

PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

by Supervisor Linda Parks, February 2008

Ventura County and its cities have joined in a national effort with 300 other cities and counties to implement a Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness. Such a goal may seem impossible but it is needed and cities that have been implementing their plans have seen significant drops in the number of homeless people in their cities.

Up until now, the emphasis by government agencies has been on managing the homeless situation, not ending it. The thought of ending homelessness was seen as too expensive to accomplish. Yet researchers have found that one homeless person can end up using tens of thousands of dollars a year in government services, and still remain chronically homeless. Indeed it was found to be less expensive to provide housing and support services than to continually have homeless people cycling through welfare programs, mental health and drug treatment programs, jails, courts, emergency rooms, and hospitals.

Ventura County's Plan addresses both the chronically and episodically homeless, as well as those at risk of becoming homeless. The Plan began with getting benchmark data. A homeless count and a survey were done in 2007. 1,679 homeless people were counted, and 300 were surveyed. Results found, among other things, that 60% of those surveyed are white, and of the males, 19% are veterans, and there are 50 children living with respondents.

The Ten Year Plan has close to two dozen strategies to end homelessness and can be viewed at the Ventura Housing and Homeless Coalition website (www.vchhc.org). The strategies focus on providing more housing, be that emergency shelters, transitional housing or permanent housing, and on providing services to assist people towards independence, and helping to prevent more people from becoming homeless.

Not all strategies may be necessary for each city in the county. What the Ten Year Plan does is raise the bar for government agencies, non-profits, and the faith-based community to work together and coordinate programs and funding to best meet the needs of the particular community, and the county as a whole.

In Thousand Oaks, where 20% of all funds received by the City's Redevelopment Agency must go to affordable housing, the majority of funds have been allocated for apartments run by Many Mansions and the Area Housing Authority. Yet, as current events have shown, many in Thousand Oaks are still threatened with homelessness. Even in the County's richest city, dozens of low income residents, including veterans, senior citizens, and children, are losing their homes as a result of a developer evicting them from the Conejo Mobile Home Park.

The Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness is a bold step. It recognizes that there are many ways that people can be down on their luck, and that preventing homelessness as well as housing the chronically and episodically homeless is not only humane, but cost efficient. Housing is one of the most fundamental of all human needs and how we help those most in need is a reflection on our community's priorities. Adopting the Ten Year Plan was the first step, now it is time to put the Plan into action.