

Meeting the Needs of California's Homeless:

It Takes More Than A Roof

Executive Summary

California's streets, parking lots, greenbelts, alleys and stairwells are host to thousands of homeless individuals. Although an exact head count has eluded experts, the estimates in California range from 100,000 to 250,000 homeless. Their common link is the lack of a stable, permanent roof over their heads. But beyond that link, their problems are diverse and their needs may be multiple.

In California, 16 programs specifically targeting the homeless are spread across at least 10 state departments and six different state agencies, not counting the more generic state benefit and rehabilitation programs that arguably keep many more people from joining the ranks of the homeless.

These state efforts are not carried out in isolation: The needs of the homeless are also targeted by local governments, charities, private foundations and the federal government, which often bypasses the state and deals directly with local organizations. Altogether, more than \$780 million is spent on homeless programs in California yearly (this does not include bond money such as the \$450 million approved by voters in 1988).

The Commission on California State Government Organization and Economy (also known as the Little Hoover Commission) has spent almost two years studying the state's response to the needs of the homeless.

The Commission considers homelessness a multi-faceted problem that must be approached with solutions addressing three levels of need: emergency, transitional and permanent. Within that context, the Commission--which by statute reviews state policies and actions--focused on the role of the state as a provider of programs and funds, and as a facilitator of solutions.

The Little Hoover Commission has concluded that despite intense interest in meeting the needs of the homeless and despite the allocation of considerable resources to do so, the state has failed to provide an effective safety net that ensures people will be adequately housed.

The Commission's investigation resulted in the following

findings:

A. Because of diffused leadership, services provided for the homeless are fragmented. As a result, some segments of the homeless population are not served or are served inadequately.

Programs around the state are as diverse as the homeless themselves. But the effectiveness of this diversity is hampered by a lack of firm leadership and policy direction from above. Because no one agency or individual is in charge of setting priorities for spending, some categories of homeless are left with few or no programs and there is little control over efficient use of dollars.

B. Availability of the three main types of homeless programs (emergency, transitional and permanent) is uneven, and there is no efficient, coordinated method of moving the homeless through the different programs.

The homeless are being served by a wide array of programs--when they are available and when connections are made. But the result of having programs that are not thoroughly integrated and "user friendly" is predictable: Many people remain on the streets rather than successfully extracting aid from the bureaucracy that has grown up around homeless programs.

C. Because there is no cohesive approach to a statewide housing policy, many actions at various levels of government drive up the cost of housing and/or discourage the availability of adequate, affordable housing.

The law of supply and demand is a major factor in the rapidly escalating price of housing in California. With the rapid expansion of population moving into the state, the supply of housing--particularly affordable housing--cannot keep up with the demand.

In addition, many laws and programs have a direct, readily recognizable effect on housing availability. But other policies, while having no on-the-surface link to housing, still have an indirect, and cumulative, effect on affordable housing. With no overall statewide housing policy in place to rein in counterproductive measures, the result is a complicated array of laws and regulations that contribute to increases in the cost of both rentals and home purchases.

Flowing from these findings, the Commission's report recommended the following actions:

1. The diverse state programs dealing with the homeless should be unified under the state Health and Welfare Agency.

Although the state has been diligent in its coordination

efforts across many agencies and departments, strong leadership is lost in the shuffle. The bulk of state homeless programs are already under the Health and Welfare Agency, but a significant and high-profile portion of these programs are housed within the Department of Housing and Community Development, which is under the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency.

2. The Department of Housing and Community Development should set up a unit to qualitatively evaluate local homelessness efforts based on state-promulgated priorities and policies, and aggressively recommend model programs and alternatives to local regions.

The state should be leading in efforts to replicate model programs, direct spending to the most efficient and productive uses and allocate resources in a manner to target those with the greatest need and/or those who can be most helped.

3. The Department of Housing and Community Development should serve as a clearing house for information on programs for the homeless.

In its clearing house role, the department should attend to functions such as (but not limited to) producing yearly updates of shelters around the state; compiling annual reports on programs and expenditures by region; and listing and tracking legislation affecting the homeless and housing.

4. The Governor and the Legislature should expand the duties of the Attorney General's Charitable Trust Division so that it can operate more effectively on the public's behalf.

The division should be given enough staff and resources to adopt the national standard reporting model for charities, set up a toll-free hot-line for potential contributors and register professional fund-raisers.

5. The Governor and the Legislature should fund the creation of Homeless Coordinated Intake Centers, funneling one-time grants to counties through the Department of Housing and Community Development.

These one-stop reception centers would take all newly homeless individuals, assess their varied needs and hook them into all available and applicable programs (federal, state, local and private services would be represented at the centers).

6. The Governor and the Legislature should require the Health and Welfare Agency to create a training program for homeless case management workers and provide such training to county personnel.

The training program would ensure that case management workers would be familiar with the gamut of benefits available from federal, state, local and charitable agencies, as well as with the range of needs usually found in the homeless.

7. The Governor and the Legislature should amend the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act to further define "gravely disabled" to allow a wider scope for treatment of the homeless mentally disabled.

The civil rights and liberties of the mentally ill should not be ignored; but these people are not served by a "right to choose" when they don't have the mental capacity to make appropriate choices. The Governor and the Legislature should redefine gravely disabled to include a person who, "based on the historical course of the person's disorder, is likely to deteriorate without treatment until he is unable to care for his own personal need for food, clothing or shelter."

8. The Governor and the Legislature should create a "provisional leave" program for mentally ill persons for continued monitoring after involuntary care is completed.

Some patients who are released after involuntary commitment fail to continue treatment and deteriorate to the point where they must be involuntarily committed again. This "yo-yo" syndrome can be broken by requiring those who have been involuntarily committed several times in the course of two years to participate in a 180-day outpatient program that ensures adequate food, clothing, shelter and medical care.

9. Any new funding of emergency shelters, such as from state bond money, should be focused on facilities for homeless families, runaway youths and dual-diagnosed individuals (mentally ill substance abusers).

There is universal agreement that homeless programs are lacking for families, runaway youths and dual-diagnosed individuals.

10. The Governor and the Legislature should investigate the use of state-owned, vacant, surplus property for development of transitional housing, particularly for the mentally disabled.

The use of surplus property should be explored, including the development of lands around state mental institutions for transitional housing purposes.

11. The Governor and the Legislature should expand the use of tools to place people in permanent housing.

The state has made use of many innovative programs and should explore expanding those and creating others, including: rental

deposit programs, mortgage credit programs, incentives for federally subsidized housing to remain in subsidy programs, developer density bonuses and so-called benevolent lending programs.

12. The Governor and the Legislature should study the interplay and effect of land use factors including, but not limited to, slow-growth initiatives, locally imposed building fees, general plan housing elements, rent control and restrictive zoning practices.

The Governor and the Legislature last year requested the Little Hoover Commission to investigate the effects of growth control measures on the availability and affordability of housing (SB 2895, Chapter 1423 of the Statutes of 1988). The study was delayed when funding was deleted from the 1988-89 budget. The study should be funded and expanded to cover the entire range of elements that affect housing construction. The study would include recommendations for statewide policy changes.

13. The Governor and the Legislature should authorize a complete review of the Building Standards Code.

The federal General Accounting Office issued a report several years ago that concluded that unnecessary building standards add 30 percent to the cost of housing. While safety and durability should remain top considerations, the state Building Standards Code should be reviewed with an eye to adopting improved technology and cost-effective techniques, as well as eliminating duplicative requirements and aesthetic frills.