

Informational Forum re ACR 61 to Establish a Joint Committee on Homelessness in California

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First, let me congratulate Assemblymember Lieber and her co-authors on their leadership. If there was ever a subject or a time that called for such a committee, this is the subject and this is the time. Truly addressing homelessness requires attention to issues not within the jurisdiction of any single standing committee of the Legislature.

Although we sometimes refer to “the homeless” as if homelessness is a distinct property of people, “homeless” is an adjective that describes a situation, not a type of person. Those who find themselves homeless in California, as elsewhere in the world, come almost entirely from the ranks of the very poor, those too poor to afford consistent housing. But among those in our shelters and on the streets are many very different groups of people, many of whom reflect the failures of different social institutions and public policies, as well as bad luck or bad choices. People who are homeless are much more likely to be the product of failed schools that did not prepare them with the skills to compete in global labor markets. Homeless individuals are highly disproportionately the graduates of our foster care and juvenile justice systems. And, perhaps most disturbingly of all, they are much more likely to be people with biologically based mental and other disabilities, including susceptibility to addiction. Lacking access to adequate mental health services, very poor people with mental disabilities who become homeless often become addicted for the first time on the streets. Given the racial distribution of the contributing problems and differential access to services, no one should be surprised that chronic homelessness is much more prevalent among African American men than any other group of individuals. These are but a few of the issues that homelessness in California raises, illustrating the need for a Joint Committee.

I have worked as an advocate and more recently a researcher on issues of homelessness for the past 25 years. There was a time of some optimism that we might have the will to respond to the problems producing mass homelessness. Now there are only a few glimmers of hope, like this resolution and this hearing. Having spent the past several months conducting an in depth investigation of the situation in Los Angeles, my dominant feeling more recently is one of shame and embarrassment for Los Angeles and for California. Our report is not yet final, but I can provide you with some of our findings.

As you may know, nearly one of every three Californians in poverty lives in Los Angeles County. One in every 20 poor people in Los Angeles is homeless at any point in time. One in 7 poor people in Los Angeles will be homeless for some time during a year. These ratios are similar elsewhere in California. For example, in both Los Angeles County and Santa Clara County, the number of homeless individuals on a given

day is 4.95% of the population in poverty. San Francisco has a higher proportion of homeless people to poor people, nearly 11%. But there are some differences. Nearly 90% of homeless individuals in Los Angeles are on the streets or in parks, not in shelters or temporary housing, compared to 70% in Santa Clara County and 43% in San Francisco.

These average numbers obscure some important truths. Although there are more than 13,000 shelter and temporary housing spaces in Los Angeles for the 88,000 homeless people in need of them, the situation is much worse for people with disabilities who are homeless. For every shelter bed or housing unit designed to serve them, there are 18 people who are homeless and have chronic mental disabilities. And for those who are disabled by addiction, or both mental illness and addiction, there are 39 such human beings for every available space. It is small wonder that we have so many very disabled people on the streets, or that they are so concentrated in areas like Skid Row where Los Angeles officials have long concentrated mass shelters, food lines, and other survival services.

This is not to say that shelter is the answer. Twenty five years ago many thought that homelessness was a temporary problem and that shelter was the answer. Very few people believe that today. Homeless people need what the rest of us need: housing. Homeless people with disabilities or addiction problems need what the rest of us need: treatment for our medical problems and help overcoming addiction. Dealing with mental illness, drug addiction or alcoholism is difficult enough, as our celebrity news columns attest. There is scant evidence that people can effectively deal with their mental health or addiction problems while living on the streets. Call it supportive housing or by some other name. What works is what any of us would need: a place to stay and some help with our problems.

So what have we in Los Angeles done in response? In his recent report on his first two years in office, Mayor Villaraigosa touted the creation of an additional 200 shelter beds in his first two years in office. What he didn't say was that the City of Los Angeles is spending well over \$6 million per year of its general fund revenue for the most intensive police crackdown on homelessness in the 50 square blocks of Skid Row, but only \$5.7 million for shelter, housing or services for homeless people in the remaining 464 square miles of the City. He also did not mention the City's loss of \$12 million in Federal homelessness funds, most of it for supportive housing, because of its lack of local commitment.

Worse yet, the City of Los Angeles is violating the first principle of the doctor's oath when it comes to homelessness: "First, do no harm." Since the police assault on Skid Row began last September, the police have written 10,342 citations, many of them for such things as dropping a cigarette ash on the sidewalk (littering) or sitting on a milk crate. Since poor people can't afford to pay the fines for these citations, nearly all of them will go to warrant, meaning the next encounter with the police means a trip to jail, and often the loss of whatever shelter a person had. Much to the dismay of the City, many homeless people arrested return to Skid Row, which is the only place in the City where they have some chance of obtaining food or a place to sleep indoors. The result has

been something even more troubling, the targeting of homeless addicts for so-called drug sales stings in order to send homeless addicts into our State Prison system for a term of years.

