

## We can solve our homeless problem

By Joel John Roberts

December 23, 2007

Over 20 years ago, I had recently graduated from Long Beach's educational system - Newcomb, Marshall, Millikan and CSULB -and was anxious to help solve the small, but growing problem of homelessness in Long Beach and throughout the county. If you fast forward to the present, this "small" problem has grown into an enormous societal embarrassment, with nearly 73,000 people homeless in the county, and almost 4,000 people homeless in Long Beach. A visual example of this is Lincoln Park, home of Long Beach's City Hall and, sadly, the address for dozens of chronically homeless people.

You would think that after two decades, our society would have figured out how to help the thousands of people languishing on our streets. But instead of a concerted effort to resolve homelessness, the leaders and stakeholders in our region have resorted to political and legal battles.

There is the legal struggle between homeless advocates, like the ACLU, and law enforcement. Advocates think people who are homeless should not be criminalized and have the right to sleep on the streets, while law enforcement and their political and business backers think the streets should be safe and clean. So lawsuits tie up any actions to solve homelessness in courts for years.

There is the struggle between urban areas (like downtown L.A.) with suburban bedroom communities. When L.A. County wanted to develop regional homeless centers, suburban mayors were adamantly against it. So a comprehensive solution to resolve our regions homelessness was quietly shelved because of the fear of a homeless ripple effect.

The fear of having people who are poor or homeless living side-by-side with middle-class homeowners has resulted into a strong attitude of NIMBYism. So any effort to build homeless shelters or affordable housing turns into a local battle in planning commissions and city councils throughout our region.

Is there hope to a homeless problem that many feel has become just another addition to our community's urban, and now suburban, plight?

Years ago, Long Beach was referred to as "Iowa by the sea," because of a large influx of people migrating from the Midwest who settled here. These new families brought with them their strong work ethic, family values, compassion and neighborhood camaraderie.

In fact, many Long Beach neighborhoods still reflect these values.

Now, Long Beach is poised to be one of only two cities in the region to approve a citywide plan to resolve homelessness. (Pasadena is the other city.) Over 450 Long Beach stakeholders helped design this plan and will present it to the City Council in early 2008.

The stakes are high. But Long Beach, with its heritage of strong Midwestern neighborhood values, can be a model for the other 87 cities in the county in addressing homelessness. Why? Because Long Beach is a reflection of the county's rich diversity. It possesses sprawling valley-like middle-class suburban neighborhoods, a Santa Monica-like beach resort, pockets of urban poverty, a downtown in the midst of redevelopment, Venice-like canals, a big-city school district, and like every other community in the county, both urban and suburban, a nagging homeless problem.

A plan that contains a business approach that is accountable to numerical outcomes (i.e., the number of people who will be off the streets) with an emphasis on placing people into permanent housing is needed in Long Beach and throughout the county.

But any approach to resolving homelessness needs to adapt to a city's (or regions) locale and environment.

A "top down" approach forcing local neighborhoods to provide solutions that are cooked up in a philosophical laboratory is just not realistic or beneficial. Instead, social regionalism should prevail, where solutions to homelessness are birthed out of a local community's needs and attitudes.

As the next generation of Long Beach graduates finishes its educational journey and chooses to make its city a better place, I hope they won't look back 20 years later, only to see a community battling each other over political or philosophical attitudes, but rather see solutions that are dramatically ending homelessness.

Joel John Roberts, a resident of Long Beach, is the CEO of PATH Partners, a member of the Long Beach Human Relations Commission, and the author of "How to Increase Homelessness."