

COMPASSION FOR THE HOMELESS; CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Forum on Local Homelessness

Sponsored by the North Coast Advisory Council

June 19, 2019 Cambria Veterans' Hall 6-8:30 pm

Panelists: Supervisor Bruce Gibson, Laurel Weir, Anne Robin, Rob Mullins, Michael Manuele, Toby De Pew, Brandy Graham, Wendy Lewis, Pastor Gary White, Pastor Mark Stetz, Theresa Desmond, Kyle Martin, Johnathan Gibson and Carlos Mendoza

Moderator Susan McDonald, NCAC Chair, opened the meeting at 6 pm, welcoming the panelists and guests and thanking all who participated in the planning of the forum. She asked those present to listen, learn, ask questions, and try to find solutions together. A summary of this meeting will be posted on the NCAC website as soon as confirmed: www.ncacslo.org

Remarks by the panelists are summarized as follows:

Bruce Gibson: District 2 County Supervisor

Thank all for attending. I struggle to describe the extent of the explosion of the unsheltered population. It is disturbing, demoralizing, and depressing. I'm concerned about the growing problem in every community, every county, and every state. We cannot ignore the fact that basic human needs are unmet, but we are finally turning the corner on the seemingly intractable problem of how we get our hands on the many situations causing homelessness, which often are complicated by the rural versus urban differences. No one stereotype describes the homeless, and thus no one solution can solve the problem. I note the many different organizations are working on these problems. There is no one solution, and government must work with nonprofits with limited resources, as well as with individuals struggling for answers. The conclusion is that we must ALL join together to address the issues. There is some hope in that several coastal communities (Los Osos, Cayucos, and Morro Bay) are stepping up to answer the question: HOW do we do this?

Laurel Weir: Homeless Services Coordinator, SLO County Social Services

During the month of January 2017, there were 1125 people who received homeless services by our agency. The numbers are not in for January 2019 yet, but homelessness is a growing trend, estimated to be about 8% of the population. We have available 100 shelter beds, plus some for those fleeing domestic violence, and in rainy weather we have more in warming centers. But there are not enough

beds to meet the need. The single biggest predictor of homelessness is the cost of housing in our region versus the ability to pay, or the lack of affordability. We break this down into homeless sub-populations:

- a. **Transitionally Homeless:** this group is temporarily in need of shelter due to situations such as loss of job, a temporary personal crisis, and those who generally need only temporary short-term help, not major intervention.
- b. **Chronically Homeless:** this group has to meet the Federal definition of “disability” due to a minimum of 1 year of continuous homelessness, or at least 4 episodes of periodic homelessness within a 3-year period. This group makes up 30-35% of the entire homeless population and 50% or more of those who are referred to us by law enforcement or social services for their health and safety. Generally, short term intervention with this group does not work. Many are on SSI or disability incomes of about \$900 per month, and it is very difficult to find rental housing for those in this income group.

We have 52 units in the “FEC” housing program, but the need exceeds our resources. We triage those who are referred to us, often after they have used the services in our jails, emergency rooms, and psychiatric facilities, towards those of highest need through our programs of “Rapid Re-housing” and “Coordinated Entry.”

Anne Robin: Director, SLO County Behavioral Health

I have been in this field for more than 35 years. There is a percentage of 15-34% of those who are mentally ill within the homeless population, many because of drug abuse, changes in marital status (often divorce), and family separation. The cost of housing is a major driver. We serve about 2500 adults yearly, plus 1000-1500 kids. We contract out what we cannot handle to provide transportation and other mental health services. Our HOMELESS OUTREACH TEAM assesses individuals for their mental health, fostering conversations to build trust over the long term. Our involvement is NOT for the purpose of punishment; rather we are encouraging treatment for illness often caused by:

- a. Mistreatment during childhood
- b. Those who are uncomfortable indoors
- c. Those who are unable to follow rules

We try to find ways to treat them with compassion and safety, but most often this is a multi-year process, never one and done.

We are looking to the broader community to determine what it wants and how, together we can find solutions?

