

Working together, we can end homelessness

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On Nov. 26, EHC LifeBuilders opened cold-weather shelters at armories in Sunnyvale and Gilroy, providing 250 beds of nightly emergency shelter through March. With support from the county, several cities and thousands of volunteers, the agency has operated this program for over 20 years. However, the continued need for the cold-weather shelters underscores a much larger problem in our community: according to the 2007 Santa Clara County Homeless Census, nearly 20,000 residents experience homelessness each year.

In Silicon Valley, where a minimum-wage earner with a family would have to work 146 hours a week to afford a two-bedroom apartment, the origins of the homelessness crisis are readily apparent. A lack of affordable housing, coupled with federal and state cutbacks in social services and a predominance of low-paying jobs, mean personal hardships can quickly push people onto the streets. On a daily basis, working parents, emancipated foster youth, disabled veterans and many others face this threat.

The homeless of Santa Clara County - greater in number than in San Francisco - frequently vanish into the landscape. They sleep out of sight on the banks of creeks, under freeways, or in cars and tents. They rent cheap motel rooms or "couch surf" with friends and relatives. When winter comes, many find their way to the county's cold-weather shelters for a pad and a blanket on a cement floor. In 2007, 71 of these individuals died in Santa Clara County while living on the streets or in temporary housing.

Historically, non-profits have provided the bulk of homeless services, relying heavily on government funding to operate. But with federal dollars steadily dwindling, these organizations are expected to do more with less, continually hoping to raise greater private contributions to compensate for the decreased public funding. But hope is not a reliable strategy. Where will people go if cold-weather shelters close?

We must meet the current needs of the homeless population, while seeking long-term solutions. Over the past few years, much attention has been given to the latter. San Jose has led all California cities in the development of affordable housing. And in 2005, Santa Clara County adopted a 10-year plan to end chronic homelessness. At the center of the plan is the "Housing First"

approach, which helps people regain and maintain permanent housing. At work on the issue is a Blue Ribbon Commission on Homelessness and Affordable Housing, initiated by county Supervisor Don Gage and co-chaired by San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed.

But providing immediate support for people living on the streets needs to become a higher priority. The public must engage this issue head on. We as a community need to decide that homelessness, and the human misery that results, are not in our best interest. When Santa Clara County residents achieve stable housing, their health, employment and contributions to the community dramatically improve. Studies show it costs more to help people while they live on the streets - where many use expensive emergency medical services or end up in jail - than it does to provide permanent housing with supportive services.

In spite of our best efforts, the cold-weather shelters will most likely be filled to capacity throughout this winter. Each person who walks through those doors signifies a loss for all of us. Homelessness cannot be resolved without a community-wide commitment. It is smarter, more cost-efficient and kinder to come together to alleviate this most basic human suffering - not only for the homeless, but for ourselves as well.