

In Theory: How can ordinary citizens be of help to those who are homeless?

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The number of “people experiencing homelessness on a given night” in Los Angeles County exceeds a volunteer count of 57,794, according to a Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority report released in late May. The authority notes a 23% increase from 2016 and cites the “cost burden” of living in the L.A. metropolitan area. Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Times reports home prices and rent are expected to continue to rise.

The authority places hope in the passage of Measure H, which in March added a quarter-percent county sales tax in order to boost homeless services, and Measure HHH, which funds housing for the homeless. In mid-June, the county Board of Supervisors approved a \$1-billion spending package to implement Measure H funds over the next three years beginning this month. But the effects of these voter-approved endeavors are not expected to be seen overnight.

Q. What can ordinary citizens — who often face their own financial pressures — do to aid the increasing number of homeless people they encounter day to day? Does your faith or worldview offer guidance?

We live in a place of myriad homeless. Some of us will engage them several times a day. At every store entrance there are hands out expecting money, people are seen using the shadows for restrooms, and shanties litter our sidewalks. It’s a deplorable situation that’s worsening. What can be done?

This week I was apprised of a married couple who fell on hard times and became homeless. One actually has a part-time job. I didn’t know where to send them that gave me any confidence they would be satisfactorily helped. I wish I knew of specific resources I could rely on to help a situation at once, immediately, today, but I don’t know any. I ask other pastors, and everyone suggests calling this or that place “to see,” but nobody knows for sure. Perhaps some of that H money should go toward an ongoing public service announcement with such information (like the old Smokey Bear/Woodsy Owl spots).

One problem with L.A. homelessness is that so many already-homeless people migrate here. Here is a place where the winters are mild, and one can actually live by charity and very little legal follow-through regarding panhandling, loitering, public intoxication, squatting, etc. And so every day I meet homeless addicts who spend their hours collecting change to fuel their habits.

Many homeless are just mentally unstable and should be taken into care as state wards. Many are illegal aliens who thought life would be better here but had nowhere to land upon arrival. I’ve met youngsters who came to be movie stars, only to wind up in prostitution for survival. It’s pretty ugly, and it’s growing.

I don’t know how H will help most of these. Perhaps homeless families are a more reachable demographic, but I think we should be more active removing the homeless from the streets and getting them into work, housing and food, while simultaneously forbidding the negative behavior such as off-ramp begging, etc.

In the meantime, we can personally help ease suffering by providing church meals, clothing distribution and sanitation. Doesn't this perpetuate the problem? Perhaps, but there is also the "what's humane?" aspect of it all, and basic needs should be basically met whenever possible as we work out the ultimate solution. Remember, "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God" (Pro 14:31 NIV).

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All of us have a critical role in helping end homelessness. We can call for building more homes and oppose unnecessary barriers to housing development, especially multifamily. For decades home building in California hasn't kept up with population growth, and the imbalance amounts to over a millions units at this point.

There are now many newly homeless who are employed, but their wages are not keeping up with rents. Not only will homeless relief funds take time to move through the pipeline, but as experienced housing advocates point out, emergency shelters for the homeless are not a permanent solution.

California cities and counties are required by state law to have in place housing elements with "fair-share plans," locating new housing to meet the needs of all income levels in our communities. The lead editorial in last Sunday's Los Angeles Times condemned some jurisdictions for flouting the law, calling La Cañada Flintridge's restrictions "so intentionally onerous for developers, it pretty much guarantees that new housing wouldn't be built."

The remedy doesn't have to allow gigantic homes out of character for a neighborhood, which of course don't help the homeless, or extreme density. The proposed Senate Bill 35 (Wiener) would instead require cities to expedite approval for new housing, following their own land-use plans.

It is housing, not handouts, that will end homelessness.

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