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L.A. has 46,874 people who are homeless. If we're not smart, we'll have 250,000 more

By Adam Murray
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Tents in the Arroyo, sleeping bags on the beach, RVs parked on our boulevards. Heartbreaking visual manifestations of Los Angeles' homelessness crisis are everywhere. The recent homeless count found that 46,874 people in Los Angeles County experience homelessness every night.

As shocking as that number is, imagine for a moment that lined up behind each of those unsheltered human beings are five more. That's roughly how many more Angelenos are at high risk of imminent homelessness.

Our local elected officials — city and county — have admirably committed more than \$250 million to emergency housing and services for people experiencing homelessness — absolutely essential programs. At the same time, though, we must become much more aggressive in our effort to stanch the flow of people — thousands each month — who end up on the street when they are evicted, when they exit foster care, escape domestic violence, or are released from jail.

Right now it's like we're trying to rescue the drowning from a sinking ship. We need to plug the leaks, and soon.

A dire lack of affordable housing is the biggest hole in the boat. The California Housing Partnership Corporation estimates that Los Angeles needs to add 549,197 affordable housing units just to meet our current need. How many is that? If every seat in the Rose Bowl, Coliseum, Dodger Stadium and Staples Center were an apartment, that would be only half the housing we need.

Because of our housing shortage, rents have gone up 28% since 2000. Over the same period, renters' median incomes fell 8%. The result is an untenable situation: More than 250,000 households in Los Angeles pay 90% or more of their income on rent. These families are just one illness, one eviction, one car accident, or one lost job away from homelessness.

For those who are chronically homeless or afflicted with serious mental illness, the city and state have proposed bonds to build approximately 14,000 permanent supportive housing units in Los Angeles — a vital use of public housing dollars. That said, it's not going to dent the overall shortage of affordable housing.

For that, we need to unleash the private market. The government has some levers it can pull, such as easing environmental reviews and curtailing local authority to restrict

affordable housing (proposed by the governor) or using inclusionary zoning to require a portion of new residential construction be affordable (under discussion in Los Angeles). But we need to take these steps and more — all while facing down resistance to increased density.

In 1960, the City of Los Angeles was zoned for 10 million people. Largely because of advocacy by single-family homeowner groups, today it is zoned for only 4.3 million people. We must be bold enough to envision a Los Angeles where housing is affordable for all — and understand that a more affordable city is by necessity a denser city. Much affordable housing should and will be developed in public transit corridors and other already dense areas, but all neighborhoods need to be part of the solution.

We also need cities across Southern California to keep people secure in the apartments they have. While Los Angeles has a rent stabilization ordinance, many nearby cities do not.

In November, four Northern California cities are voting on new rent control measures. Southern California cities should consider joining this trend. Unfair and illegal evictions happen every day and tenants also need protections like those recently passed by Santa

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Monica, which prohibit landlords from harassing tenants to push them into moving out.

We must also get smarter about how we prepare people about to be discharged from hospitals or prisons or who are leaving foster care. The statistics around foster care are particularly damning. Nearly 50% of those aging out of the foster care system will be homeless within six months. One national study found that 30% of people experiencing homelessness are former foster youth.

Earlier this year, county supervisors instructed six departments to develop discharge planning guidelines to prevent individuals exiting county institutions from becoming homeless. These guidelines should

focus on requiring individualized transition plans six months before people leave institutional settings and ensuring the availability of adequate housing and social services for people once they leave.

We know from studies of New York City's homelessness prevention program that stepping in with help before people become homeless is more effective — and less costly — than waiting until they are without a place to live. For families on the edge of homelessness, we must provide a much more robust safety net. People need help not just paying rent, but also finding jobs, accessing healthcare, fighting illegal evictions, applying for public benefits and finding child care if they are to stay stably housed.

Homelessness is a problem that begins months or years before the symptoms become visible on our streets. Until we start strategically preventing homelessness before it happens, we'll just be bailing out a sinking ship.

Adam Murray is the executive director of Inner City Law Center, which serves over 5,000 homeless and working poor clients each year from its offices on Skid Row.



A man smokes a cigarette in front of his tent along Gladys Avenue in downtown Los Angeles' skid row on July 5. (Los Angeles Times)

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