

Los Angeles Times

What the Homeless Need First: Homes

Steve Lopez
Points West

March 22, 2006

I'm hoofing it east on 2nd Street in downtown Los Angeles and bump into a young man named Donald who's got crazy ideas in his head, a crack pipe in his hand and a knack for eluding police who have stepped up their crackdown on the skid row drug trade.

Donald says he's been through detox before and he's on a waiting list to give it another go. What he really needs is a roof over his head with rehab and mental health counselors down the hall, but there isn't enough of that kind of supportive housing. So at 30, he's headed nowhere, except maybe to a jail that kicks him right back onto the streets because of overcrowding.

On 3rd Street, I come upon a 45-year-old gent named Marvin who says the police came and roused him, loaded his tent, clothes and belongings onto a truck and hauled everything away like trash. He moved down to the 6th Street bridge for a while and then came back to his old spot a few days later. Nothing has changed, except he's colder now.

When I ask Marvin what put him on the street to begin with, he unloads. After telling me about a history of mental illness, he pulls up his sleeve to show an ugly pattern of crisscrossed scars. "I tried to kill myself," he says, wiping away tears.

I happen to believe that people who live and do business in downtown L.A. shouldn't have to step over the huddled masses at every turn. But here's a bulletin for the people trying to transform skid row: Sending the police out to take away a tent and jacket from a mentally ill, suicidal man isn't helping him and it's a waste of our tax dollars.

"Police action is at the forefront of the policy to clean up skid row, same as we've done before," Mike Alvidrez of the Skid Row Housing Trust said when I asked him whether he was seeing any positive changes on the streets. "We keep using the most expensive resources to treat the symptoms of the problem and not the solution, which is to get people into housing."

Alvidrez was one of several skid row players still grumbling about a January draft of the Downtown Transformation Project by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health. The agency will disperse millions of dollars made available by the Mental Health Services Act (Proposition 63) approved by voters in 2004, but critics wonder if the roughly \$10 million dedicated to a "downtown transformation" plan can accomplish much without first addressing a lack of housing that includes mental health and other support services.

The first draft of the plan, which is still being revised, called for a walk-in stabilization center on skid row to ease some of the strain on the county's overwhelmed psychiatric emergency room wards. It also called for creation of various other service centers on the row, including an "engagement center" at the Midnight Mission and an outreach team — including police — to entice at-risk youngsters and older adults in off the dangerous streets.

"We're not saying the services in the plan shouldn't be provided," Alvidrez said. But the problem, he says, is housing. "They're going to put an engagement center at the Midnight Mission? Lamp is engaging them up the

wazoo, but they've got nowhere to put them."

At Lamp, a skid row center that treats and houses several dozen chronically mentally ill people — including a friend of mine by the name of Nathaniel — Deputy Director Shannon Murray agreed with Alvidrez.

"Outreach? I don't need any more," Murray said. "If I had the rooms, I could put another 200 people in apartments tomorrow. I could put 500."

As you can see, these are contentious times on skid row. The money is rolling in and countless agencies with conflicting philosophies, and sometimes cross-purposes, are reaching for it. Some people insist that supportive housing is the only way to go; others question the cost and the quality of some of what's been built.

But this isn't an either/or situation. We need more housing, more services, more everything and no one's ever going to be happy with the way the money gets divvied up. As someone with a strong interest in how this whole thing turns out, the least I can do is sort through the information and misinformation out there, as well as hold public officials' feet to the fire.

Speaking of which, let me say that no one on the L.A. County Board of Supervisors has demonstrated a scintilla of leadership on these issues, which extend beyond skid row and city limits. Hundreds of millions of dollars in Proposition 63 funds will pass through the hands of that bickering and often inept crew each year for years to come, and it's time somebody took a stick and poked one of them awake.

L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa stepped up and pledged \$50 million to housing with support services, but nobody seems to know the details or the timetable. The mayor has also floated the possibility of a \$1-billion housing bond that has some support in the business community, but that's a bit sketchy, too.

When I called Marvin Southard of the L.A. County Department of Mental Health to report criticism of the downtown transformation plan for its lack of housing, he said he was about to pull his hair out. The housing will come, he said, but wasn't meant to be a big part of this initial draft. There's roughly \$11 million for a countywide program over the next three years, Southard said, and he's hoping to incorporate the mayor's \$50 million pledge into his plans, if not the \$1-billion bond.

Then there's Darrell Steinberg, the godfather of Proposition 63 and head of the commission it created. Steinberg has been negotiating with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's office to set aside roughly \$75 million a year in funds generated by the initiative, and use it as leverage to borrow billions of dollars for housing statewide over the next 20 years. Steinberg told me Tuesday that he hopes to have news of an agreement any day.

L.A. County's share would be hundreds of millions of dollars over that span, a sum that could begin to make a significant difference down the road one day. But at Lamp on skid row, Murray and her boss, Casey Horan, think now is the time to do what other cities have done and give higher priority to housing.

They believe the smartest use of tax dollars is to identify the most severe cases and get them under a roof, with wraparound services that can rehabilitate them. That's not cheap, they admit, but neither is the cost of police, paramedics, emergency rooms, shelter beds, jails and courts that now deal with the constant churn of recycled clients, some of whom never get any farther than the next dead-end street.