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Diverting Skid Row's Homeless — But to Where?

Advocates Oppose a Plan to Expand the City's Unsuccessful 'Streets or Services'

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LOS ANGELES - Sometimes it's hard to understand Dorothy Mendez when she speaks. The 56-year-old homeless woman is missing her top dentures, which were confiscated when she was arrested in December for illegal lodging, she said.

"They were in a cup and I asked, 'Can I at least get my teeth?' and [the officer] said, 'No, you should have had them in your mouth,'" Mendez said. "He said he was taking them to storage and now they're gone."

Mendez has been arrested seven times in the last year for a variety of so-called "quality of life" crimes, like sleeping on the street, and drug-related offenses like possession of a crack pipe.

But arrest records don't reflect all the times Mendez has been released before being taken to county jail. She said she has been arrested close to 20 times since the city launched its crackdown on Skid Row last year.

"I've been arrested three, four times each month for sitting on a crate, for sitting on the sidewalk, for sleeping on the sidewalk, for blocking the sidewalk, for possession of some kind of paraphernalia," Mendez said. "I go in, I stay for 30 or 60 or 90 days. I'll be out two weeks and they'll arrest me again."

Mendez is not an anomaly on Skid Row. There are at least 62 people who were arrested six or more times in the first 10 months of the policing initiative. Most of those arrests were made within a 10-block radius.

The last time she was arrested, Mendez was offered a chance to keep the violation off her long record if she agreed to participate in City Attorney Rocky Delgadillo's Streets or Services program, the social service arm of the policing initiative.

The program is supposed to offer shelter and assistance to homeless people arrested for misdemeanor crimes. The goal is to keep them out of the criminal justice system.

But of the 7,528 people arrested in the first 10 months of the crackdown on Skid Row, only 34 people graduated from the program, meaning they stayed in an assigned shelter for at least 21 days, according to a recent UCLA Law School analysis of police statistics.

Now, the city attorney's office is asking for \$830,000 in homeless program funds to expand Streets or Services. The City Council will vote on that request today.

It's not a lot of money, but the proposed expansion gets to the heart of the controversy surrounding the city's policing efforts on Skid Row and has angered many who work with the homeless.

Advocates for the homeless said the city wouldn't need to use scarce resources to divert people away from the criminal justice system if it wasn't already spending \$6 million a year for 50 additional Skid Row officers to put more homeless people into the same system.

They said the money should go to programs that keep people off the streets and address their needs, not to a city program with a low success rate and no capacity for keeping people housed long-term.

"Why is it the few dollars we have for homeless services in the city are going to a program that has one of the most abysmal failure rates imaginable?" said Casey Horan, executive director of LAMP Community, an organization providing housing and mental health resources to the homeless on Skid Row.

"And what is success for them? Moving someone to a shelter for 21 days?" Horan asked. "How many lives have they turned around? How many people are no longer homeless? That is success. And their success rate is zero."

The city attorney's office said it wants to create a much-needed bridge to services, and that the added funds will allow at least one city attorney to work on the diversion program full time.

"You need personnel within the criminal justice system," said Jose Egurbide, who runs the Streets or Services program for the city attorney's office. "If you want us to get into the social service arena, we need a couple attorneys that know the lingo, that know the option, so that we can make smart choices."

Advocates said there are no services on the other side of that bridge.

The last time Mendez was arrested, she was offered 21 days at the Midnight Mission through the Streets or Services program.

Between July and October of this year, 210 people enrolled in the program and 24 graduated. Of the 210, at least 50 percent were sent to Skid Row's missions.

Advocates said the fact that people are going to the missions accounts for the program's failure. While the missions provide emergency shelter and services, they are not set up to address long-term needs, they said.

Cities across the country have found that emergency shelters have little success in ending an individual's homelessness.

That's especially true, providers said, for people like Mendez, who have been on the street for a long time and have a mental disability or drug addiction. In the last few years, the federal government has focused on building housing for these people, who utilize a disproportionate amount of resources as they cycle in and out of jail and emergency rooms. In big cities, the government estimates each of these people cost taxpayers \$100,000 per year.

