

Editorial: Stable housing is key to curbing homelessness

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A little-heralded breakthrough of the past few years has been the discovery of a strategy to reduce homelessness that actually works.

If the success of the "Housing First" approach continues, America could achieve the domestic equivalent of bringing down the Berlin Wall.

The basic premise is that if you get the chronically homeless into housing and line up the services they need to deal with their problems, they actually stay in the homes. And often their disability income and other programs pay the costs.

Fortunately, Silicon Valley is adopting this strategy with "Destination: Home," the coalition of Santa Clara County and San Jose officials who have put together a 10-year plan to end homelessness.

The valley should also be relieved that its biggest agency for the homeless - EHC LifeBuilders - has stabilized financially after nearly going under last fall.

The positive developments come at the same time more Silicon Valley residents are plunging into homelessness - not the chronic population, who have regularly been on the streets for years, but people hit by the foreclosure crisis and a slowing economy. EHC's main local shelter is turning away 20 to 40 people a night - and it's summertime. If things continue to worsen, record numbers could be thrown into the streets.

The urgency of adding to the valley's supply of affordable housing has never been greater.

Progress on the homeless front made headlines last week with the Bush administration's report that the number of homeless Americans had dropped 12 percent from 2005 to 2007. But the number only takes into account the chronically homeless, which equates to about 35 percent of the homeless population. It's good news that validates the "Housing First" approach, but it doesn't address those who are simply victims of the bad economy or personal hardship.

Here in the valley, the decrease in the chronically homeless was only 3.8 percent. That means well over 5,000 people are still wandering the streets on any given day.

"Destination: Home" is pushing forward with its plan to offer safe, stable housing and immediate access to services for those in need. The strategy emphasizes combining permanent housing with a one-stop support center designed to keep people from becoming chronically homeless.

EHC LifeBuilders' interim chief executive, Jennifer Loving, reports that her agency is seeing extra pressures on families as they try to deal with the financial squeeze.

Loving also says that an increasing number of the homeless are senior citizens, who are poorly equipped to being on the streets.

Sometimes they suffer from dementia or are unable to walk without assistance. The one thing they share in common is they have nowhere to go and no one to care for them.

"It's heartbreaking," Loving says.

That's why those working on behalf of the homeless are pushing so hard to add to the existing stock of affordable housing.

The immediate goal of Destination: Home is to raise \$25 million by 2013. That's a small price to pay for helping to end one of our most overwhelming problems.