

April 5, 2019

California Homelessness Coordinating and Financing Council  
Request for White Papers

Dear Council Members;

I just received a copy of your request for strategies the Council may consider towards addressing homelessness, and want to take this opportunity to join in the discussion regarding one of California's most serious social problems.

The top four causes of homelessness have been described as 1) Lack of affordable housing, 2) Unemployment; to which I would add underemployment, 3) Poverty, and 4) Mental illness and or substance abuse without needed services. [nichp.org](http://nichp.org)

It is a well-understood fact that rapid shifts in our economy have generously compensated some, while leaving others without marketable skills or the income to participate in economic expansion. This has happened previously in our country's history; of a magnitude that conventional social resources, methods, policies and procedures can seldom encircle the societal damage and losses of human capital.

The six bullet points you present in your first question are essentially two questions; what can we do to reduce existing homelessness; and what can we do to prevent homelessness before the onset?

Providing homes under our present circumstances requires a fundamental, coordinated shift in consciousness. Adequate housing or home ownership in our past has been simply equated with hard work and focus, an act of commitment and will. It is difficult for the American culture to understand that this is true only in the context of an egalitarian society; where everyone has a sense of proportion, and everyone recognizes that their responsibilities are both personal and civic. This has changed.

For the state to intervene successfully; a bare sense of order must first prevail. This why I assert that the central problem of homelessness; is the home. We need to focus on what we can accomplish; dropping our preconceptions about what that should look like. Decent housing is better than no housing. Our rules, regulations, fees, and procedural constraints are geared largely to the past; and to

maintaining a particular look and feel to our communities. Shelter; decent housing in quantities sufficient to make a difference, may not look like what we expect, so the first step is changing our expectations to match our reality. It is difficult to transition from business as usual; however, city planning constraints; and the expectation that everyone needs to be in a larger, middle-class home, will not magically make our problems go away; in fact they are part of the problem.

As an example; post Katrina on the Gulf Coast, FEMA offered what became known as the FEMA trailer for temporary housing. These manufactured, largely synthetic mobile homes were not healthy, or cheap; and they created an instant blight on the communities where they were installed. In response; a group of Southern Architects known as The New Urbanists developed plans for a set of 400 to 800 sq. ft. cottages that fit with the historic architectural antecedents of southern communities, and offered, for the cost of a FEMA trailer; enduring, affordable smaller homes. After initial enthusiasm; and a number of successful homes, the group found that their plans were invariably torpedoed by local planning boards. This occurred despite the desperate need for replacement housing in devastated communities; local governing bodies simply could not handle the shift, even though the hard hit Gulf Coast communities started with very modest houses. [Wikipedia](#) The Powers that Be were in denial. This is happening here and now.

The State could set the stage for housing alternatives which are much more modest in size than we have grown accustomed to. The Katrina Cottage plans essentially swung off of HUD guidelines; so despite their size, they fully met federal guidelines.

The size of our homeless population has overwhelmed our inventory of affordable housing; and our inventory of privately owned affordable housing is renting to market; or selling to a market unreachable by a large segment of our population. One of the biggest components of homelessness is our intransigent value system regarding residential real estate, and the power of equity. The goals of housing the homeless and maintaining our present middle class expectations regarding all community residences are incompatible.

The fact is that smaller apartments and houses meet and will continue to meet many ongoing socially important functions. The emancipation of our children;

affordable housing for the underprivileged; housing for the handicapped, for single people, for young married people; for service workers of all types; for widowed or retired people. These types of homes provide the stabilizing component of a healthy community. In California especially, potential residential lots and land are priced as a percentage of the current market prices for completed residences. As houses go up, land goes up. In this market, where there is a shortage of housing, land is priced at an additional premium. Bulk sale of properties and the intercession of the state in entitlements can make a difference. The more houses built in one project; the more affordable each of them will become. The community will be looking at their tax base; and the costs of servicing affordable communities for the life of the homes there. This is a worthy discussion, again, regarding the money the community will have to contribute to homelessness over the same projected period of time; and the fact that it is not possible to simply displace the homeless to another community, another argument for solving the problem where it is. The people living in those homes going forward will be necessary community members. In San Jose, the situation is completely out of hand, and homelessness is affecting property values in some locations; and causing working families to move from the community. The problem must be solved, it cannot be ignored.

I believe the HCFC Council members are familiar with the need for stable housing in the triage of homeless people, and the education and treatment of the formerly homeless, and to reintegrate those that are able back into the life of the community. It is simply marginally successful, and expensive to attempt to accomplish this with a people who are homeless.

In addition to the application to HUD basic standards for residential spaces, be they small houses or multifamily residential apartments; there is the potential of remodeling bankrupt commercial or mall buildings into affordable residential uses. Yes, the scale is enormous and the costs are staggering. The fact is that a number of recent studies have shown that we pay these costs anyway, without anything to show for it in the end. These are the cumulative costs of homeless people using disproportionate amounts of public services; from emergency medical, social services, to police, to streets, parks, and easement cleanup. These costs are enormous, and detract from the work these agencies usually do. If we provide housing, we gradually have something to show for our social costs.