Since this effort began in September through last month, LAPD had made 1676 arrests for narcotics sales in Skid Row, but only 116 arrests for possession. Those numbers should tell you something. They do not, however, capture the callousness and inhumanity, to say nothing of poor public policy. LAPD is targeting homeless addicts, most of whom are also mentally disabled, in order to send them to State Prison. Let me tell you the true story of Mr. Y, a homeless African American man in his 30's:

Mr. Y was approached on a Skid Row corner by an undercover police officer who offered him \$20 for two rocks of crack cocaine. Mr. Y told the supposed drug buyer that he didn't have any drugs, but that for \$20 he could probably get some. Mr. Y then went to another homeless addict and obtained 2 rocks of crack cocaine weighing less than one fifth of a gram in total. When he took these drugs to the undercover officer and passed the \$20 to his friend, he was arrested for the sale of narcotics. The police report reflected that this "drug deal" sting involved no less than 25 LAPD officers (13 in plain clothes and 12 uniformed officers). Because Defendant Y had another felony on his record, the District Attorney initially insisted on a term of six (6) years in State Prison. This homeless addict finally agreed to accept a sentence of three years in State Prison for being the middleman in the sale of 0.0067 ounces of cocaine to a team of 25 police officers.

The District Attorney of Los Angeles has a policy of refusing pleas for less than State Prison for drug sales arrests in Skid Row -- and only in Skid Row. The same arrest in Venice would have led to some time in County Jail or a Proposition 36 drug program. I don't need to tell you what kind of help Mr. Y will get in State Prison. And on his eventual release from prison, Mr. Y will be categorically ineligible for both federally assisted housing and food stamps. He will thus join the large group of the permanently homeless disabled the City of Los Angeles is now manufacturing.

Of course, the press relations people for the Mayor and LAPD talk about the effort as not about homelessness but serious crime, often against homeless victims. But the LAPD's own internal documents and data tell a different story. The current police campaign originated in an earlier internal LAPD document entitled *Homeless Reduction Strategies*. And out of the first 2867 arrests made by the 50-officer task force sent into Skid Row, the total number of serious non-drug felonies, crimes with victims (murder, robbery, battery, theft) was: 16.

What might we do instead? Given the current State budget, I will not take your time today to argue that the State has to spend more. I will argue that the State could *save* a good deal of money by the following measures, requiring minimal investment:

1. Investigate and put a stop to the practice of manufacturing permanent homelessness among addicts with mental disabilities, as is now happening in Los Angeles, particularly at the expense of the State Prison system.
2. Follow the example of many other states to maximize the number of the currently or potentially homeless people with disabilities who receive SSI disability benefits and federally subsidized health and mental health care, and leverage those benefits to provide housing or supportive housing. SSI provides enough to pay for housing, particularly through creative master leasing programs like that operated by San Francisco through its “Care Not Cash” program for General Assistance recipients. SSI can help pay for supportive housing, as it does for residents in excellent programs operated in Los Angeles by the Skid Row Housing Trust or LAMP Community. Moreover, people on SSI automatically qualify for Medi-Cal, which brings more federal dollars to California to help pay for the health and mental health care needs of the poor and homeless. We know what such a program takes: adequate health and mental health records, some advocacy, and housing while the process proceeds. But in places like Los Angeles, we are not doing nearly enough. Every City and County receiving State assistance should be required to maximize its efforts to access these federal dollars through tried and tested advocacy programs and the provision of interim housing while applications are processed.
3. Recognize that the objective is not shelter, but stable housing, and that for those who are not sufficiently disabled by federal standards to receive SSI but not realistically employable because of disabilities or lack of education, there will always be those who need some help to avoid homelessness. The General Assistance programs mandated in California since 1855 once met this need. But no more. An internal survey conducted by the County of Los Angeles last year reveals that of the 60,000 recipients of General Relief in the County, about 36,000 are still homeless despite receiving General Relief. This is not surprising, given that the total amount of aid provided for all needs, including housing, is a loan of \$221 per month – precisely what it was 25 years ago. And these are the lucky ones. The County either rejects or cuts off more than 10,000 people each month. And, believe it or not, the situation is much worse in other Counties, as I believe Mr. Tepper will attest.

Let me conclude by observing that I am currently working with a team of some 20 scholars around the world, preparing a book on the response to homelessness in four global cities: Paris, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, and Los Angeles. The story we will have to tell is not flattering to my home City and State. We in Los Angeles and in California should be ashamed to know that in this, by far the wealthiest society, despite the fact that we now know how to end homelessness we are doing so little that is positive and so much that is ineffective, wasteful, and simply wrong. I am pleased, however, that our Legislature may be about to provide some clear focus and leadership. Thank you for beginning that process.