Other cities across the nation have shifted their services to the "housing first" model, using housing as a first step to recovery rather than as a reward for enrolling in mental health and drug-addiction services. Housing with on-site services, called permanent supportive housing, keeps people out of emergency rooms and jails, and costs between \$10,000 and \$16,000 per person per year. Despite its success, Los Angeles has been slow to adopt this model.

As a result, some of the city's permanent supportive housing providers have waiting lists that exceed 500 people.

"When we have a vacancy, we fill it up as soon as the paperwork will allow" Horan said. "Everyone is at capacity. When there's an opening, we're at capacity an hour later."

These providers do not want limited city funding spent on emergency shelter.

"You're just fueling the cycling" of homeless people in and out of emergency services, Horan said. "You could take that money and house 52 [homeless] people with disabilities and provide services for them for a year."

Egurbide agrees the city needs more permanent supportive housing.

"I still have a hard time trying to get individuals with serious mental health issues into permanent supportive housing," he said. "I have a hard time finding it. In Los Angeles, the permanent supportive housing stock is so limited."

But he said diverting people away from jail into emergency shelter "may not be ideal, but it's better than nothing."

"The city has not transitioned yet to a permanent supportive housing model and the city attorney's office is stuck in the middle," he said. "We're trying to do the right thing but we've got limited resources."

When the crackdown on Skid Row was announced last year, officials said heavier policing would be accompanied by increased housing and support services for the homeless. But the city has yet to invest in more housing and services. And Streets or Services, born years ago out of a failed attempt to create a community court, has been the city's only attempt to connect the policing effort to shelter.

Streets or Services is a pre-filing diversion program, meaning the city attorney's office agrees not to file an arrest if police officers determine the person they arrested qualifies for the program. The city attorney's office recently created a more holistic program, called Project HALO, which includes post-filing diversion as well, meaning city attorneys agree not to prosecute a case if a county social worker determines that person would benefit from services.

Public defenders who have worked with city attorneys on post-filing diversion said Project HALO has had some success. The city attorney's office has applied for a county grant for the pilot project.

But the \$830,000 in leftover homeless service dollars would fund only Streets or Services. Egurbide said some of the money would pay for the full-time city attorney and the rest would be available to service providers who want to house program participants.

Currently, the city attorney's main partner in the program is a group called People Assisting the Homeless, or PATH.

PATH's Maggie Willis said the program was never intended to create new resources, but simply to help people avoid arrest.

"You open a window of opportunity to people with the incentive that the arrest won't go on their record," she said. "If we can keep people out of the court system for two weeks, that's a win."

Willis said the program was not equipped to deal with the rise of arrests from the crackdown.

"Now we're trying to match the additional officers [in the Skid Row area] with additional resources for Streets or Services," she said.

But providers said a more economic and humane solution would be to reduce the number of arrests. They said taxpayers should not pay for the police to put the homeless in jail while paying for city attorneys to keep them out.

Since the initiative began, officers have made an average of 750 arrests each month on Skid Row. Of the 7,528 arrests in the first 10 months of the initiative, only 22 were for violent offenses, including one homicide. The officers also have handed out more than 1,000 citations per month, a majority for pedestrian offenses like jaywalking and littering.

A jaywalking ticket carries a \$117 fine. Late fees and other penalties raise that fine significantly and eventually result in a debt-collection process and arrest warrant. Civil rights attorneys recently sued the city, saying tactics for policing the area's poor and homeless create a modern-day debtor's prison.

Housing providers said the crackdown affects not only those living on the street, but those lucky enough to be in permanent supportive housing as well.

Molly Rysman of the Housing Trust said her organization conducted a survey in the first five months of the policing initiative and found that of the 76 Housing Trust residents who were arrested, 42 lost their housing as a result.

"And that was just in the first five months," she said.

