

HOMELESSNESS IN SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY: ARE WE SOLVING THE PROBLEM?

SUMMARY

On any given day nearly four thousand persons in San Luis Obispo County are homeless. Some sleep under bridges or along the creeks, some live in their cars, many “couch surf,” (spending a few nights with an acquaintance and moving elsewhere). A hundred may find a bed at a shelter in Atascadero or San Luis Obispo. The Grand Jury examined how they live and what public and private agencies and individuals are doing: (1) to help them survive in the short run and (2) to assist them in finding stable housing for the long term.

METHOD/PROCEDURE

To complete this inquiry, Grand Jurors:

- interviewed county officials
- interviewed staff members of non-profit corporations working with the homeless
- interviewed volunteers, who give their time and effort to try to help this population
- visited facilities that serve the homeless in Santa Maria, our south county, Atascadero and San Luis Obispo
- reviewed both national and local reports on homelessness
- talked with homeless men and women in our community

NARRATIVE

Approximately 260,000 persons reside in San Luis Obispo County. In late January 2009 some 3,829 people in the county (nearly 1.5%) were homeless. Of those 1,372 were children or teens under the age of 18.¹ Interviews with 342 (14% of the adults) provided a profile of our homeless population at that time.

Where they slept:

That January night 25% of the interviewees slept outdoors (in a tent, under a bush, etc.); 21% were in a car, camper or other vehicle; 18% were guests of family or friends; 12% were in a shelter, about 11% were in housing provided by a transitional housing program; and 10% spent the night in a motel.² The remaining 3% did not respond.

Where they resided:

Of the 3,829 persons counted in the enumeration; 1,025 (88 under the age of 18, hereafter children) were in the City of San Luis Obispo; 572 (144 children) in Paso Robles; the unincorporated areas of the county registered 501 (64 children); Grover Beach counted 275 (38 children); Atascadero 209 (27 children); Arroyo Grande 118 (14 children); Morro Bay 66 (5 children); Pismo Beach 48 (3 children). In addition 988 homeless children were counted in public schools; their places of residence were not available to the enumerators. The home city of 27 persons was not recorded in the report.

¹ Homeless Services Coordinating Council, *San Luis Obispo County HOMELESS ENUMERATION REPORT, 2009*, (http://www.unitedwayslo.org/News/09/Enumeration_9-01-09.pdf). Most of the statistics in this report are based on that document.

² Of the 342 interviewed, 12% (41) had spent the night in a shelter, but with just over 100 beds, county shelters can accommodate only about 3% of the 3,827 homeless people counted in January 2009. Similarly 10% (34) of the interviewed had spent the night in a motel; it seems unlikely, however, that 10% (383) of the entire homeless were in motels that night.

Local or Transient:

Last year 342 homeless persons were interviewed in some detail. Of those 56% reported they had resided in the county more than five years and an additional 24% had resided here from one to five years. Eight percent had been in the county less than four months and ten percent had lived here four months to a year.

Time homeless:

Of 342 interviewees, 188 (55%) reported that more than a year had passed since having their own apartment or house. Of the remainder; one-third had been homeless 3 months or less; one-third 4 to 6 months; and one-third for 7 to 12 months. In addition, 144 (42%) said this was not the first time they had been without a home.

Why homeless:

When asked why they had no home, about 35% of the respondents said they were unable to pay rent and 20% believed unemployment to be the cause. Substance abuse, divorce and low wages were each cited by about 15% as the culprit.

Associated challenges:

About 30% of the interviewees reported a physical disability, 25% a mental one and 9% substance abuse. Respondents noted various health issues including dental problems, vision, joint injuries and most often depression or similar ailments.

THOSE WHO HELP AND HOW

Depending upon their specific needs and details of their individual circumstances, the homeless of San Luis Obispo County can and often do find support from a wide variety of public, non-profit and even individual sources. The most important of these include:

Community Action Partnership (Formerly EOC)

A large non-profit organization with a substantial staff, CAPSLO (as it is known) operates Head Start programs in various counties and provides numerous other direct service programs for

disadvantaged persons. Since 1989 it has operated a shelter for the homeless, first located on Kansas Avenue north of San Luis Obispo but soon moved to the current site on Orcutt Road in the city. That facility, called the Maxine Lewis Memorial Shelter, has beds for 49 homeless persons. In addition, CAPSLO manages an “overflow” shelter for women and families, the location of which rotates monthly among a dozen churches and synagogues via the “**Interfaith Coalition for the Homeless.**” Each night of the year volunteers from those religious organizations serve as chaperones at those “overflow” facilities. To be admitted to the overnight shelter(s) individuals go through an “in-take” process and may be asked to pass a breathalyzer test. Friday through Sunday evenings, volunteers donate, prepare and serve supper to homeless persons at the shelters. Monday through Thursday evenings, CAPSLO serves meals prepared at their Head Start Kitchen in Shell Beach. Friday, Saturday and Sunday scheduled volunteers from churches and similar groups donate, bring and serve those meals.

