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5 Steps to Get Out of Skid Row

Officials in L.A. County have used skid row to "contain" homelessness, but it's clear the system has failed

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Skid Row disproportionately — and unfairly — cares for the region's homeless because so many other communities in Los Angeles County have few or no services to help them. Currently, only 25 of 88 cities in the county spend money on housing and services for the homeless. Those communities that don't contribute are, in effect, using skid row as their solution to homelessness.

The problem is that city and county policymakers are reality-resistant — they are unable or unwilling to face up to what needs to be done about skid row. They have settled instead on the "three Cs" to fight homelessness: "contain" it in skid row by adding and concentrating mission-based services around San Julian Park; "control" it through personal property seizures, arrests and incarceration, which is one reason why 50 additional police officers were deployed in the downtown area; and "cleanse" it by closing homeless encampments and altering land-use laws.

These strategies have virtually criminalized homelessness, shifted the blame for skid row's continuing problems onto the homeless and allowed other cities to shirk their responsibilities. Clearly, these strategies are not working. Rather than trying to contain, control and cleanse skid row, we should do something radical: end homelessness.

Skid row's problems principally stem from pressures to develop the Central City East district commercially and industrially in the mid-20th century. Half of the single-room occupancy hotels were demolished, often because they were seismically unfit, which made cheap accommodations more scarce. Worried about this trend, the city of Los Angeles in 1975 adopted a plan to stabilize the district. Its main goal was to maintain skid row's low-income housing stock by buying, rehabilitating or taking over the management of the remaining hotels that favored single-room occupants. The city also sought to consolidate and concentrate skid row social services in close proximity to the population they served.

Then, in the early 1980s, homelessness exploded across the United States, and L.A. soon became the nation's "homeless capital." Estimates put the homeless population in the city at 35,000, with about 10,000 in skid row. In response, the city's Community Redevelopment Agency set up the SRO Housing Corp. to implement the 1975 plan. But the city's biggest response was to greatly expand its inventory of emergency shelter beds, mainly funded by federal dollars.

Two decades later, L.A. still has an emergency-shelter mentality when dealing with homelessness, this despite the many examples of success other cities have had in alleviating the problem. In New York City, for instance, rapid construction of affordable and supportive housing has reduced the homeless population to such an extent that the city's largest shelter, with 1,000 beds, will be closed in June.

How can L.A. make similar inroads into homelessness?

- Help homeless people help themselves by giving them jobs. Working is the surest way out of poverty, so a share of public-sector jobs — tree planting or highway construction, for example — should be set aside for the homeless. Such a program could be paid for with some of the infrastructure bond money approved in November by California voters.
- Make sure that public assistance is enough to allow recipients to afford a roof over their heads. General relief, the last-resort L.A. County program for unemployed and disabled people, amounts to \$221 a month — the same as it was 25 years ago. Many county assistance dollars could be saved if the homeless entitled to federal Social Security benefits and veterans' disability payments were helped in obtaining them. The savings could be used to raise general relief payments.
- Go beyond the emergency shelter mentality to provide affordable housing and services for the homeless. This would be a relative bargain compared with the cost of warehousing people in jails, hospitals and emergency shelters. According to a study by Lewin Group, a healthcare consulting firm, in Los Angeles, a night in supportive housing costs about \$30, compared to \$37 in a shelter, \$64 in jail, \$85 in prison, \$607 in a mental hospital and \$1,474 in a general hospital.
- Stop the flow of homeless people into skid row. Other municipalities must scrap zoning restrictions that make it possible for some of their neighborhoods to keep out low-income housing and essential public services. It makes sense to support a law on the lines of SB 1322, introduced last year by state Sen. Gil Cedillo (D-Los Angeles), that would require cities to include emergency shelters and special-needs facilities in their general plans. Homeless patients discharged from hospitals and jail should not have to travel to skid row in search of a cot. They should be able to find social services, housing and health clinics in their own communities.
- Be willing to spend the political capital necessary to end homelessness. Long-established divisions of political authority cannot be used as an excuse for inaction. General relief is a county program, and homelessness is not confined to skid row. The mayor and City Council of L.A. and the county supervisors can no longer avoid working together to solve the problem. And Southland cities should stand up to NIMBYism.

Can we afford to alleviate homelessness? Yes. New York City spends \$1.7 billion each year on services and housing for its homeless population. In L.A., county, local and private sources spend less than \$600 million annually. According to the Economic Roundtable's estimates, the cost of sheltering and sustaining every homeless person in the county would be double this amount. But researchers who analyzed supportive housing programs in New York City found that when homeless people live in such housing, their use of emergency shelters and hospitals drops and their involvement in the criminal justice system declines, all of which would result in savings.

The causes of homelessness are not mysterious, and experiences from other U.S. cities prove that these five actions would go a long way to ending homelessness in L.A.

It's time we tried.