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Homeless in Lancaster get free tickets to go away

Nonprofit pays for people to bus to places where they have family or other support systems. Mayor R. Rex Parris says Lancaster has become a 'dumping ground' for other cities' homeless.

By Ann M. Simmons

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Andrea and Greg Killgore were already living on the streets in Las Vegas when they decided to relocate to Lancaster in early March. They thought their job prospects would be better in California.

But the couple were unable to find work and feared they would soon end up back on the streets.

A few days later, they were on a bus headed to Denver, where a relative had agreed to take them in. To their surprise, a local nonprofit group had agreed to pay for their one-way ticket out of town.

Since January, the Grace Resource Center has offered to cover transportation expenses for homeless people to return to their home states or wherever they have families or other means of support. So far the group has spent about \$2,500 to help more than a dozen people leave Lancaster through the Opportunity Bus Pass Program.

"It's to help people get well and start over," said Steve Baker, the center's executive director.

Andrea Killgore, 31, said she was grateful for the free bus voucher.

"This is a step for us to get back on our feet," Killgore said. Without it, she said, "we'd be on the streets, or stuck here until my next [Social Security] check."

Mayor R. Rex Parris is a strong advocate of the bus program, even contributing \$10,000 of his own money. He said he is upset by what he believes is an unspoken policy by Los Angeles agencies and others to use his city as a "dumping ground" for the homeless.

"The more economically disadvantaged people they can ship to the Antelope Valley, or encourage to go there to live, then they don't have to pay for services for them," he said.

Homeless people who have chosen to relocate to Lancaster are putting a strain on local police and social services, Parris said. The city's own needy should come first, he said.

"We have an obligation to take care of our own homeless," he said.

There are an estimated 73,000 homeless people in Los Angeles County, including at least 2,000 in the Antelope Valley, on any given night, according to statistics from the United Way of

Greater Los Angeles. Anecdotal evidence suggests the number is rising because of the economic downturn, said Christine Marge, officer of the agency's Basic Needs program.

Jonathan Powell, a spokesman for Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, disputed allegations that the city was encouraging its homeless to relocate to the Antelope Valley or anywhere else.

"We're doing everything possible to get our homeless families the services and shelter they need to get back on their feet," he said.

Powell said Los Angeles' social service agencies view accusations of homeless dumping by other municipalities as "urban legend, to deflect from their lack of achievement on this issue."

Some homeless advocates take issue with the philosophy behind homeless busing programs.

"It makes the assumption that someone has some fabulous support system someplace far away," said Anat Rubin, director of public policy at Lamp Community, an advocacy group based in L.A.'s skid row, who acknowledged that she was not familiar with the specifics of Grace's program. "If someone is living on the street, the likelihood they have some great support system someplace else is slim."

So far, most beneficiaries of the free bus program in Lancaster have been local residents who chose to go elsewhere, according to the Grace Resource Center.

Several homeless people who learned about Parris' views when he visited the center in January said they were offended.

"The way the mayor put it, 'homeless go home,' I didn't like that. That was kind of cold," said Grace Guijarro, 57, of California City, who lives at the Lancaster Community Shelter. "Not all homeless are . . . robbers and killers."

"I think it's very narrow-minded," said Isis Wickham, 26, who is also homeless. "He's stereotyping all of us. It's not like we want to be here."

In addition to hot meals and showers, the Grace Resource Center provides emergency groceries, clothing, counseling and other services to at least 8,000 needy residents each month, officials said.

Baker, the center's director and a pastor for more than three decades, said that he and the mayor have different motivations for the bus pass program. But they agree on its goal: to reduce homelessness in Lancaster and help people get their lives back on track.

"We're not in the business of shipping people out of here," Baker said. "We're in the ministry of compassion. We know that God can turn people's lives around."

Baker said he talks to more than two dozen people each day who come to the shelter seeking advice or assistance. "When I see that they are sort of jogging in place . . . I ask the question: 'Do you have a relative anywhere?'" he said.

If the answer is no, he inquires: "If you could go anywhere in the country and start over, where would you go?"

As for the Killgores, the couple said they were happy for the helping hand and a chance to reconnect with family. "I'm so excited," Angela Killgore said shortly before departing for Denver. "It's going to be a fresh start for us."

ann.simmons@latimes.com

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-buspass30-2009mar30,0,7967769.story>