Rob Mullins: Deputy, San Simeon State Park

Homelessness is a big issue in all parks, due to proximity to creek beds, low cost campsites, sheltering vegetation, and nearness to families. We must follow the rules of our organization, which means no

use by the homeless of our facilities. We offer to help, but we must move them along, minimize damage to creek beds and other vulnerable areas, and remove piles of debris. We encourage reporting of homeless camps so that they do not become entrenched so we can protect State Park resources for all to enjoy. Santa Rosa Creek is a big problem, a hot spot for transient drifters. You should call 911 if you see unusual situations to alert State Parks, even if this does not seem like an appropriate use of the emergency system.

Michael Manuele: Commander, SLO County Sheriff's Department

Homelessness is a SOCIAL issue, neither solely law enforcement, nor mental health. We have a conflict between compassion and "not in my back yard" attitudes. The Sheriff's Department is on duty 24/7 to receive the first call, so please use 911 to alert us. Your call will be dispatched to our department. You are our eyes and ear, so report it! Although we receive many calls for service, the courts have decided that homelessness is NOT illegal. We estimate the current population in Cambria to be 5-10 people, with additional people living in cars and RVs. Our patrol deputies are trained in crisis intervention and in handling critical incidents, and we are taking a different view than before as we realize the causes of the problem. We are the first responders.

THE C.A.T. Team (Community Action Team) starts with our Station Liaison, somebody to respond who is familiar with the problems, and often a person from Behavioral Health rides along with our C.A.T. team. While in custody we offer individuals health services, dental services, veterans' services and drug services, but some refuse, wanting just to be left alone. Most of the services in this region are in San Luis Obispo, which is remote from the North Coast, and many of the homeless are immobile.

We are working on new ideas constantly. Residents also must know that we cannot go on to private property without the permission of the property owner.

Toby De Pew: Deputy, Sheriff's Community Action Team

A recent survey that tracked the services used by one homeless person for 1 year shows that he/she used an estimated \$1.7 Million in services, such as ambulance, police, law enforcement, mental health, and emergency rooms. Over 10 years that same person is estimated to have cost in services \$17 Million. Instead of incurring expenses to treat habitual cases, we should anticipate the problems use resources to proactively engage homelessness. 25% of all homeless people are now living in California, but here only about 1% of homes are rentals, whereas in other areas the average is 13%. There are 3 groups of homeless:

- a. Have nots, who are destitute financially
- b. Will nots, who will not work or follow rules
- c. Cannots, who are mentally ill, often incapable of work, often with no identification and no home address to use of prospective employment

Our C.A.T. teams focus on reducing recidivism by collaborating with Behavioral Health personnel. Our deputies receive 40 hours of crisis intervention training, focusing on de-escalation and recognition of mental health issues. The good news is that Behavioral Health experts go into the field with our C.A.T

teams, and we are able to accomplish positive results....the ball is moving down the field in the right direction.

Brandy Graham: Program Manager, CAPSLO Veterans Services Sector

We concentrate on rapid re-housing for veterans only, and 100% of our funding is from the Veterans Administration. We triage vets coming into our program and maintain a master list of all vets in the County. In past years, the number of homeless veterans we help has been about 350, but now it is down to about 63, but none of them are in Cambria/San Simeon/Harmony. In past years, the number of homeless vets in this area has been about 4. One inhibitor in serving homeless vets is the definition of who is a veteran by the Federal government. Some who actually did military service do not qualify because of this strict definition. We recommend more flexibility in serving all of those with a military background. The majority of those on our master list are unsheltered adult males, and some want no services due to a lack of trust. Our outreach goal is to gain their trust over the long term, and we are often successful, with most coming around to accept health services.

The primary challenge we face is the lack of affordable housing and the regulations that determine eligibility based on income levels. We cannot help those who are not officially within low and extremely low-income levels, but even those above the low levels still cannot pay the high rents in this area.

We have offices in San Luis Obispo and Paso Robles, but transportation is an issue.

Our “Housing First” model is (1) to put a roof over those in crisis and only then (2) determine what the causes of homelessness are. First achieve housing stability and then get them connected to services. We have a problem with landlords in finding enough housing. Our veterans often have no incomes, no rental history, and no current employment. We try to find landlords who are willing to rent and employers who are willing to take a chance on them.

Give us a call. We will find the homeless veterans and begin to help them.

