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## The Homeless Need Solutions

**Compassion isn't missing, but programs are.**

By Joel John Roberts

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The new—and some say punitive—homeless ordinances in Santa Monica almost certainly reflect what much of Southern California feels. But it is not so much "compassion fatigue" as a desire to see better solutions.

The Santa Monica City Council banned programs that served meals to the homeless living in public parks and outlawed sleeping in doorways of downtown businesses.

Clearly, the law is a response to aggressive panhandling at freeway offramps and in busy shopping districts. People are reacting to trash tossed about, sidewalks smelling of urine and having to step around homeless people on the ground. Businesses are worried about the loss of tourism and customers. The Los Angeles City Council has already instructed the city attorney to draft comparable ordinances.

There is no less compassion now than years ago. People are still willing to respond, and generously give, to the hurting and needy -- look at the outpouring after Sept. 11, 2001, for the families of victims and people who lost their jobs. However, people are tired of the lack of solutions to the growing blight of so many people living on the streets, subsisting on handouts. Food programs that are not linked to services to help get people off the streets and into drug or alcohol treatment, mental health assistance, housing and even jobs do not solve anything.

Good solutions mean investing significant resources, but the social payoff would be substantial. Here are four pragmatic proposals that, if implemented, would dramatically alter the landscape:

\* Clean streets, not mean streets. Provide a shelter bed linked with support services for every person on the streets. If we want to ban people from sleeping on sidewalks and streets,

we first need to provide them with a safe and secure place to go. We are not criminalizing homelessness if we provide shelter linked with services. Feeding programs would not be needed if people were guaranteed a bed and meals.

\* Integrate existing homeless services. Services scattered across the county force people to travel discouraging distances by bus and on foot to find help. Services such as health care, mental health and substance abuse assistance, job programs, education and even haircuts should be under one roof. This would help not just clients but the community by reducing street people's presence while increasing the likelihood that they would find a permanent way off the streets. My homeless organization takes this approach. We have 19 government and private service agencies housed in one mall location, just off the 101 Freeway near Vermont Avenue. We hope others will follow the same approach.

\* Prevent homelessness through better discharge planning. Los Angeles County releases a stream of people onto the streets every day. Foster youth who turn 18 are forced to leave their homes, adults are released from jail, patients are discharged from mental health and substance abuse facilities with no place to go. They end up on the streets. These people need help finding permanent places to live.

\* Build more affordable housing. The working poor and already homeless are all but locked out of the costly local apartment market. Proposition 46, a housing bond on the Nov. 5 ballot, would provide a big boost. So will the city of Los Angeles' new housing trust fund, which is about to issue a plan for spending the \$100 million that the city has promised.

By concentrating on effective ways to keep people off the streets to begin with, cities would not need ordinances that seem to criminalize homelessness.