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Skid Row Still Needs More than Cops

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Memo to Mayor Villaraigosa and L.A. County supervisors:

Missed you folks at Tuesday's hours-long Los Angeles Police Commission hearing about the crackdown on skid row crime and whether it's helping or making matters worse.

Yeah, I know you had your own obligations. But years of inaction or halfhearted efforts by you folks helped create the mess. And since you're the ones with the power to do something, I took some notes for you.

One speaker after another -- representing merchants, residents, police, government agencies and service providers -- stepped to the podium. Each one assessed L.A.'s Safer Cities Initiative, which was instituted on skid row in 2006 to bust rampant crime and provide more homeless services. With few exceptions, the speeches fell into two categories:

The Safer Cities Initiative has been brilliant.

The Safer Cities Initiative has been disastrous.

The truth is probably somewhere in the middle.

Sure, it's important to make the streets safer. But trying to fight poverty and mental illness with more cops is like trying to fight high dropout rates with more crossing guards.

Cops can't do rehab, they aren't psychiatrists and they don't build housing, all of which are necessary before any police action can lead to real change rather than a pile of stats.

And yet:

"Truly phenomenal" is how a Villaraigosa minion, Deputy Mayor Arif Alikhan, described the Safer Cities Initiative at Tuesday's hearing.

There's been a 40% reduction in violent crimes, Alikhan boasted, and a 30% reduction in property crimes. Arrests are down significantly, as well, he said with great satisfaction.

Excuse me. But could it be that when 50 cops were added to downtown patrols with a zero tolerance policy, many of the pavement dwellers were merely driven into other neighborhoods?

As Alikhan himself noted, 1,200 fewer people are living on the skid row streets now.

Congratulations.

But here's a question for all the players at the top of this memo:

Where did they go?

If they're all in supportive housing and on the road to recovery, I'll back all of your reelection efforts. If they bought condos in Westwood or scooped up foreclosed properties in the Antelope Valley, I'll get a cake and some candles, and I might even invite Supervisor Mike Antonovich.

But if they're in jail or prison or simply moved to Hollywood and beyond, what have we accomplished?

Twenty-four thousand citations have been written the last two years, said UCLA professor Gary Blasi, who believes Safer Cities makes matters worse by churning people through the criminal justice system at great expense, hampering efforts by other agencies to house them.

Twenty-four thousand citations.

Many of those tickets, Blasi and others argued, have been for jaywalking, flicking cigarette ash, or possession of small amounts of drugs. Blasi said aggressive prosecution has meant that people with a couple of rocks are charged with selling drugs instead of merely possessing them, which lands addicts in prison at great cost.

If they're mentally ill and addicted, he said, and get no help for either while they're behind bars, where do you think they go when they're released?

LAPD Sgt. Deon Joseph told me outside the hearing that complaints against police are exaggerated and that busting the low-level criminals often leads to bigger arrests. He has also said that if arrestees have mental health issues, they're often referred for help rather than sent to jail.

But as I spoke to him, a man named Leonard Woods sat in a wheelchair, waiting to testify that he has twice been cited for not being able to roll across an intersection before the light changes.

And Monica Martinez of the Downtown Women's Center spoke about a 70-year-old mentally ill woman her agency had worked with for months, gradually trying to gain her trust and bring her indoors. They got close, she said, but lost her when she was handcuffed and jailed for sitting on the sidewalk.

"We are not anti-police or law enforcement," Martinez said. "But we do not support the criminalization and excessive policing of the Safer Cities Initiative that has terrorized our community and has had a devastating effect on our ability to provide . . . services."

To be fair, skid row lawlessness was out of control a few years ago and something needed to be done. I think there should have been more emphasis on major crime and less on minor offenses, but the crackdown has been welcomed by many residents, merchants and others.

"I just know that when needles were thrown over the fence and into our sandbox, we needed help," said Gisselle Acevedo of Para Los Ninos, which has a preschool center and teen program in the heart of skid row. She credits the police and the Central City East Assn. for helping keep dealers, users and gangsters away from the school.

If the Safer Cities Initiative is to be continued, it should focus on that kind of cooperation and on major crime, but it needs to be backed with all the right services.

City Councilwoman Jan Perry said at the hearing that more than 800 units have been built or are in the works, but that's a small portion of what's needed. And as Perry asked, why isn't more of that housing being built outside of downtown?

Any answers from the mayor or the five kings?

Yeah, Mayor Tony, I know you've done more on skid row than your predecessors. And a couple of the supes at least have deputies doing some honest work -- one of Zev Yaroslavsky's aides spoke at the hearing.

But we're coming up on three years since L.A. County supervisors told us they would end homelessness in 10 years. The centerpiece was a plan for five regional service centers.

Not one has been built.

End of memo.