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Reframing A Crisis: Solving Homelessness in Los Angeles

Los Angeles is home to world class beaches, mountain vistas, and expansive deserts. It is the center of the world's entertainment industry, a financial hub, and a beacon of opportunity for much of the nation. Thousands around the country flock to LA each year hoping to experience professional or personal growth, or just to enjoy the weather. It is also ground zero for an increasingly devastating humanitarian crisis: homelessness. In 2019, 59,000 people lacked permanent housing in Los Angeles County, classifying them as homeless. That number is up 12% from the previous year in a trend that has been rapidly increasing over the last 25 years. The situation has gotten so dire that at least 1,000 people a year are dying as a direct result of living on the streets of one of the wealthiest and most picturesque cities in the world.¹ The history of homelessness in Los Angeles highlights a confluence of failures at both a national and local level, and the potential solutions to a humanitarian crisis of this magnitude pose daunting challenges on both a personal and political level. But to put it most simply, the key to solving the problem of homelessness is to both to stop the circumstances which produce homeless people, and to coordinate the resources necessary to rehabilitate the currently unhoused. By addressing the issues of affordable housing, employment at a living wage, and readily available healthcare services that address the needs of the homeless or potential homeless, Los Angeles can start living up to its reputation as one of the greatest cities in the world.

Like any major city, Los Angeles has always had a homeless presence. The infamous Skid Row has been a fixture of LA's homeless community since the early 20th century, but it wasn't until the 1980's that homelessness began to increase at an alarming rate. Following a global trend, a decline in skilled manufacturing jobs coincided with an increase in low-skill, low-

wage work which was primarily filled with immigrant labor. As a result, the poverty level in the city grew from 8% in 1969 to 14% in 1987.² At the same time, the Single-Room Occupancy hotels that had been relied on by the city's unhoused began to be torn down to make way for commercial development, and federal housing subsidies began to decrease significantly. No new public housing units were constructed in Los Angeles during the 1980's at a time when rent-poor households were struggling to keep up with the rising cost of housing.³ At the same time that the number of unhoused residents in Los Angeles was increasing, funding to programs targeted at helping the poor was cut by 57 billion dollars. Lack of funding to welfare systems coincided with the closure of the nation's mental health institutions and the explosion of the crack epidemic, leaving jails as the main institutions tasked with providing for people with mental health problems. The increase of low-income families fighting for a diminishing amount of housing and welfare services, and an increase of people with personal vulnerabilities without appropriate institutional guidance resulted in the explosion of the homeless crisis in the 1980s.⁴

The underlying causes of the rise of homelessness in the 80's have only intensified over the last 30 years. The cost of living in Los Angeles has far outpaced the minimum wage, leaving 40% of Angelenos below the poverty rate as of 2004. In addition, people living near or below the poverty line are usually low-income workers who do not earn a pension and are unable to afford healthcare, leaving them more susceptible to the life circumstances that could propel them into homelessness. The housing market in Los Angeles has continued to get more competitive, and the number of affordable rental units has declined dramatically.⁵ Welfare was restructured under the Clinton administration to mixed effect. While programs are in place to help needy families and down-and-out folks, things like work requirements and a 5-year lifetime maximum eligibility for welfare benefits keep people from accessing them. More emphasis is put on

helping people find temporary work immediately rather than educating and preparing them with a lifetime of work-related skills. Transferring welfare from a federal program to state and local authorities has put enormous stress on localities like Los Angeles who face far more than the average national rates of homelessness.⁶

Available treatment for mental health and addiction services has also failed to meet the needs of LA's homeless population. Almost half of Skid Row residents were dependent on drugs or alcohol within the last six months and two-thirds had been dependent at some point in their lives. These numbers represent something far from individual moral failure. Most people dependent on substances have been subjected to violence or abuse of some kind and are more likely to suffer from a physical or mental illness. 37 percent of the residents of Skid Row are physically disabled, more than double the rate of LA's housed population, and rates of mental illness are nine times higher than the general population.⁷ Sadly, it is also this demographic which is both judged most harshly by housed Angelenos and has quite unfairly become the public face of homelessness. Much of the public's attitude towards what is first and foremost a humanitarian crisis is unfairly painted with the brush of individual moral failure rather than a failure of society to meet the needs of its most vulnerable.

Historically, public policy and the public attitude towards homelessness in Los Angeles has gravitated between compassion and hostility. Unfortunately, the punitive policies available to those willing to advocate for them are both more immediate and easier to enforce. In effect, punitive policies involve either shuffling the homeless from one location to another as public tolerance allows, or doing nothing at all. Emergency shelter beds have been a good start to compassionate solutions, but so far have not been met with the amount of required supportive housing, permanent affordable housing, treatment services, job training, and other social services

necessary to keep people off the street for good. The social service industry has largely been concerned with short-term solutions to appease the enforced punitive measures which please home and business owners affected by the presence of the homeless with little regard for helping the homeless themselves. Police simply cannot force people into shelters, especially when the available shelter space does not exist.⁸ The fact is that these punitive measures and the weak social service responses to them have failed both the homeless and housed citizens of Los Angeles, and highlight the need to pivot to public policies based on compassion for the unhoused and near-homeless.

