

Los Angeles Times

Going for Clean, Not Mean, Streets

Commentary
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May 4, 2002

Mayor James K. Hahn's new annual budget is basically a carbon copy of previous years and makes a dismally low investment in assisting the homeless

I recently was a panelist on Gov. Gray Davis' first-ever Summit on Homelessness, where I was proud that California was taking a lead in ending homelessness - including backing up words with dollars through a proposed \$2.1 billion housing bond. I hoped Hahn would join this effort in ending homelessness by investing more city money in our community effort.

Homelessness affects those who live on the streets and those who simply walk by them. We all see them - men on the freeway ramps carrying tattered cardboard signs with scrawled messages; older women hunched over rickety shopping carts pushing their life's possessions; families living in parked cars. Shelter Partnership, a nonprofit research and advocacy agency, says there are 84,000 homeless people on Los Angeles County streets on any given night, and yet there are only about 13,000 shelter beds available.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff wants to build a drop-in center for mentally ill homeless people near downtown. And the county opens up a limited number of emergency shelter beds when the weather is cold or rainy. But this is only a small battle within a larger war.

San Francisco sterilizes its sidewalks, cleans off discarded items and tells the homeless to move on. The critics say that their streets are mean and violate a homeless person's civil rights.

Do homeless people have the right to sleep on our city's streets and sidewalks? When a person falls through the cracks of society, don't they have the right to at least be able to sleep in a public park? Or, on the other hand, are businesses and residential neighborhoods justified in their claim that

homeless people scare away customers and decrease property values? It's a tough call.

New York City invested \$530 million and guarantees a shelter bed for every homeless person within the city limits. The city of Los Angeles' financial commitment to the homeless is barely a blip on the radar screen.

Mayor Hahn's commitment to \$100 million for the Housing Trust Fund is a terrific first step in waging war on the terrible conditions on our streets. But we need more.

We are all tired. The homeless are tired of surviving day by day on the streets. And our community is tired of seeing this human blight day after day.

The city of Los Angeles needs to fight this war on two fronts. For the community's sake, we need to follow San Francisco's model of cleaning our sidewalks and streets so that the whole community can live in a safe, clean, and secure homeland. As a compassionate and responsible community, however, we can only do this if we follow New York's model of providing a bed for every homeless person.

There is a solution. Clean streets, but not mean streets. Clean our streets and also provide a shelter bed for every homeless person in the city. It's a balanced and fair approach that allows our whole city to live in a safe and secure world.