

A cost-efficient answer to the question of L.A.'s homeless

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EVERY week brings one more announcement of another high-density urban housing project in downtown Los Angeles. The housing boom is on, the renaissance has begun. Yet every prospective tenant and buyer considers one issue when they envision a life downtown: "What about the homeless?"

Every night, more than 90,000 men, women and children live on the streets and in encampments, vehicles and shelters in Los Angeles County. Around 35,000 have been homeless for more than a year, have at least one mental or physical disability and are extensive users of costly acute care services. Long-term homeless mentally ill persons are denied help outright by housing providers because they are deemed unworthy, too difficult to serve or not "housing ready."

A visit to Skid Row will show conditions that Angelenos cannot envision and should not allow in their city.

Yet, there is an answer for homelessness--a home.

Lamp Community, a Skid Row non-profit with nine downtown facilities, permanently ends homelessness among our most marginalized citizens--those living with mental illness and perhaps drug/alcohol addiction, HIV/AIDS and other chronic illnesses. Unlike traditional providers, Lamp Community provides immediate housing and lifelong support, with no strings attached. Its housing options include private apartments, a Safe Haven and a community residence.

Once housed, Lamp Community tenants participate in services of their choice: job training and employment, mental and physical health care, harm reduction/substance abuse services, money management and shopping and apartment maintenance.

This supportive housing--permanent residences with wraparound social services--has emerged as a good investment because it is shown to substantially reduce the use of other publicly funded services. In Los Angeles, a day of supportive housing costs about \$31 compared to a day in shelter (\$38), jail (\$85), a psychiatric hospital (\$607) or community hospital (\$1,474).

It is actually less expensive to provide real housing and self-sufficiency services than to warehouse a homeless mentally ill person in a shelter or allow them to remain on the streets. Further, this supportive housing has demonstrated an 89 percent retention rate for tenants who were previously homeless.

So in Lamp Community, there is a proven organization that has the answer to ending chronic homelessness. Its model can be replicated throughout the city and it is cheaper and certainly more humane than maintaining the

status quo.

The renaissance of downtown does not need to smell of urine. A shining high-rise tower does not need the blemish of those bunking at its base. Every celebration for another wildly successful real estate deal should bear an asterisk until there are no more city citizens sleeping on our streets. Angelenos must recognize that the success of our city is dependent on the quality of life for all its residents. We can end homelessness in less than a decade if we make a concerted effort now--not only with money but with innovation from the public and private sectors.

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