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Preventing Homelessness

By Adam Murray

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I have two young children. If one day, heaven forbid, either of them became homeless, I would want whoever could help them to move heaven and earth to do so. I would not care why they had become homeless. It would not matter to me whether they had made poor choices or whether they had become sick, lost their job or been evicted. I would want someone to help them.

In Los Angeles County, 13,000 people become homeless every month. Each of them is someone's son or daughter. To tackle this unprecedented explosion in homelessness, we must expand our rapid re-housing efforts and provide much more permanent supportive housing to help those who have already become homeless. But none of these much-needed efforts will stem the tidal wave of new homelessness cascading down upon our communities, flooding our streets with new tents and newly homeless Angelenos.

In Los Angeles County, 289,144 people live at less than half the poverty threshold and pay more than 90 percent of their income on rent. These people are at grave risk of becoming homeless. Only a robust, multi-pronged homelessness prevention program will stem this looming tide of new homelessness.

To be homeless, by definition, is to be without a home. The paths to

homelessness are many and varied, but homeless prevention programs address a pretty simple question: What can we do to help this particular family remain stably housed?

Lots of communities have effective homelessness prevention programs. Perhaps the most useful model comes from New York City, which, with 60,000 people homeless each night, is the only place in the country that faces homelessness on the same scale as Los Angeles. New York City spends over \$1 billion on homelessness each year, including over \$870 million on shelters alone. Recently, Mayor de Blasio pledged to spend an extra \$100 million annually in rent subsidies and legal resources to fight evictions and to ensure that families being evicted have a soft landing that does not end in a homeless shelter.

New York's homelessness prevention program provides intensive case management and wrap-around services to keep families stably housed. Case managers help their clients find employment, mediate with landlords, seek health care, apply for public benefits, access legal services, pay rent, find child care, and do whatever else will help ensure their long-term housing stability.

New York's program is very effective. Of the 16,000 families helped last year, 95 percent are still living in their homes. In 2011,

researchers from Columbia University found a statistically significant reduction in homelessness in the neighborhoods where program was operating. In 2013, Abt Associates found "not only a substantial reduction in the average amount of time families spend in shelter — a reduction from 32.2 nights to 9.6 nights over two years — but also that the savings from this reduction in shelter use were greater than the cost of operating the Homebase Community Prevention program." It was cheaper to help people stay in their homes than to support them in homeless shelters.

New York City's homeless landscape differs from Los Angeles in some key ways. New York residents have a right to shelter. Ninety percent of the homeless in New York City are sheltered, as opposed to only 30 percent in Los Angeles. Family homelessness is much more prevalent in New York, accounting for 78 percent of homelessness as opposed to 28 percent here. New York City also has fiscal options, including taxing authority, that Los Angeles lacks.

Despite these differences, New York's experience demonstrates that for families in imminent danger of homelessness, case managers who can provide significant financial subsidies and legal services can help to decrease homelessness and save money. In light of the City Administrative Office's recent report that the city's regular

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interactions with homeless individuals cost more than \$100 million a year, similar savings should be possible here. Mayor Garcetti recognizes this and recently committed that the city would spend an additional \$100 million annually to affirmatively tackle homelessness.

Los Angeles County is also well aware of the costs of homelessness, and just last week committed to spending \$200 million more on homelessness. The county's Housing for Health program has created a Flexible Housing Subsidy Pool that pays for housing for high utilizers of county health care. Similarly, in an effort to reduce recidivism rates, the county probation department provides case managers, substance abuse and mental health services, and housing for 300 homeless ex-felons.

The cost effectiveness of homelessness prevention programs largely boils down to how effectively they identify and target the people who are most likely to become homeless. In Los Angeles, we know where to intervene because we know our most common pathways to homelessness: involvement with the foster care, public assistance, or criminal justice systems; a history of mental health issues, domestic violence or

previous homelessness; or being in the eviction process.

We also know what kinds of interventions work: financial subsidies, case management, help with employment and health issues, and legal services. Last year, Inner City Law Center, provided free legal representation to over 500 families facing eviction. We were able to keep over 40 percent of these families in their existing homes. For the families that had to move we routinely ensured that they had at least 60 days and the financial cushion needed to secure another stable housing situation.

Last year, New York City paid about \$34 million for legal services to combat homelessness and \$180 million in rent to keep people from being evicted. We are unlikely to commit that level of resources here in Los Angeles any time soon. However, an effective homelessness prevention program must have sufficient resources to begin meeting the scale of the challenge. If the city and county each began with an initial investment of \$20 million a year, we could use the strategies proven effective in New York City and other places to help 17,000 people remain stably housed. Such a program could be refined and further scaled up as it proved its efficacy here.

One of the most powerful indicators that someone is likely to become homeless is that they experienced homelessness as a child. The time has come to break this cycle and prevent all our children from becoming homeless in the first place.

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