

# Homes for the Homeless

A shelter in Sylmar is a case study for the decentralization of L.A.'s homeless services

~ By ERIC HAAS ~

*Published in LA CityBeat - June 2007*

"I'm all right here. It's peaceful." Betty Wright grips my hand and stares into my eyes. Her voice quavers with earnestness. "It's like a touch of heaven," she says. "I finally have a place to rest." After a lifetime of indigence and itinerancy, Wright moved into Hope Gardens last August. She plans to stay at this haven for the homeless until she dies.

Established by the nonprofit Union Rescue Mission, Hope Gardens is a 78-acre center for the homeless, secluded in a rural canyon near the city of Sylmar. It has been slowly phasing in elderly women as permanent residents for almost a year, and last month single-mother families began moving in on a transitional basis, allowing them to participate in rehabilitative programs for up to three years.

"The main goal," says Andy Bales, chief executive of the Mission, "is to help people educate themselves, find jobs, and re-enter society as productive citizens." A staff of case workers, counselors, and teachers will help the women to care for their children and recover from life on the streets. "We're looking for moms who are ready, willing, and able to make a positive change in their lives," says Scott Chamberlain, director of the Gardens. At full capacity, the center will house approximately 275 people, transferred from shelters around L.A. County.

During a tour of the facilities with Chamberlain and Bales, they proudly show me the manicured lawns and immaculate apartments of this converted retirement home. Laughing children ride bicycles along flower-lined pathways as smiling mothers chat together in the shade. Residents speak about their struggles to maintain dignity while raising their children on the streets. "Almost everywhere, they treat you like crap," explains Olga Koleshchuk. "When your kid has a bloody nose from dehydration, if you're hungry and don't have a place to sleep, it's hard not to give up," adds Veronica Duran-Ramirez.

Estimates of L.A. County's homeless population range between 90,000 and 200,000 on any given night. "Homelessness here is absurd," Bales says. "It's a disgrace."

His assessment is commonplace among the county's service providers and homeless advocates, though reform efforts remain frustrated by scarce funding and a lack of political will. "There are so many coalitions, so many organizations," explains Michael Cousineau, associate professor at the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development. "But without a government plan to address the issues systematically, there's little hope for widespread or sustainable change."

Bales is optimistic that Hope Gardens can help to catalyze a "cultural shift" in the public's perception of homelessness. "We need a broad political consensus," he says, "and to achieve that, we ultimately need people to stop ignoring the problems of homelessness." He is eager to present the Gardens as a model for a new approach. "Per capita, it's actually cheaper to set up a system like this than it is to run the programs in Skid Row," he says.

The comparison to Skid Row is not accidental. Media stories and images of the women in Hope Gardens have become a powerful argument for what many local politicians, business associations, and

development commissions, as well as the editorial board of the L.A. Times, have taken to calling the “decentralization of services” from downtown L.A.

State Senator Gilbert Cedillo (D-Los Angeles) is currently pushing a “Fair Share Zoning Bill” (SB 2), which would require cities to assess their need for homeless services, and then zone areas where those services could be provided by non-governmental organizations. Only 26 of the 87 cities in L.A. County currently have such

areas zoned.

“This has been going on far too long,” says L.A. City Councilmember Jan Perry. “Cities need to start taking on their own responsibilities.” Hope Gardens, she says, “is a perfect example of how this can be done.”

Historically, one major obstacle to setting up centers like Hope Gardens has been resistance from local communities, in the form of so-called NIMBY campaigns. It took the Mission more than five years just to find a site for the Gardens, and, even after winning the \$7.38 million bid, the organization had to negotiate 34 government hearings over 21 months, which cost an additional \$1.9 million in interest payments and legal fees. Few groups have the resources to overcome such barriers.

As families phase in to residency at the Gardens, however, NIMBY concerns seem to have dissipated. “They came at the beginning to check us out,” explains shelter resident Ethel Brooks. “I guess they realized we’re not monsters or something ... we haven’t had any problems after that.” Bales hopes this is a sign that neighborhood resistance can be overcome, and that SB 2 can pave the way for a radical change in how L.A. County treats its homeless population.

However, because cities would be asked to carry out their own needs assessments, and would suffer no consequences for neglecting to do so, the potential effects of the legislation remain unclear. Becky Dennison, codirector of advocacy group the Los Angeles Community Action, makes a distinction between “decentralization” – which she fears may be used “as a rhetorical cover for the evisceration of services” – and “regionalization, which would add new services for the homeless at their communities of origin, without altering the services available in Skid Row.”

The controversy over decentralization closely mirrors other contentious aspects of downtown’s transformation, such as the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI), which has led to greatly intensified police pressure on Skid Row. SCI is closely modeled on the so-called “broken windows campaign” that L.A. Police Chief William J. Bratton conducted to successfully “clean up” Times Square when he was police chief in New York City. His efforts there, however, were accompanied by \$1.7 billion in funding for the construction of new low-income housing units – an aspect of the New York campaign that SCI has yet to replicate.

“There’s been a kind of schizophrenia in city policy,” observes Jeff Dietrich, who for more than 20 years has worked as a service provider and journalist on Skid Row. “Mostly what we’ve seen is a drastic increase in arrests and harassment.”

Law enforcement officials consider their increased presence beneficial to the Skid Row community. “We’re arresting the criminals that are victimizing the poor,” says Capt. Jodi Wakefield, area commander of the Central Division. “Crime has gone down 33 percent in Skid Row,” affirms Deon Joseph, Senior Lead Officer for downtown. “It used to be a Mardi Gras for criminals here.”

Whatever the immediate effects of SCI policies, however, the long-term results will be tied to the future of decentralization plans. “People will go wherever the services are,” notes Councilmember Perry.

“What we really need is microsystems of care,” says USC’s Professor Cousineau. The example of Hope Gardens is encouraging, he says, but “we need services that can address the needs of the mentally ill, issues of substance abuse – we need the diversity of services available in Skid Row to be replicated throughout the county.”

“It’s simply too early to tell what’s going to happen,” Bales says. “But unless we can get some real unified political support,” he adds, “you can pretty much bet that things aren’t going to improve.”