



# Homeless, Not Hopeless

How Sacramento can end a chronic problem

By Diane Luther

**T**o some, ending chronic homelessness is the modern-day, metropolitan version of tilting at windmills.

But there's nothing quixotic or hopeless about trying.

This past fall, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors and the Sacramento City Council adopted a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness. We're beginning to implement the plan.

The first step was to establish a baseline so we would know, as precisely as possible, how deep and wide-ranging homelessness is in the region. In the wee hours of January 30, volunteers conducted a count of homeless people in shelters and parks and on streets and levees throughout the county. The findings will be released later this spring.

According to local, state and national studies, about 10 percent of homeless people are "chronically" homeless. A chronically homeless person is someone who has been adrift for a year or more or who is repetitively homeless because of a disabling condition. These are people who have mental illnesses, physical illnesses or disabilities, alcohol or drug addictions or other special issues that keep them from maintaining housing without assistance. They might be the people walking around with shopping carts while talking to themselves. They are the people about whom we often wonder: How did they get this way?

About 1,600 people are chronically homeless in Sacramento today.

Can anything be done to help them?

Experts believe that much can be done. Researchers, social workers, housing providers and others feel that the answer to chronic homelessness is permanent supportive housing. During the past few years, jurisdictions across the nation have proved it. Portland, Oregon, for example, has removed more than 900 chronically homeless people from its streets by providing permanent supportive housing.

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Permanent supportive housing is very-low-rent housing, easily accessible to hard-to-house people, accompanied by supportive social services to help them remain stable.

In Sacramento, we are beginning to develop two types of permanent supportive housing: units through leasing and units through development.

The units-through-leasing program is making arrangements with for-profit as well as nonprofit landlords throughout Sacramento County to rent small apartments to clients of programs with mental health and other support services. The availability of these support services, along with rent subsidies, provides incentives for landlords to rent to

people who otherwise might not be considered ideal tenants.

This approach is an effective and humane way to reduce homelessness and enhance quality of life for participants. Sacramento County's goal is to add 218 of these units during the next two years.

Units through development is the other critical strategy of the 10-year plan. It's designed to assist people with disabilities who require more support than can be provided through a units-through-leasing approach. They need continuing site-based support services in housing communities where mental, physical and health issues can be better addressed and accommodated.

The Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency is working to create new permanent supportive housing. The goal of the 10-year plan is to develop at least 280 units in the next five years.

To be sure, there are other strategies in this comprehensive plan, including coordinated street outreach and intake; a new leadership structure for the homeless service system; improved discharge planning from jails and hospitals; diversion of qualified individuals from the criminal justice system; and a downtown single-room-occupancy preservation program.

As we pursue these goals and programs, we realize we will need to answer an underlying question: Why should we even bother to end chronic homelessness?

The answer: compassion and economics.

To be chronically homeless is to experience a sad, desperate human condition. But for those of us fortunate enough not to be in this situation, it's also an expensive condition. Chronically homeless people meander through a continuing cycle from the streets to jails to emergency rooms to psychiatric wards to detoxification facilities. They use substantial public resources that we all pay for.

Several studies have shown that providing housing plus services for homeless people with disabilities is cheaper than leaving them homeless. For example, a 2006 study conducted in Portland, Oregon, shows that for a group of 293 chronically homeless people who were provided with housing linked with intensive support services, the cost to the public decreased by more than \$16,000 per client in the first year of enrollment. That's an annual savings of more than \$4.7 million in public costs.

It's no wonder that downtown business districts in large and small cities throughout the country have identified ending homelessness as a high priority. With the support of Sacramento County's leaders and citizens, we feel confident that, in the foreseeable future, the words "homeless" and "hopeless" won't be inextricably linked.

*Diane Luther is the director of Sacramento's Ending Chronic Homelessness Initiative. To view the 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness, go to [communitycouncil.org](http://communitycouncil.org).* ●