Perhaps the most obvious solution to addressing the issue of homelessness is to simply get them indoors, but the odds are stacked against us. Los Angeles has the least affordable housing market in the U.S., leaving the 721,000 rent-burdened residents who earn below the cost of living and spend more than half of their income on rent vulnerable to homelessness. While 21,000 people were housed in rapid, supportive, or permanent housing in 2018, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority still recommends that 517,000 new affordable housing units need to come online as soon as possible to start addressing the problem in any meaningful way.⁹ The creation of affordable housing for both low-income earners and the currently unhoused is largely a combined effort between public policy and free enterprise, and as in any matter of public policy or business, a cost-benefit analysis must be employed to convince the players involved of its efficacy. Simply put, money spent on supportive and affordable housing is money saved by taxpayers on things like emergency services and involvement in the criminal justice system. New York City spends 1.7 billion dollars a year on support systems related to housing, but with support from its right-to-shelter law and rapid construction of affordable housing, they have phased out the need for emergency shelters altogether, resulting in a net savings.¹⁰

Some of the biggest barriers to the construction of affordable housing are previously enacted laws and policies. Currently proposed housing strategies concern the passage or redefinition of public policies to allow private enterprise to benefit from the creation of affordable housing, in the hopes that their benefit will become a benefit to those teetering on the brink of homelessness. SB2 is a proposed policy that will require cities and counties to rezone areas where emergency shelters are permitted as a right, and where transitional and supportive housing is treated under the same jurisdiction as rental properties.¹¹ This is a necessary first step in ensuring that a developer with the will to create such housing is even permitted to do so. As a statewide measure, it also helps to lessen the burden on areas which are among the few currently building this type of housing. If every city in California is required to permit housing of this type, it will help to alleviate the geographic component of homelessness coalescing in specific areas like Los Angeles, where even the meager social service offerings are better than the non-existent social safety nets of other cities in the state.

Another policy concerning affordable housing is the previously enacted Costa-Hawkins Act and its role in the prevention of inclusionary housing. Inclusionary housing, also known as mixed-income housing, is a policy that requires developers to include a certain percentage of affordable units alongside market-rate units when developing residential properties. The 1995 Costa-Hawkins Act currently prohibits inclusionary housing from occurring, and instead gives owners in rent-controlled communities the right to increase rental rates to market levels upon change in occupancy, and exempts housing constructed after 1995 from rent-controls altogether.¹² A reinterpretation or complete repeal of Costa-Hawkins would go a long way towards implementing the availability of the hundreds of thousands of affordable units necessary

to keep any of the 721,000 rent-burdened residents of Los Angeles from slipping into homelessness, and at no cost to the taxpayer.

As tightly packed as Los Angeles can feel, there is still available public lands to build on, and proposals are in place to capitalize on them. Underutilized public lands can and should be offered to developers interested in created affordable housing, and AB 2135 would give these developers the right of first refusal to obtain it at a deeply discounted rate. LA Metro, LAUSD, the DMV, and Veterans Affairs properties all contain underutilized land that could potentially become affordable housing.¹³ Not only would this be, again, at no cost to the taxpayer, but would in fact be a benefit to the communities that they are developed in. Where empty plots of land once went to waste, individuals and families in need of housing could thrive, and while the price of rent is commensurate with their income, have money left over to engage in commerce and other community endeavors.

The concept of “left-over” money to spend after rent is something of a foreign concept to many Angelenos. Since the 1980’s the cost of living in Los Angeles has far surpassed the minimum wage of \$13.25 an hour, but with a competitive employment market, many are forced to survive on what is essentially less than the minimum required to thrive in the city. Despite the common sentiment among advocates for “boot-strap” solutions to homelessness, employment alone is not sufficient to keep people off the streets. Currently, it is estimated that 16% of homeless adults in Los Angeles work, and that in the two years prior to becoming homeless, three-quarters had worked consistently for more than one year.¹⁴ While the barrier to a livable wage is largely a matter of political support, there is no doubt that the best way to keep people from becoming homeless in the first place is to pay them a living wage. Way back in 2003, the

hourly wage necessary to afford an average rental unit was \$32 an hour, rendering even the highest current minimum wage of \$15 per hour in California grossly inadequate.¹⁵

For those trapped in the cycle of homelessness, an increase in both employment opportunities and income in general is a necessity. Targeted recruitment to the homeless for county jobs is a start, especially considering that government work pays a substantial amount more than the minimum wage, and includes a range of benefits from healthcare to pensions that are also sorely needed by the unhoused. As the county is the agency doing the vetting and providing the employment, no subsidizing or coaxing of private employers would be necessary.¹⁶ Although the available job pool is likely small, the ease of coordination and commensurate pay and benefits would make this a coveted position for the homeless population.

