

Memo to Orange County: Forcing homeless people off a river trail doesn't actually solve homelessness

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As Orange County authorities gear up to clear the Santa Ana River Trail of its burgeoning homeless population, they need to realize that sweeping the area won't solve the county's homelessness problem. It will only move those people to other locales — in Orange County.

The simple fact of the matter is that the county can't offer even temporary housing to all its homeless people. There is a dearth of permanent supportive housing for the chronically homeless and a shortage of short-term shelter beds. One of the biggest shelters, at the former bus terminal, is an open-sided parking structure wrapped in plastic. That's shameful.

The river trail encampment, which sprawls from Ball Road in Anaheim to the 5 Freeway, has become something of a case study in what happens when a community ignores homelessness. With an estimated 500 to 1,000 inhabitants served by jerry-rigged toilets and showers and group tents, it has become a lightning rod for annoyed local residents as well as advocates for homeless people. After trying for a year to thin out the encampment, the county decided to begin dismantling it this week — only to ease back after media and activists planted themselves at the site, ready to document the ugly process of people being stripped of tents and makeshift housing.

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The nonprofit organization hired by the county to tend to the riverbed inhabitants, City Net, has been able to help more than 150 people leave the encampment in recent months for shelters, treatment programs, relatives' homes or, in some cases, individual housing units. But as the group acknowledges, the county needs more housing options — both temporary and permanent — and it needs them soon. Placing a homeless person in one of the county's overnight shelters is not much of a solution.

Orange County should and can do better immediately. The problem it faces isn't as daunting as the one in Los Angeles County; according to the 2017 homeless count, there are nearly 4,800 homeless people in Orange County — about a twelfth of the number in L.A. County.

For the near term, county officials must commit to providing more interim, short-term housing and spending more to rapidly rehouse newly homeless people. And for the longer term, the county needs to build permanent supportive housing. County officials should join in ongoing efforts by the Orange County United Way and other local groups to find ways to create housing. They can argue that clearing out the river trail is a matter of safety, but there's nothing safe in turning out homeless people to search for another park — or riverbed.