

Editorial: Curing homelessness. Again

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Salt Lake City and Utah got such a good feeling out of curing homelessness last year that they are now setting out to cure it again.

Last week, in an all-too-rare instance of cooperation between the Democrats who run Salt Lake City and Salt Lake County and the Republicans who run the rest of the state, Gov. Gary Herbert signed two key pieces of legislation designed to help the capital city deal with its serious homelessness problem.

One was a measure specifically targeting homelessness with a \$9.5 million down payment toward efforts to build new shelters and add new programs. The other was the Utah version of Medicaid expansion, a paltry effort that should at least help some 16,000 people, mostly the homeless, those with mental illness and people finding their way out of the criminal justice system — three often overlapping populations

But wait a minute. Didn't Salt Lake City already cure homelessness? Weren't there stories in national media, from The Los Angeles Times to "The Daily Show," about Utah's innovative approach to dealing with its homeless population was held up as a model of success?

Well, yes, there were. And, yes, we did. From, as Obi-Wan Kenobi once said, a certain point of view.

What Utah was having truly remarkable success with was a big slice of a very complex problem. The "Housing First" approach was aimed at a target population classified as the "chronically homeless." Those are souls who have been on the street for at least a full year or at least four times over a period of three years. That's a group that included many veterans, and a cohort that reportedly responded well to the deceptively simple approach of just finding people without homes an apartment to live in.

But, as anyone who has been in the Pioneer Park/Rio Grande neighborhood of Salt Lake City recently knows, we still have a long way to go to really eliminate homelessness from our streets. That's what the new programs and plans are for. After many months of study and contemplation by blue-ribbon panels appointed by the city and the county, and a realization on the part of the Legislature that the community's problem is the state's problem, the new money is aimed at providing more services and more shelters for different kinds of people who are homeless for different reasons and require different approaches to address their woes.

Of course, this would all be a lot easier if the state's deep-seeded dislike for Obamacare hadn't stopped it from accepting full Medicaid expansion two years ago.

But the bills the governor signed on Good Friday are a step, another step, in the right direction.