For those not lucky enough to obtain employment with the county, Social Enterprise programs could provide job training and an intermediary step to full-time employment. The most important role of these projects is to connect those who are ready to work, but without the appropriate resources for job-seeking, with gainful employment. Social Enterprise programs also cater to those who often have the hardest time getting their foot in the door with employers, such as folks with criminal backgrounds or those who are involved in recovery programs.¹⁷ While the goal of these programs is admirable and may provide valuable experience and even eventual full-time employment, one hurdle remains: that even under the best of circumstances, wages in Los Angeles are tragically low. Consistent employment is most certainly an important metric for maintaining accountability and reintegrating into working society, but until the city addresses the issue of living wages in a meaningful way, no number of subsidies or employment programs will keep people already teetering on the brink housed for long.

One of the deepest barriers to keeping the currently homeless housed and employed is a lack of access to healthcare services. Rates of mental illness are nine times higher among the homeless of Skid Row than in the general population, and drug addiction is rampant. Many of those suffering from these problems are dual-diagnosis patients, meaning their mental health affects their ability to stay sober and vice-versa. The American healthcare landscape is frustrating to navigate even under the best of circumstances, and all but impossible for those who need it as badly as the unhoused. As such, it is critical for homeless service providers to be able to share and access information about homeless clients. Many homeless are unable to answer questions about their insurance provider or enrollment status in various healthcare marketplaces, and would benefit from that information being easily retrievable by savvy social workers. The complex nature of these sorts of health issues also make it necessary for cases to be managed across multiple platforms and healthcare services.¹⁸ Educating suffering individuals about their healthcare options and connecting them with the appropriate service providers is a critical step to recovery that is often unattainable by the most vulnerable among the homeless population.

A robust and coordinated substance abuse recovery network would be one such invaluable service under the proposed program. Allowing counties to opt-in to standardized treatment of drug addiction as coordinated by the California Department of Healthcare Services would provide consistent lifesaving care to those currently unable to navigate the patchwork of recovery options available to them. The proposed model would integrate physical and mental health services into the program as well, and transform existing models from acute care to chronic care. Withdrawal management, short-term sobriety, residential treatment, and outpatient care would all be included, and in conjunction with case management and continued recovery support would greatly benefit both the suffering individual and society at large.¹⁹

First responders find themselves on the front lines of homelessness and its related problems every day, and as such should have the resources available to better respond to the various needs of the unhoused who find themselves in various stages of physical and mental duress. Chief among the concerns of first responders should be coordination with appropriate service providers in a joint effort to relieve the burden of homelessness on both the unhoused and first responders alike. Information about various encampments should be shared across multiple jurisdictions and agencies to facilitate meaningful engagement with those in need of services, with the end result being a transition to applicable medical, substance abuse, or housing services.²⁰ An ancillary effect of such an approach would be the humanizing of victims of homelessness, who too often are treated as suspects. Thoughtful engagement from first responders could potentially have a positive effect on the attitudes of neighborhoods where encampments are prevalent. The provision of services will not only reduce reliance on outdoor encampments, but bolster hope among community members and the unhoused, leading to thoughtful engagement from neighbors as well.

Indeed, thoughtful engagement is what is absolutely essential from every Angeleno in order to resolve the humanitarian crisis of homelessness in Los Angeles. Affordable housing, increased employment services coupled with wage reform, and a robust and coordinated response to the healthcare needs of the unhoused can only be accomplished with a conscious shift in how the public views the issue of homelessness. For many, homelessness simultaneously happens right down the block but far away from their own experience. It is critical to begin to think of those suffering from homelessness as though they were neighbors, because for many, they truly are. When the crisis is reframed as something that happens to “us” rather than “them, Los Angeles can begin to live up to its reputation as one of the world’s great cities.

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- ¹ Smith, 1.
 - ² Wolch, 6
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 - ⁴ Wolch, 7
 - ⁵ Wolch, 9
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 - ⁷ Wolch, 12
 - ⁸ Wolch, 14
 - ⁹ LAHSA, 8
 - ¹⁰ Wolch, 24
 - ¹¹ LACHI, 106
 - ¹² LACHI, 110
 - ¹³ LACHI, 116-117
 - ¹⁴ Wolch, 9
 - ¹⁵ Wolch, 9
 - ¹⁶ LICHA, 41
 - ¹⁷ LICHA, 38
 - ¹⁸ LICHA, 73
 - ¹⁹ LICHA, 70
 - ²⁰ LICHA, 75

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