As to the second part of your first question, the prevention of homelessness, this also represents a commitment to break away from our present structure. It involves a combination of financial training, educational support toward specific goals; child care for the working poor (and child care for the homeless), job placement, and skills development. It is vastly less expensive to support and strengthen marginally independent struggling families; than to deal with homeless families and individuals. This program involves education that may be different than that currently offered in existing educational institutions. Computer skills, for those able to understand them, can place individuals in another job seeking category entirely. This is the same requirement, you have realized, that is necessary to the homeless at some point.

As to your second question; I believe the state should focus on the construction and development of affordable housing; and the triage necessary to sort and support the re-entry of the recently homeless toward resources that will allow them to become as successful as they are able. I understood that the Governor was engaged in a review of excess properties owned by the state, with an eye to provide candidate properties for affordable housing. I told him in a recent email, that the land is one thing and the entitlement of that land, as I mentioned above, is another must be coordinated to make a difference, and to be even reasonably cost effective.

As to your question number three; since there is limited money, reintegration must be a coordinated operation. The land, its entitlements, the architecture, and the supporting social services; and the specific group involvements that bring individuals back to independent lives require an almost military structure. We would be modeling the presence, commitment, diligence, structure, and unrelenting participation we require of each formerly homeless person; by our commitment to provide the real context for their actual success. Those who successfully move on would be asked to return to share with those in process. It is all group therapy. Each homeless person will progress at a unique pace; and accommodations must be made for this as another measure to prevent relapse.

So the success of the community in reducing homelessness is congruent with their engagement and commitment. We cannot afford an untouchable caste. The American Dream cannot work by excluding the homeless. Is it a fact that the community itself requires some reorientation? No only regarding, for instance,

what size dwellings should be in the mix, but behaviorally, the formerly homeless may experience hiccups. Any of us could intervene and make a difference. What would those community engagements look like? How could the HCFC share what it knows productively with the community? Certainly in the Planning and Building Departments; probably with the police; also with local business; in dialogue with social services of all stripes; you will be providing some of them with highly motivated residents and employees.

Why must this be regional? Well as you are successful, you will find your services oversubscribed. Almost everyone on the street would like a better life. All local communities cannot rely on “others” to solve their problem without them engaging in a meaningful way in their own communities. This means the whole program; the housing, the social services, the educational involvement. HCFC can help by providing training, engagement, and a framework of best practices. For the homeless; their first new job will be the mastery and participation in the process they are engaged in. Since I am discussing a societal change toward inclusion; these three words are important; societal, change, and inclusion.

Now I am going to add to the mix, climate change. I cannot assure you that the conditions you have listed will lessen, essentially because of climate change. Homelessness represents an example of societal breakdown. In the thick of it with climate disruption, some of which California is beginning to experience, societal breakdown is something we will have to combat; it is a bad thing. I believe the people you house and reintegrate into the community life are some of the best resources you will draw on in the future. There will be waves of climate refugees. There will be the need for more housing, community gardens, and a level of social cooperation not seen for many decades. You may find that the freedoms and consumer choices we have enjoyed are due to the explosive power of a gallon of gasoline or a cubic foot of natural gas; and that we have lost our sense of community in the process. We will find that community very valuable in the future. So, is the reintegration of the homeless ideally a process of building community? A sense of belonging is a very important human experience.

So while our efforts toward ending homelessness are immediate and paramount, they represent training for all of us toward preventing the breakdown of society when the going gets rough. The good news is that California has a climate change mediation and adaptation infrastructure greater than most states; and many

countries. I encourage the HCFC to utilize the resources available within our State climate agencies to help you understand the implications towards your work discussed herein. They can answer some of the same questions. California needs to get as good at dealing with homelessness as they are in engaging climate change; because there is a lot of overlap regarding sustainability, resilience, self-reliance and community reliance and interdependence. Need I mention community gardens going forward, and the role they will play in the descriptive words in the last sentence? A well-managed acre can feed hundreds of people. It can mitigate the very economic forces that impact the poor. It represents a set of learned skills, and is a central and unifying component of a resilient community of the future.

I want to thank the Council for reaching out; and encourage you to continue engaging with State and local agencies and government; NGO's, and the public. In the short time I have had to respond I have skipped over the reference part of your request. The concepts I presented to you are well known and easily found; however I welcome any questions that you may have.

My background is as a therapist involved in community organization, crisis intervention and short-term therapy; and as a builder I managed acquisition, site development and production housing operations for Divisions of three tract housing Builders; completing up to 850 homes per year. Lately I am (obviously) interested in our timely, effective, realistic, and enduring responses to climate change.

Yours,

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