

Pasadena Star News

Our View

Assessing need in the Valley

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WHEN it comes to solving homelessness in the San Gabriel Valley and Whittier areas, there are essentially two approaches local governments use: Doing the right thing or responding according to the need.

While doing the right thing - management by moral imperative - is honorable and puts a compassionate face on bureaucracy, it may not result in workable solutions. For instance, government replicating what faith-based or other nonprofit groups are already doing equals wasteful spending. Worse, as was tried in the past, is a top-down government-imposed solution that misses the mark.

It's always better for government or business to approach a problem armed with facts. That is what the county Board of Supervisors realized in 2006, when an "order" to locate a regional homeless center in West Covina was met with staunch resistance in the east Valley city.

Now, the supervisors have empowered the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments to figure out the extent of the problem and the proper response. The COG study estimated at least 5,043 people are without permanent homes in the Valley. This was considerably lower than the previous estimate of about 10,911 local homeless released in 2007 by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

The discrepancy is large. We question whether the COG cities and the county, for that matter, can properly provide services for the homeless when the numbers are this soft. How can they meet the need when they don't have a proper assessment of that need? We recommend that cities raise up volunteers to actually count the homeless - something the COG demographers did not do. They can participate in the next count, which is being headed up by LAHSA in January.

However, despite the fluidity of the numbers, much of the study favors the "assessing the need" approach rather than the knee-jerk, do-the-right-thing tack. The COG's inclusion of faith-based groups was key; getting these nonprofits involved in how to fill in the gaps in services (mostly in the center of the Valley) will be crucial in the next phase.

COG and the supervisors should stick with appropriate approaches - not to force a top-down solution but to feather service centers, emergency shelters and mental health and job-placement services into the region where they are needed most and fit best.

For example, the east Valley has more homeless women and children than in the west Valley. Therefore, services should be tailored accordingly. Perhaps these should not look like Pasadena and Pomona's shelters.

Also, another model mentioned by COG is one of cities working together to provide discount mental health services - that is - the Tri-City Mental Health Center, an agency formed by cities of Claremont, Pomona and La Verne.

But before any decisions are made as to who can do what, local cities, the county and interested residents should participate in Phase II of the homeless plan. A meeting will be held Dec. 8 at the Garvey Community Center in Rosemead so all entities involved can get an educated look at the problem, its true scope, and form workable solutions based on facts.