light.

Homelessness among families upsets nearly every part of the family's life. It disrupts children's education and development. It affects the emotional and physical health of the family. It often forces family members to separate because of gender or age. Families with children constitute 20% of the homeless. Of those who become homeless, 40% are families with children. That makes them the fastest growing segment of the homeless population.

So now I've pulled at your heartstrings, and you are saying, "Wow, that hits home a lot closer than I ever thought it did. Marissa, what can I do?" Well, I am glad you asked.

As a business owner, you can align with one of the many homeless shelters in your region to become a corporate donor. We happen to support Reston Interfaith because our office is located in Reston, VA. (www.restoninterfaith.org). We participate in coat drives and Thanksgiving drives every year. Like all homeless and transitional shelters, Reston Interfaith is in desperate need of food for its pantry. Donations are down significantly at all shelters, while the need for their services continues to escalate. **As a business owner, you can support Reston Interfaith's need for food to fill Thanksgiving Baskets to that needy families can**

have an enjoyable, food-filled Thanksgiving... something that many of us take for granted. Reston Interfaith will post the information for the Thanksgiving baskets and the coat drive shortly on their website, if you would like more information.

There are shelters all across the country just like Reston Interfaith that need your help. If you have not visited a shelter, you should. For our older son's birthday, in lieu of birthday presents for past birthday parties, he has collected donations to Reston Interfaith, and then has presented them to Kerrie Wilson, Reston Interfaith's CEO. (Kerrie is a fellow SmartCEO BRAVA Award Winner, and has worked tirelessly to ensure that Reston Interfaith's families get the support they need to regain self-efficacy and self-sufficiency).

Through this experience, not only did he gain the gift of a greater appreciation for his own life, he discovered the gift of compassion for children that are just like him... only living in a different environment. He donated the money he collected to purchase books and toys for these children. One notable memory that has remained with him is that these children who live at the shelters board their school buses first in the morning, and exit the school buses last in the afternoon to avoid the embarrassment of living in a shelter. **So it is very possible that if you have children who attend school, they have school mates who live in a shelter, and your family would not even know about it.**

There are so many ways a business owner can make a difference in the lives of others. Toy drives, canned food drives, and clothing drives are just a few ways to make a difference. Supporting specific charities is another way. Donating products or services pro-bono is yet another way to give back.

At the individual level, we can all take small steps to make a big impact. One thing I want to suggest to everyone is to go to Costco or another food warehouse and purchase a case of bottled water and perhaps some granola bars or another non-perishable item. Keep these in your car, on the floor behind your seat. **The next time you are approached by a homeless person, or you see someone on the street, do not pretend you do not see them.**

Give them a bottle of water and a couple of granola bars. It very well be the only thing they have to eat and drink all day. In addition to giving them nourishment and sustenance, you will also give them something that is just as important... hope in humanity that we will take care of one another.

How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the struggling, and tolerant of the weak. Because someday in life you will have been all of these. - George Washington Carver