Carlos Mendoza: CCSD Resources and Facilities Manager and Manager of the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve

The CCSD is in the same boat as State Parks with homeless using our Vets Hall parking lots and our public restrooms. We interact with the homeless on the Fiscalini Ranch and behind the Catholic Church primarily due to these reasons:

- a. Many of our properties are along the highway, offering easy access to campgrounds and lots of vegetation
- b. Close to Main Street for access to businesses and restrooms

We did an assessment from February to June of 2019 and found 50 homeless campsites, many of which are found on the East Ranch near the dog park and behind the Catholic Church. Some people use several sites, multiple places for living, storage of their belongings. We estimate 15-20 people camping on CCSD property with 8-10 people currently on the Ranch. Of these, 7 are men at least 50

years of age, 2 are women over 50 years of age, and 1 man in middle 30s. Among these we found substance abuse, mental health problems, and, although some are working part time, they do not earn enough to pay rent. We have found housing for the 2 who are working.

We have done cleanup on 50 sites, many in the East Ranch area, with about 20 of those abandoned. We collected 40 cubic yards of trash along the Santa Rosa Creek. The accumulation of trash is causing pollution and washouts. Presenting fire danger in the Monterey Pine and Cypress forest areas are shelters made from dried wood and brush. We keep the Fire Department aware of these conditions.

Kyle Martin: Assistant Superintendent, Coast Unified School District

The current student population among our 4 schools is 606. 73.8% are classified in the lower socioeconomic community (447 students) and 15% as homeless (91 students). We get these figures from information provided by those applying for free and reduced lunch service, but the figures are underreported, especially among the older students. Some students are housed in motel rooms, and many families are sharing one dwelling together. Others are living in campgrounds and in cars.

We find about 12 families “transitioning”, often moving out of Cambria within the first month of school, and this is a pattern of moving around within the County trying to find stability.

School provided breakfast and lunch are often the only meals these students have daily, resulting in less on weekends and summer and school holidays, and these meal programs cost the district \$40,000 annually.

Our teachers receive training for social and emotional issues. Behavioral Health provides counseling for mental health and Atascadero’s “LINK” program helps with direct services from the community.

Theresa Desmond: Organizer, IN THE COMMUNITY group

I am a retired registered nurse within SLO County mental health services. The problem with homelessness started in 2008 with the Great Recession, with more acute and suicidal. Many of us are only 1 paycheck away from homelessness and live paycheck-to-paycheck. Many local residents know or are related to homeless persons. Some on the “Next Door” social media website complain about the homeless, saying “ain’t it awful!” Our IN THE SOLUTIONS group started in March of 2019 but not for the complainers. Our primary goals are:

- a. Communication for awareness of the problem
- b. Education about homeless services
- c. Coordination among all individuals and organizations toward helping the underserved
- d. Cooperation with local resources for services

We will meet on Wednesday, June 26 at 10 am at the Pacific Premier Bank conference room and all are invited to attend.

Our group volunteered to help clean up trash but were discouraged because of liability issues. Meanwhile the CCSD spent \$20,000 on cleanup costs.

Due to the court decision in Martin v. Boise, homelessness cannot be criminalized, and we can be sued for infringing on the rights of the homeless.

Our ideas are to create resources to help the homeless by providing patrols, increasing safe parking, establishing resort fees from local hotels, and providing dumpsters. The Los Angeles program "LA CARES" provides mobile showers. There are 118,142 homeless people in 58 counties in California.

Be part of "IN THE SOLUTION," use prayer and faith, and do not ignore the local homeless; they are permanent residents here.

Mark Stetz: Pastor, Santa Rosa Catholic Church

The homeless population is in two groups:

- a. Older people with no families who are close to homeless, sometimes are house sharing, and sometimes need live-in help (without the ability to vet them)
- b. "Gutter Punk" is a movement of younger people whose capitals are Santa Cruz and Seattle, who are "passing through" and need gasoline or other things. They cannot be put-up in hotels because too often they trash the rooms, but they make use of our food pantry and food bank. For them we need "pop top" meals because they have no cooking facilities.

We try to help all of them, but our resources are limited.

Gary White: Pastor, Vineyard Community Church

We have an open-door policy for all who seek help, but we are "kindly discerning." We purchase food from the foodbank monthly and many people contribute packages of food. We also have help from the Rotary Club. All of these are supplemental to the needs of the homeless, but they are part of the solution.

We have a community Thanksgiving dinner, although not primarily for the homeless.

