

Study: 5,000 living on San Gabriel Valley streets

By Alfred Lee, Staff Writer
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A new analysis of the San Gabriel Valley's homeless population estimates at least 5,043 people are without permanent homes, while shortages exist in services ranging from emergency beds to mental health care to long-term housing.

Undertaken by the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments and funded by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, the Phase I Homeless Services Needs Assessment attempts to create an overall picture of the region's homeless while identifying available services and the need for better coordination among providers.

It came about, COG officials said Thursday, in response to a 2006 proposal by Los Angeles County to place a regional homeless services center in West Covina. City officials balked at the plan, saying they were never properly consulted.

As a result, the COG launched the study at the request of the county Board of Supervisors to assess the needs of the Valley's homeless population using a "bottom-up," community based approach. Supervisors Gloria Molina, Don Knabe and Michael Antonovich are on the COG's board.

The study's authors consulted with city managers in nearly every Valley city - except Temple City and Bradbury, which do not belong to the COG - and contacted local service providers, homeless services field workers, church and other faith-based groups, and nonprofit organizations.

While much of the data on service providers has been documented in the past by groups such as the county's Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) and other agencies, COG Executive Director Nick Conway said the analysis' survey of every faith-based program serving homeless people in the Valley "has never been done before."

"It would be fair to say that we have never had such an exhaustive or extensive outreach effort to identify those who are involved in trying to meet the needs of this homeless community," he said.

Along with taking an inventory of Valley homeless services, the 101-page report describes the location and characteristics of homeless persons in the region and analyzes where gaps exist between services and the homeless population.

Its estimate of 5,043, however, is notably less than LAHSA's 2007 estimate of 10,911 homeless people in the San Gabriel Valley.

The difference, COG officials said, is the LAHSA estimate relied on a larger countywide estimate; for the COG's estimate, city representatives and service providers were asked to provide their own estimates of their homeless populations.

"We're viewing that (the 5,043 figure) as the low end - the floor, if you will - of the homeless estimate for the Valley, and the higher number (LAHSA's estimate) as the ceiling,"

said David Howden, program manager at the Corporation for Supportive Housing, the consulting firm the COG hired to conduct the study.

Larry Johnson, director of program services at Union Station Homeless Services in Pasadena, said most experts in the region consider the new number to be "fairly accurate."

"The number 10,000 was pretty much agreed to be too high," Johnson said. "It was daunting for local service providers to think, 'How am I going to provide for that number of people?'"

Notably, the COG analysis found that the vast number of services, including short-term and long-term shelter and housing programs, mental health services and support services, are concentrated in Pasadena and Pomona. Pasadena and Pomona, however, both have the largest populations of homeless, with close to 1,000 in each city, the study shows.

At the center of the Valley is a dearth of homeless services, particularly for homeless single men, according to the analysis. Some cities in the Valley's center have far fewer beds per homeless person, with some cities having a ratio of about one bed for every 40 homeless individuals.

"Certainly the middle of the Valley is lacking, as far as shelters," said Craig Jimenez, principal planner for Monrovia. Both Jimenez and Johnson belong to the COG's Homeless Services Steering Committee.

"You're dealing with a lot of small cities that have very limited budgets, and it's difficult to provide those individual services," Jimenez said. "Pomona and Pasadena are larger cities and have more resources available to them."

Conway added that Pasadena's long history of dealing with its homeless population, dating back to the city's pre-redevelopment era in the early 1970s, has put it far ahead of other Valley cities in addressing the issue.

Other cities with high numbers of homeless people include El Monte, with 490, unincorporated Altadena and East Pasadena, with 420, Baldwin Park, with 361, and West Covina, which reported 228 homeless people.

With the information gathered, and holes in services identified, COG officials said Phase II of the plan will kick off at a Dec. 8 meeting at the Garvey Community Center in Rosemead.

It will bring city officials, community and government service providers and faith-based groups together to start exploring solutions at the local level - and to begin looking for funding to pay for them.

The long-term goal, Conway said, is to forge an effective valleywide network of homeless services utilizing and strengthening existing programs and services, rather than creating a centralized rehab hub based in one Valley city.

"One's mind immediately goes to some five-story facility that is referred to as a shelter," said Conway. "That's not a solution."

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