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L.A.'s homeless: A progress report

A new checklist indicates that we still have a long way to go when it comes to solving the problem.

By Jennifer Wolch, Gary Blasi and Michael Dear

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Nearly 18 months ago, a group of scholars released a study on homelessness in Los Angeles County. The report, "A Reality-based Approach to Ending Homelessness in Los Angeles," said that a worsening economy, a shortage of affordable housing, cutbacks in welfare programs and personal vulnerabilities (including mental disabilities and health-related issues) were all contributing to a rise in homelessness in the county, and that skid row was bearing the brunt of the burden of caring for them.

To ameliorate the situation, the study urged that more jobs be created for the homeless; that public assistance be increased so that recipients could better afford a roof over their heads; that more supportive housing be built; that more municipalities provide services for the homeless; and that political leaders across the county cooperate on relieving homelessness.

So, has the homeless situation, and the factors that contribute to it, improved?

Overall, the number of homeless people in L.A. County has fallen by more than 16% since 2005, according to a count by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. In 2007, there were 73,702 homeless people, down from 88,345 in 2005. But although the ranks of Anglo and Latino homeless have declined, the number of African Americans living on the street remains the same.



The 54 scholars involved in the January 2007 study, including us, recently identified nine indicators to measure progress on combating homelessness in the county. Here's what we found.

- * There is still not enough affordable housing. For instance, the city's general housing plan called for 4,000 units to be built annually between 2001 and 2006, but since 2001, the city actually has lost more than 11,000 affordable units.
- * Supportive housing remains scarce. Such housing provides healthcare, drug treatment, mental health services and counseling for people with special needs, such as a disability. According to the Homeless Services Authority, there is a shortage of 36,000 permanent supportive units in the county. To put it another way, for every bed that becomes available, there are 11 people who want it.
- * Emergency and transitional housing and services are in short supply. The county is short 5,000 emergency beds and 14,000 transitional beds in hospitals and shelters. For every emergency bed, there are 16 people who need it; for every transitional bed, nine people are waiting.
- * Government health and welfare programs remain inadequate. For more than 25 years, general relief, the county's last-resort program for unemployed and disabled people, has been \$221 a month -- \$2,652 a year -- for a single adult, far below the federal poverty level of \$10,400 for a one-person household. Not surprisingly, almost two-thirds of general-relief recipients end up homeless. Making matters worse, MediCal and Medicare payments, as well as those from CalWORKS, the state's welfare program, are reaching fewer and fewer homeless adults and children in part because of tightening eligibility standards.
- * More than half the homeless receive food stamps, the most important federal emergency food program. Typically, however, food stamps, which are distributed once a month, last only 2 1/2 weeks. More than half of general-relief recipients skip meals or reduce meal size because they lack money, according to a survey by Los Angeles County's Department of Public Social Services.
- * Although many homeless people are employed and are employable, their pay is far below what L.A. County defines as a living wage -- \$11.84 an hour. Unfortunately, job-training programs cannot offset this market reality.
- * L.A.'s respect for the civil liberties of homeless people remains disgraceful. In 2006, the city and the Los Angeles Police Department instituted the Safer City Initiative, which combined aggressive policing against drug dealing, prostitution and thievery on skid row with more social services for those in need. The promised services never materialized, but more than 18,000 skid row residents have been cited or arrested since the program began in September 2006, most often for petty offenses such as littering or crosswalk violations.
- * Most municipalities in L.A. County spend less than 1% of their operating budgets on homeless services or housing. The result is that the burden of caring for the homeless disproportionately falls on cities, such as Los Angeles, that provide services. Unfortunately, this has not changed since January 2007, and the lack of a regionwide commitment to alleviating homelessness remains an impediment to success.
- * Political leadership to combat homelessness has improved somewhat. A new leader at the Homeless Services Authority moved rapidly to increase the agency's effectiveness. The county's Project 50, a program that borrows from New York City's successful approaches to homelessness, pledged to put 50 chronically homeless people into supportive housing within 100 days. So far, more than 30 of the hardest-to-house people have shelter. And despite its fiscal travails, the city last year succeeded in amassing \$50 million from diverse sources for the Affordable Housing Trust Fund, including \$8 million of its own funds. This year, however, the city will make no contribution.

Clearly, Los Angeles has much to do if it's going to change its status as the homeless capital of the country.

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