If a resident misses a rent payment, usually equal to 30 percent of the public assistance they receive, the Housing Trust must report that to the Los Angeles Housing Authority, which funnels federal money to city programs.

"That's an automatic eviction through the Housing Authority," Rysman said. "Which means the individual is put on what's called a 'skip list' and becomes ineligible for any subsidized housing for three years. Even if you go to jail for only two months, you get out and you can't get housing for three years."

Mendez has never been in permanent supportive housing. But she did manage to get a room at the Russ Hotel on Skid Row, which is run by permanent supportive housing provider SRO Housing Corporation and used to transition people into permanent supportive housing.

The hotel has private units and provides support services, which makes it more successful in getting people into long-term housing than the shelters, said SRO Housing executive director Anita Nelson.

"It gives us an opportunity to prepare that person for permanent supportive housing," Nelson said. "At the missions, you have a room with a lot of cots. You're sleeping within inches of someone you don't know. Some people feel it's not safe. We want people to move into permanent housing. We don't believe in warehousing people."

After one month at the hotel, Mendez was arrested and lost her room, and with it her opportunity to get into permanent supportive housing.

Last month, rather than accept the Streets or Services offer and go to the Midnight Mission to avoid arrest, she left Skid Row for another part of the city.

"Almost every one of our residents in housing went through these emergency programs when they were on the street, and they continued to be homeless," Rysman said of the Skid Row Housing Trust. "People cycle through emergency programs. We see that across the country. Emergency programs manage homelessness, they don't end it."

Both the housing trust and the Housing Corporation, which together operate 44 buildings of supportive housing in the city, oppose the expansion of Streets or Services.

"We would like to see a program created to divert people away from arrests," Rysman said. "We have concerns with a program where the front door is arrest."

Like Horan, she wants the money to go to permanent supportive housing.

"It costs \$5,000 a year in rental subsidies and \$6,000 a year in services," Rysman said. "And residents get primary health care substance-abuse treatment, mental health services, benefits advocacy, case management and therapy."

But Carrie Gatlin, vice president of government relations for the Union Rescue Mission, which has received the

majority of the Streets or Services participants, said these housing providers are "missing the whole point."

"The program was not intended to create new beds," she said. "It's a diversion program to encourage people, with a stick, to take advantage of existing programs. We are all for creating new beds, but some people aren't ready for permanent supportive housing."

Gatlin disagreed with the housing providers' assessment of Skid Row missions. She said Streets or Services has been unsuccessful because it lacks funding. With more money, she said, her organization could better track and assist program participants.

"If the program were sufficiently funded, it would be a terrific program," she said.

The program was originally funded by a federal grant. When that money ran out last year, the city attorney used \$100,000 from his own budget to sustain it.

Gatlin said these providers are "making this an issue of funding the city attorney's office."

"The city attorney's office has been phenomenal in making this program work when there was no funding," she said.

Egurbide, too, said the advocates' criticism is misguided.

"We're getting some of the fire that these organizations have against the LAPD for their enforcement effort," he said.

But Horan said the Streets or Services program has been used as a justification for the policing efforts, and said city money should go to programs with proven results.

"It's got to be accountable and we need to have some outcomes," she said. "We can have an 80-85 percent success rate keeping people housed and out of emergency rooms and hospitals, and it saves money. We can count the number of lives we have transformed."

Although she has never met Mendez, Horan thinks she would be a good candidate for her organization. Mendez said she would like permanent housing.

"Instead of spending money on a new jail, how about spending money on a place for people to live?" Mendez said. "Give them a reason to get off drugs. Give them a reason to get off the street. Let them be responsible people. Don't arrest them because they're tired and they want to sleep, or because they're sick. Drugs are a sickness, even if it is against the law."

She said when her life is more stable she would like to become an advocate for the homeless.

"I want people to know what's really going on. Not just the police's side who say all homelessness is bad," Mendez said. "If I have a plan, that's it. When I get my teeth and they can actually hear what I have to say."