

Editorial: Coalition's plan on homelessness needs our support

Mercury News Editorial

Tuesday, May 13, 2008 05/13/2008

Some social problems are so overwhelming that they seem insolvable.

Homelessness is one. About 7,000 homeless people wander the streets of Santa Clara County on any given day, sometimes in desperate need of shelter for the night.

It would be easy to remain indifferent to their plight. But an unlikely coalition of county and San Jose officials is leading an extraordinary effort that has a chance to end one of the valley's most vexing forms of suffering.

Better yet, its 10-year plan is designed to reduce the overall costs of services to the homeless. The plan deserves the community's full support.

The coalition's name - "The Blue Ribbon Commission on Ending Homelessness and Solving the Affordable Housing Crisis in Santa Clara County" - needs work. But its strategy is straightforward.

About 35 percent of the homeless population is chronically without shelter. The remaining are temporarily so. The one thing they share in common is the need for safe, stable housing and immediate access to services. The plan's strength lies in combining permanent housing with a one-stop support center to tackle mental illness, addiction and other related issues that eventually lead to chronic homelessness. Similar efforts in other metropolitan areas are producing promising results.

A planned medical respite facility - which has already gained county approval - would provide a clean, safe place for homeless patients to recuperate. Hospital officials agree that it could shorten the number of days patients need to stay in costly hospital care and have the added benefit of reducing the odds that homeless patients would need to be re-admitted.

As county Supervisor Don Gage has noted, the cost of a chronically homeless person who bounces back and forth between shelters, jail and Valley Medical Center is well over \$50,000 a year.

Gage is co-chairing the commission with San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed. While the city and county have had their share of disagreements over the years, this commission provides an excellent example of cooperation.

More than two dozen community leaders are joining forces with Gage and Reed.

Their biggest obstacle: raising \$25 million over the next five years. The money would provide the necessary housing to serve the homeless and affordable housing for those on the verge of homelessness.

Since both the county and the city are facing budget shortfalls, they are working to raise the funds from local foundations. A major initial gift would jump-start the effort.

Every week, on average, more than one homeless person in Santa Clara County dies of neglect. Hundreds more could potentially live productive lives if they had shelter and a network of support. The necessary manpower and organization are in place. All that's required now is the will.