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Working to provide housing and treatment for the homeless

For the past 15 years I have watched the dramatic increase in population of the chronic homeless in downtown. Simultaneously, I have witnessed the detrimental impact this situation has had on the students of Miami Dade College. Our students come from all walks of life, but have one common goal: To change their lives through the opportunity of education. As a community, we should do what is necessary to support them in that endeavor.

Helping the chronic homeless find the off-ramp to living on the streets and the on-ramp to a safe and meaningful life benefits both the homeless as well as the safety and well-being of students.

Those who criticize attempts to modify the Pottinger settlement fail to recognize that the law was designed to provide safeguards for the thousands of homeless people who were living on the streets 15 years ago. The situation has improved dramatically since then, except for the chronic homeless. Today, the protections deemed necessary in 1998 now allow the remaining homeless to engage in actions not permissible to any other citizen.

Solutions that respect the dignity of the homeless are within reach.

The Downtown Development Authority's Homeless Task Force, which I chaired, has made 17 recommendations, including additional beds, coordinated outreach, case management, outpatient treatment and reviewing the Pottinger settlement. The City of Miami, the Downtown Development Authority and other organizations are working to provide housing and treatment for the homeless. No one is seeking to criminalize homelessness. Allegations to the contrary are at best a misunderstanding of the facts.

We need to amend the rules that tie the hands of law enforcement and enable the chronic homeless to avoid any entry point into the continuum of care.

A federal judge will ultimately decide whether there should be modifications to Pottinger that reflect the realities of today.

Rolando Montoya, provost, Miami Dade College