

For homeless, safety first

■ Let police infringe on their freedom and bring them in from the cold

BY ALEXANDER H. ROBERTS

The deaths of three homeless men on Long Island likely would have been avoided last week if police were allowed to force people living on the street into a temporary shelter in the freezing weather.

In a free society, we must be leery of laws that protect people against themselves, but the New York City model of temporarily confining people whose choices pose an imminent threat to their survival, and who appear to be mentally ill, has withstood the test of time. We don't hear much any more about homeless people freezing to death on city streets.

The deaths in Hicksville, Merrick and West Hempstead reminded me of a case that transfixed New Yorkers in 1987, when a homeless mentally ill woman

challenged her involuntary confinement to Bellevue Hospital. Joyce Brown, who called herself "Billie Boggs," had been living over a steam grate. While she presented little danger to others, her occasional incoherence, running into traffic and defecation on herself gave proof enough to the city that she needed to be hospitalized.

The New York Civil Liberties Union protested that she was "a political prisoner" who should be allowed to practice the lifestyle she wanted. But psychiatrists described her as schizophrenic and a danger to herself.

Billie Boggs eventually won her release after a judge agreed that she could not be forced to take antipsychotic drugs. But her illness eventually brought her back to the streets for a time, where she was arrested for fighting, harassing passersby and drug possession, raising the question: How competent was she re-



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ally to make judgments about her own safety?

When 49-year-old George Baldwin was found dead last week on a West Hempstead street, apparently from exposure, it was one day after he had told a television interviewer that he'd rather stay in the cold than in a homeless shelter. Baldwin raised the canard of the shelter as "dangerous."

That was definitely true in the barrack-style shelters of the 1980s. But crime is virtually nonexistent in today's shelters, which stress treatment that allows people to quickly move into permanent housing.

Based upon anecdotal reports from his friends, Baldwin was an

alcoholic whose drinking would not have been allowed in a shelter. But Nassau has a program called "Warm Bed," which Baldwin utilized in the past, that will pick up anyone who calls a helpline and place them in a shelter or motel for the night.

In Suffolk, welfare motels have been replaced with small shelters. With 24-hour supervision, three to five homeless families living together receive services to address health or domestic issues and find permanent housing. This model has been a major factor in reducing the rate of homelessness. Recently, Nassau County has moved in a similar direction.

By all accounts, Baldwin chose to endanger his life because his judgment was impaired. At the least, society must err on the side of caution in very cold weather and provide involuntary shelter. Nassau and Suffolk must enact legislation that authorizes police to impinge upon personal liberty in the interest of saving lives, when those lives are in imminent danger.



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