Pomona's Unhoused: A new way

Introduction

In 2017 Pomona passed its strategic plan (A Way Home) to reduce the number of unhoused in the city. The underlying approach was to employ the housing first model, whereby housing is provided with the goal of having a centralized location in which to provide various services to the unhoused population. With this goal in mind the city built the Hope for Home shelter. After the promulgation of this plan, court rulings, a pandemic, and the inability to overcome the difficulties in treating this population undermined the success of Pomona's strategic plan. What's more, the data collected thus far seems to indicate that a far greater share of the unhoused in the city have no ties to Pomona, which suggests that Pomona has become either a magnet or a dumping ground for the unhoused. In order to more effectively address this issue, we must take a more aggressive approach and leverage the resources that have become available recently.

What the data tells us about the unhoused population

Since 2018, when Hope for Home (H4H) opened, only 40 percent of the residents served by the shelter were determined to have had a connection to Pomona before becoming one of the unhoused. This tells us that the vast of the unhoused are not from Pomona. The last point-in-time homeless count in 2022 showed that there were 716 unhoused on our streets. If we extrapolate the data from H4H, that means that only 287 of the total unhoused have a connection to Pomona.

Various studies estimate that anywhere between 25 to 75 percent of the unhoused suffer from severe mental illness. People who are ill with mental illness are incapable of making rational decisions about basic housing. These are not people who can decide whether to remain on the streets unsheltered. It is simply inhumane to allow them to sleep on the streets, exposed to the elements, and exploited by criminals.

From 2014 to 2020, the unhoused population across the country *decreased* by 9 percent. In CA, the unhoused population *increased* by **42 percent.** It is not just our imagination; the problem is worse in CA. High housing costs and other factors are cited as the main drivers. Recent homeless counts in San Diego came back with similar numbers: 60 percent of the unhoused aren't from the San Diego area. Statewide data shows that 70 percent of the unhoused population live outside of shelters.

Drivers of homelessness

According to a Stanford Study the main drivers of homelessness are the following:

1. High housing costs
2. Lack of affordable housing

3. Job creation - CA accounted for 44 percent of all new jobs in the country in 2021.
    a. This creates competition for housing (impacts supply).
    b. This drives up rents and home prices (impacts affordability).
4. Not enough shelter beds

Source: Stanford University Institute for Economic Policy Research

High housing costs and affordability are difficult to address in the short term. Various policies such as updating zoning, inclusionary housing, and building more housing will take time to have an impact. The city may need to continue to experiment with solutions to find those that work best to make an impact.

Martin v. Boise

In the *Boise* case, Boise's enforcement of its no public camping rule was challenged. The court determined, which the US Supreme Court ultimately upheld, that a city cannot prohibit people from sleeping in public spaces if it does not have adequate housing or shelter. The decision effectively required cities to provide enough beds to its unhoused population before it could enforce a ban on public camping.

This is why the annual homeless count, and the number of available beds, is so critical. Pomona cannot pass or enforce an ordinance that prohibits public camping on streets and alleys until it can demonstrate that the number of available beds is equal to or greater than the number of unhoused people in the city.

Moving past the pandemic

H4H was severely impacted by the pandemic because it reduced the functional capacity of the shelter. These measures were taken as a precaution to ensure the safety of the residents. As pandemic restrictions ease the use of the shelter at full capacity should become a critical component of providing beds to those in need. The pandemic necessitated the use of hotel rooms to help limit community spread.

The city should strive to make maximum use of the facility and add capacity on the grounds to accommodate pets and limited overnight storage for personal effects. This will address the concerns of some who have refused to use the shelter because of inadequate facilities for their pets. By removing barriers, we can increase greater use of the shelter by those who may be resistant to using it out of fear of abandoning their pets.

The continued use of alternative and transitional housing as a way to provide beds for our unhoused population will help meet our goal of beds for the unhoused. This is especially important in light of the *Boise* decision.

CARE (Community Assistance, Recovery & Empowerment) Court

The opening of Care Court offers the opportunity to fully address the underlying causes of our unhoused population. Care Court allows courts, family and others to file a petition in court if they believe the

person is suffering from severe symptoms of an untreated mental health disorder. A judge can then order a care plan for the person for up to 12 months, with renewal for an additional 12 months. The person linked with a team that will prescribe individualized treatment along with supportive services and a housing plan. Many communities have already started making Care Court referrals and even before it's opening some cities had already prepared lists of people for referral.

What can we do

In 2020 Pomona's Point in Time count was 722, that number dropped slightly to 716 in 2022. Of those 722, about 320 were sheltered and 402 were unsheltered. Space at H4H is a concern, but this population is likely the most difficult to house. They likely suffer from addiction, mental health issues, or other pathologies. Because these are the most difficult to treat, and it is inhumane to allow them to sleep on the streets, we must act to get them treatment. Allowing them to defecate in alleys and streets can lead to public health emergencies.

In order for the city to combat these potential public health emergencies it must enact a prohibition against public camping. This is the only way we can keep untreated sewage out of our alleys and streets. Before we can pass a no camping ordinance we must have enough beds to meet the requirements of *Boise*. The city could expand the number of beds to meet this goal, but that could be cost prohibitive. A better approach is to leverage Care Court and identify individuals who suffer from mental health issues to push them through that process. As many as 75 percent of our unhoused population could qualify for Care Court, but even if just half qualify that would significantly reduce the number of beds needed to meet the *Boise* requirements and enact a camping ban.

 If 50 percent of all the unhoused qualify for Care Court intervention, then that would help us to reduce the total number of beds needed. If 50 percent of our unhoused were serviced by Care Court, that would leave us with 38 people that require beds (716 unhoused minus 50 percent leaves us with 358. The shelter houses 320, that leaves a balance of 38 - 358 minus 320). These can easily be accommodated by using motel vouchers or other emergency housing alternatives. Once we have identified beds for our unhoused population, that allows us to enact an enforceable no camping ordinance. The goal of this is to push these individuals into stable housing to be able to deliver services – drug treatment and other services since these individuals may not be Care Court eligible.

Years ago, Pomona committed to building a shelter and finding solutions for our homeless. The shelter simply does not have enough beds and it also serves neighboring cities. We have to start being creative in order to solve this crisis. Otherwise, we will continue to have break-ins at empty buildings, and this will lead to a cycle of continued blight and a lack of investment. We must look for ways to break this cycle. If we do not, we will never be able to create a more livable, safer, or just community.