



Action is needed to house homeless

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BY JOEL JOHN ROBERTS, Guest Columnist

WATCHING how our regions leaders address homelessness in Los Angeles is like enduring a two-decade- long saga of "Law & Order." The recent ruling by a federal judge that pronounced the Los Angeles Police Departments actions in downtown L.A.s Skid Row as unconstitutional is just the latest installment.

The back-and-forth lawsuits and police action over whether people who are homeless have the right to sleep on our streets - or whether police have the right to search a potential criminal - have been going on for years.

You know there is a major problem when society picks on lawyers and police officers as scapegoats for ending homelessness.

Clearly, it is admirable for the American Civil Liberties Union to fight to make sure that our democracy doesn't become a police state, however, not at the expense of allowing crime to be rampant or allowing people on our streets to continue to be homeless. Likewise, most people want the police to ensure safe and crimefree streets, but not at the expense of personal freedoms.

There is something lacking in this "law and order" approach to ending homelessness in Los Angeles. The glaring, quite obvious missing piece is what people who are homeless really need - a clean, safe and secure home.

So perhaps the ACLU should also focus its efforts on goading all 88 cities within Los Angeles County to provide enough shelter and permanent housing for people who are homeless. It could advocate for a "Right To Housing" law. The two major barriers in providing enough housing are always cited for the reason why we have 90,000 homeless people in Los Angeles

County - not enough funding, and not enough neighborhoods that will allow the placement of this new housing.

But studies have already shown that the cost of keeping a person on the streets far exceeds the price of building a permanent housing unit for that person. The costs of emergency medical assistance, law enforcement, mental-health care and shelter for homeless people run into the millions of dollars. This is money that could be used for permanent housing. If there were a legal ruling to mandate housing for people, there would be a cost-effective solution.

There is also only one way to build and place enough affordable housing in neighborhoods throughout the county. Every city needs to share the responsibility of building housing in its neighborhoods.

For those of us who have struggled with helping people who are homeless for decades, we are frustrated with this continuing cat-and-mouse saga of lawsuits between the police and civil-liberties advocates, without serious action toward housing homeless people.

If we really want to "serve and protect" the homeless, then let's put them in housing. Its very clear. A person who is homeless should have the right to housing, not a right to be homeless.

Joel John Roberts is chief executive officer of People Assisting The Homeless. He is also the publisher of L.A.s Homeless Blog (www.lahomelessblog.org).