Our concern is the transitionally homeless, many older folk who did not plan for retirement. 70% have less than \$1000 in savings but now are retired. The Great Recession of 2008 was a big cause of the problem for people who are not working or have low incomes. Many are from broken marriages, have been evicted, and some are couch surfing or living in cars.

The good news is that there are social services to help out and the homeless are very grateful for this help. We help one person at a time, one situation at a time, and the faith community is part of the solution.

Wendy Lewis: ECHO

Started as a grassroots organization in Atascadero primarily serving the elderly, our group is all volunteers, soliciting help from local churches and now serving all age groups. Our case managers evaluate a person's needs, find services for them, and follow-up with monitoring and continued support. We run a 50-bed shelter in Atascadero, providing homes for up to 90 days' stay to provide clients with a home-like environment, a safe place to leave their possessions, meals, served communally. Last year we served 54,000 meals, and on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays we offer showers, new clothing, and shoes and socks to help give them their dignity back. We have special shelters for families - we do not separate them. In 2018 we provided 20,000 bed-nights and managed to find housing for 60% of those whom we served. We want to offer them HOPE, not hopelessness. We provide information on available services and sometimes provide transportation. Part of our funding is provided by California Emergency Solutions Housing.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM THE PUBLIC

Moderated by Susan McDonald, NCAC Chair

1. What are your currently offered outreach services in Cambria? Posed to Anne Robin and Laurel Weir.

Anne Robin: We identify those with mental illness through our outreach teams, but much more frequently in SLO where we have 20-30 calls daily. We have received a State grant to provide a van and nurse practitioners to go to more out-of-the-way areas. We are trying to provide our services on a more expanded route, but so far, we are not often in Cambria.

Laurel Weir: We maintain a list of housing support needs, now numbering 50-70, and we provide outreach to areas outside of the major cities.

2. How can citizens help with meals? Posed to Pastor Mark Stetz and Pastor Gary White.

Mark Stetz: We do not offer cooked meals.

Gary White: We do not cook, but we provide food from the food bank. We are in need of "pop top" food, including fruits and vegetables that are durable, not perishable. Citizens can give to the SLO FOOD BANK or donate to charities. Donations are tax-deductible, and the donor can specify that donations are for food. We always need protein sources like peanut butter and canned meats, as well as ramen-type instant foods.

Wendy Lewis: Providing easy meals transforms lives. Providing meals yields stability and allows you to get to know the people whom you are helping.

3. **Susan McDonald**, passing along a comment by Susan Warren: Could this be a possible next step: ECHO, Estero Bay Resource Center, Paso Cares, and Los Osos Resource center sponsor a once-a-week community dinner for isolated homeless seniors? Could this be a possible option for Cambria sponsored by churches, service organizations, and Cambria Connection?
4. **Laura Schwartz**: How can you provide addiction recovery help? Can tax funds from legalization of cannabis be used for addiction issues?
Anne Robin: Tax revenue from cannabis has been disappointingly low as most cannabis has been sold through the illegal market
Bruce Gibson: Tax rates for cannabis were intended to offset the problems caused by cannabis use. We would need to move our priorities authorized for these funds.
5. What is estimated population of homeless in Cambria?
Carlos Mendoza: 15-20 on the Fiscalini Ranch in 2018, but now 8-10 on all CCSD properties.
Rob Mullins: Differences in estimated numbers are partly due to those removed from campgrounds, who often are not counted.
6. What is the biggest cause of homelessness: The COST OF HOUSING (consensus among the panelists)
7. What are County health services needs along the North Coast?
Laurel Weir: Increased coordination among all public and private providers, including creation of ad hoc committees on the encampment issues, using employees from each agency and involving participation from community health service providers. This will provide information on what is working and can provide mapping to Public Works and the Sheriff's Department by sharing information from homeless outreach.
Bruce Gibson: My job is to advocate for increased funding for housing. Governor Newsom is STRONG on homeless issues, but the focus is on big city centers and not on rural areas. We need more commitment from communities on homeless issues and push for increased attention to needed services. Local communities like Los Osos, Morro Bay, Cayucos, Cambria, and San Simeon should act as a group to address the problems.
8. Do you need better numbers? How do we get them to establish the need for community help?
Laurel Weir: No, we have good information on numbers of homeless, but if you see camps, let us know so we can connect with them.
9. Can we help the local school district through volunteer assistance?
Kyle Martin: Advocate for food aid, which has a big budget impact. Help the whole community, and this will help the school district.
10. Regarding safety on the Ranch trails, please comment.

