

February 14, 2009

Pledge to end homelessness sealed; next are the details

Supervisors and Atascadero come on board; now an advisory committee will sort out the practical terms

By Bob Cuddy, bcuddy@thetribunenews.com

The county Board of Supervisors and the city of Atascadero last week approved a 10-year plan to end homelessness in the region, joining the six other cities and many nonprofits and other groups that help those who have fallen on hard times.

By joining forces, the various agencies and groups intend to end the splintered approach to helping the homeless and, for the first time, attack the problem in a coordinated manner.

What that coordination will mean and how it would look in practical terms remains to be sorted out by members of an advisory committee backed by Tuesday's vote.

Adam Hill will represent the Board of Supervisors, and the committee is likely to include individuals from each city, as well as nonprofit organizations, service providers and the business community.

Consolidation also will help the region qualify for federal dollars, according to county supervising planner Dana Lilley, who spearheaded a yearlong effort involving 1,000 people to attack homelessness.

"This is not an isolated problem," said Supervisor Frank Meham, who represents part of the north county.

Biz Steinberg, Chief Executive Officer of the Economic Opportunity Commission, called the 10-year agreement a "landmark plan" in helping the homeless and the poverty-stricken.

The final votes came at a time when temperatures were dipping into the 30s in a county that does not have enough room to shelter everyone who does not have a roof over their head.

That number is growing, advocates said, and continues to include new people who might not be homeless in better times.

"Many of the people who spent tonight in the cold are productive, or are trying to be productive," said Eric Greening of Atascadero.

As just one example, the number of people seeking services at the Prado Day Center grew 15% between 2007 and 2008.

In a survey conducted two years ago, enumerators counted 2,408 homeless individuals in the county. Of those, 817 were children younger than 21.

County officials believe that is not the total of the homeless at the time of the count, and have little doubt that the number has gone up as the economy struggles.

As the numbers rise, financial support for programs to help the homeless goes down, Lilley said.

Applauding the proposal, Richard Margetson, an advocate for the homeless, said people come together to help during natural disaster, and "The homeless situation is a national disaster."

The approval is only the beginning, Lilley said. The board authorized him and others to come back with more detailed proposals, including the structure and composition of a governing body and suggestions on how to finance the plan.

"Be brutally realistic and quantitative" about the costs, Hill warned. "It's a 'put your money where your mouth is' question."

Lilley's report said a full-time coordinator could cost between \$100,000 and \$150,000.

County Administrative Officer David Edge suggested the county consider taking that off the top of the federal Community Development Block Grant budget. But Supervisor Katcho Achadjian wanted more outreach to cities.

"The cities look at us for deep pockets," he said, and if the county picks up the tab, cities might not.

"I would like to see buy-in from each city," Mecham said.

Some supervisors said they also would like to see the business community contribute.

Supervisors will discuss funding possibilities at their Tuesday meeting – "where's it going to come from, and who's going to get short-changed," Achadjian said, as well as what the city contributions might be.

Not spending money on the homeless also costs taxpayers, Lilley pointed out, in health care, law enforcement, emergency services, and the less quantifiable but nonetheless real costs to children and families.

The Board of Supervisors approved broad goals, including:

- Providing interim, transitional, and permanent housing;
- Fighting homelessness by preventing evictions and planning for people being discharged from institutions; and
- Providing support services, such as case management.

Supervisors also said the Maxine Lewis Memorial Shelter in San Luis Obispo needs replacement.

The shelter provides 49 beds year-round and 25,000 shelter nights per year.

It offers meals, showers, mail, phone and message services, information and referrals, specialized health screenings, and access to case management.

The shelter operates only during the evening hours, with clients vacating the premises by 7:30 a.m.

But the shelter, whose anticipated shelf life when it began was two to three years, is about 20 years old now, according to Margetson. It was not designed to sustain its current level of high use.