

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## Why Is There So Much Government Hostility to Private Charity?

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January 10, 2018

Last week brought some of the most brutally cold weather in years to the eastern U.S. In Elgin, Ill., Greg Schiller recognized the threat such cold posed to the area's many homeless people and decided to allow some of them to spend nights in his heated basement.

This selfless act seemed a good thing, praiseworthy even. But the petty autocrats that run Elgin's city government thought otherwise. After inspecting Schiller's property, including measuring the basement's window size, Elgin officials closed his impromptu shelter. According to city officials, "Mr. Schiller's house does not comply with codes and regulations that guard against potential dangers such as . . . inadequate light and ventilation, and insufficient exits in the event of a fire."

Disaster averted. Now the homeless can go back to the safety of sleeping in the cold under bridges.

Schiller's experience with local authorities is, unfortunately, far from unique. Last November, officials in Atlanta ticketed people who were handing out free food to the poor and homeless for "unlicensed operation of a food service establishment." Baltimore also requires organizations to obtain a food-service license before feeding the homeless. Wilmington, N.C., simply prohibits the sharing of food on city streets and sidewalks. Las Vegas bans "the providing of food or meals to the indigent for free or for a nominal fee" in city parks. Orlando prohibits sharing food with more than 25 people in city parks sans a permit, which can only be granted to any one group twice a year. New York City requires all charitable assistance to the poor to pass through one of eight municipally approved organizations. Other municipalities have used zoning ordinances to hamstring homeless shelters.

The evidence suggests that private charity is simply more effective than traditional welfare at both providing for people's immediate material needs and dealing with the barriers to their moving up the economic ladder.

Why, then, is there so much government hostility to the practice?

One might simply conclude that "bureaucrats will be bureaucrats." The enforcers of rules and regulations soon come to believe that, in the absence of those rules, society would collapse — that the rules were disregarded, even for a good cause, we might soon come to question the need for them altogether.

But there is also a troubling skepticism toward the very idea of charity among some progressives. Bernie Sanders once flatly declared that, "I don't believe in charities." He said he objected to "the fundamental concept on which charities are based," that is, individual as opposed to collective or state action.

Similarly, Chrystia Freeland, an editor-at-large at Thomson Reuters, has complained that charity violates the fundamental democratic principle that "we raise money collectively and then, as a society, collectively choose how we will spend it." Eduardo Porter, a writer for the New York Times, cautions that philanthropy is "pretty much unaccountable to society" because it is "unfettered by democratic controls and dictated by the preferences of donors." In arguing against tax incentives for charitable giving, Rob Reich of Stanford University calls charity "the odd encouragement of a plutocratic voice in a democratic society." By offering philanthropists "nothing but gratitude," he complains, we allow a huge amount of power to go unchecked. "Philanthropy, if you define it as the deployment of private wealth for some public influence, is an exercise of power."

In a sense, the opposition to charity can be seen as a characteristic of the modern statist impulse. Both on the progressive left and the nationalist right, there is a growing antipathy to the idea of individualism. The ideal of individual liberty and responsibility that has been at the heart of liberal thinking since the Enlightenment is being jettisoned in favor of a collectivist notion of state primacy. Charity, then, might be seen as the canary in the coal mine.

Of course, few would argue that charity can replace all government efforts to help the poor. But the charitable impulse is still an unequivocal good vital to individual liberty, and every time the government tries to check it, society as a whole loses out.

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