Carlos Mendoza: There are not many reports of problems on the Ranch trails, but if you see fire or other issues contact FFRP and CCSD or you can call 911. We have 460 acres of Ranch and hundreds of open space lots owned by the CCSD to cover.

Michael Manuele: There are not many problems on trails caused by the homeless, but there are some problems in town.

11. How can camp cleanup be accomplished?

Carlos Mendoza: This is a complex issue of trash in the creeks and forests. Volunteers are eager to help, but there are issues of safety, health and law to contend with. How to evict? How to get belongings to the owners? Their belongings are NOT trash.

Rob Mullins: There are many dangerous needles in the trash and other dangerous conditions.

12. What legal obligations do we have toward animal companions of the homeless?

Michael Manuele: We ask the homeless what is their preference in caregiving to pets, and we will contact that person. Otherwise, we use animal shelters and services.

13. Can communities disallow panhandling?

Michael Manuele: No, panhandling on public property is not illegal.

14. Can community showers be provided?

Mark Stetz: Showers and towels are beyond our capacity. We purchased 6 portable showers to give away, but nobody wanted them.

Anne Robin: There are "Showers of Hope" mobile shower vehicles.

Gary White: We found that there is a lack of volunteers to help, a requirement of those who provide the mobile shower vehicles.

Bruce Gibson: Showers CAN be provided with community support.

Wendy Lewis: This is not complicated. People are grateful for the services, and donors are readily available to provide towels, socks, etc. People give.

15. Do the C.A.T. teams need community volunteers to ride along with them?

Toby De Pew: Not sure, as CAT teams need intense case management training. Better to ask if this person needs a place to stay, a bus, mental health care and help to link case managers to local services, help with transport, etc. Most services are in SLO.

Anne Robin: Not sure that ride-alongs are a good idea. CAT teams pair-up in safe locations but do not call for untrained volunteers. Mobile treatment facilities are available, but there are lots of no shows.

Bruce Gibson: People's Self Help does a very good job of helping to house the homeless.

16. What is the legal situation of camping in and around town?

Bruce Gibson: Martin v. Boise

Michael Manuele: Martin v. Boise provides that the homeless cannot be prosecuted and cannot be removed from public property as long as there is no reasonably available alternative. Camping in a car is not illegal unless the car is parked in a red zone or driveway. People can sleep in public places as long as they pose no safety or health hazard. Be careful how to approach this subject.

17. Can we provide excess restaurant food?

Toby De Pew: Surprisingly, food is available to most homeless in this area; they are well fed. Other priorities are more important, such as a good job.

18. **Claudia Harmon-Worthen:** **Becky Jorgensen** runs an organization called “Hope Villages” with the idea of housing the homeless. Is this possible?

No answers given

19. Isn't it unfair to be forced to use CCSD funds for trash pickup when the Vets Hall needs a new roof?

Bruce Gibson: Isn't it unfair for the mentally ill to be homeless?

20. Can we get 2 dedicated case workers added to address the homeless situation in San Simeon and Cambria:

Anne Robin: Two full-time people might be more than is needed in this area, but we might increase the C.A.T. patrols and add 1 more Sheriff's deputy. Those same 2 support people can serve 20 people in larger communities. The homeless could use prepaid cell phones to help them access services. CENCAL can provide transportation for those who need to get to medical appointments and then get back “home”.

CeCe Lomeli: Community Health Center clinic has social workers, psychiatrists, and case workers to help the homeless. We are in need of more space since we serve everyone in the community. Last month we saw 644 people in our facility. I am the case manager for Cambria.

Alan Fields: Challenged Bruce Gibson to help reduce the bus fares for the homeless to \$1.60, which most homeless can afford. Alan's bus often takes locals who need showers to Morro Bay, because they are barred from using those in the San Simeon State Park.

CLOSING REMARKS: **Bruce Gibson**

Thank all who helped put the meeting together, providing admirable hope and inspiration. The next steps depend on making help for the homeless PART of our communities, providing meaningful compassion and understanding that the homeless are part of our wider communities.

End of meeting called by Susan McDonald at 8:37 pm

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