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The Homeless and the Numbers Game

Without new leadership, we all lose.

By Joel John Roberts
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The headlines said it all: 90,000 homeless in Los Angeles County.

For most of us, we don't need a slide rule to figure out that homelessness has increased. Anyone who exits a freeway off-ramp, who travels through our downtown neighborhoods or even visits our world-famous beaches knows that there are too many people in our community without homes.

The counting of homelessness has always been hotly debated. Some want to exaggerate the number to encourage more funding for services; others want to diminish the number to deny that there really is a problem. For a decade we've argued over this number, as if it was some statistical problem rather than a human dilemma.

So now we have a number, an official count. But in this homeless numbers game, there are other numbers. There is the dollars game. It is big business. In fact, this homeless count was a result of the dollars game. The federal government mandated that all communities, including ours, count the number of homeless or else their much-needed federal funding would be cut. In Los Angeles County that means nearly \$50 million per year.

Private fundraising for homeless services is also a high-stakes game of risk. If you don't convince supporters that your charity is important, you risk closing your doors to people in need. I would estimate that private support of homeless services is many times greater than federal funding in our community.

Then there is the affordable-housing game. It's a sad

game of musical chairs in which there are too many players and not enough chairs. Round and round the people go, hoping for an empty home to buy or rent. But when the music stops, there are always people left out with no place to call home.

This all reminds me of the game of Monopoly. The urgency of gathering dollars, collecting property and staying out of jail. At the expense of other players, we hoard these resources in order to win. In the game, there's one winner and the losers are only the other players. In the real world, the homeless "" and ultimately, all of us "" lose.

So now we have this large number: 90,000 homeless people. What does it mean?

Well, we obviously have a huge problem. If we wanted to build simple apartments for each person, it would cost our community billions of dollars.

We also know that the existing system of care is not solving the problem. Whether because of lack of funding or lack of coordinated services, our efforts over the last two decades to help the homeless have not improved the situation.

Clearly, this number defines Los Angeles County as the homeless capital of America, and shows that we need galvanized new leadership to end homelessness on our streets. Our new mayor is tackling crucial community issues head-on "" education, crime and traffic. I would hope that he and his new team also provide the same visionary leadership in working toward ending homelessness.