CAPSLO also runs the Prado Day Center that provides showers, a noon meal, mail, laundry and other services for homeless persons. Both Prado and the Maxine Lewis receive financial, volunteer and moral support from volunteer organizations that were established to serve the homeless in the county. Both facilities also get financial support from the city and county. Financial records indicate that the combined average per bed night costs for the Maxine Lewis and overflow shelters is about \$17.

Finally, CAPSLO provides case-management services for homeless persons in the south and north areas of the county as well as in San Luis Obispo. The programs that CAPSLO operates are funded from multiple sources including county and city grants (much of the money coming from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development). In 2009, CAPSLO spent \$878,088 to operate the Maxine Lewis Shelter and Prado Day Center and another \$244,895 for case management.

In the course of our inquiry the Grand Jury obtained a copy of a written assessment (2008) of homeless services that CAPSLO had commissioned. The document described serious deficiencies in each of three homeless service programs: case management, the Prado Day

Center and the Maxine Lewis Shelter. The report then outlined recommendations for improving service in those programs. It was not distributed to CAPSLO's governing board or to the county or city governments that provide CAPSLO with substantial grants for homeless services. The Grand Jury learned that many recommendations in the report have since been implemented and that consequently CAPSLO's direct services to the homeless have improved.

El Camino Homeless Organization (ECHO)

Located in Atascadero, ECHO is essentially an all-volunteer non-profit organization. Since opening in December 2001, ECHO has provided meals and overnight shelter for homeless clients. At first it moved month to month from one local church to another. Since 2006 it has operated all year in space provided by the First Baptist Church where they have 31 beds. They fund motel rooms for families when the shelter is filled to capacity. In over eight plus years of operation ECHO has provided 62,000 bed nights for homeless persons. They also provide supper for about 45 persons each evening. Recently, perhaps due to the recession, that number has averaged above 60 persons. The meals are prepared, delivered and served by volunteers from a wide variety of churches and other groups. In 2008, a total of 639 persons volunteered as overnight ECHO chaperones. Other citizens support the program by providing laundry services, registering clients each night, etc. ECHO gets financial support from local governments and a variety of donors. Because (1) labor is donated, (2) the First Baptist Church furnishes space at a very modest fee and (3) local organizations make other in-kind donations, ECHO's per bed night cost is about \$6.

South County Programs

Since 1991 the "South County People's Kitchen" has served lunch every day in Grover Beach. It is staffed by volunteers from churches and other non-profits. The region is without an overnight shelter or a warming station where homeless people can escape the rain and the cold.

Recently the "San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation" received about \$1.5 million from a couple who directed that their gift be used to assist homeless people in the south county area. The foundation is working with public and private groups to put that gift to work. The

“Five Cities Homeless Coalition” has organized as a non-profit that hopes to build a day center. Besides serving lunch the coalition hopes such a facility will have a health clinic and space for social service providers. It would also give clients access to showers, a laundry, computers, etc. Regrettably, as presently envisioned the facility does not include a place for the homeless to sleep, although the Five Cities Homeless Coalition claims that is a “#1 priority.” Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee is authoring legislation to allow the Cities of Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach to forge a partnership and use housing funds to construct a local homeless facility. Last fall the County Board of Supervisors endorsed the concept as did the city councils in Grover Beach and Pismo Beach. On January 12, 2010 the Arroyo Grande City Council passed a resolution “supporting the efforts of the Five Cities Homeless Coalition in locating a homeless services center within the south county.”

Services for the Homeless Elsewhere

If there are substantial programs to serve the homeless in Morro Bay, Los Osos, Nipomo or Paso Robles they have not come to the attention of the Grand Jury. The 2009 Homeless Enumeration Report found relatively few homeless persons in the first three communities, but documented 572 (including 144 children) in Paso Robles. Where they slept is not known, but the nearest shelter is ECHO in Atascadero.

San Luis Obispo County Government

Homeless people are frequently assisted by one or more units of the county government, but being homeless does not automatically qualify someone for a particular service. The County Health Agency has mental health services and drug and alcohol services. The Department of Social Services (DSS) administers a variety of programs including CALWORKS, General Assistance and others. One day a week DSS sends a staff member to the Prado Day Center for program outreach. While programs in DSS and the Health Agency serve homeless persons who come to their offices, staff seldom search out the homeless where they sleep, work or gather. In the past, a staff employee in mental health “beat the bushes and the creek sides” to get to know the homeless, earn their trust and get them needed services. No more. State budget cuts ended that program. Mental health has one outreach worker. How much time he or she spends with the

homeless population is uncertain. Today, if a homeless person wants the help of these agencies, he or she gets on a bus, drives or walks to an agency office. For our homeless population, especially the 25% or so with mental illness, it is hard enough to find a place to sleep and eat, let alone get to an appointment made days or even weeks previously. A few end up in jail.

Moreover, some homeless persons need the support of more than one public agency, but it seems that coordination and integration of services by the primary providers (drug and alcohol services, mental health, DSS) is less than ideal. In speaking with managers, we obtained varied answers, to the question, “How well do you integrate your services with those of other county agencies?” One of them said, “not as well as we should.” Another told us the agencies do work together and there is no problem. One told us “There is no integration of services.” Another witness indicated that egos and turf wars were obstacles to coordination.

San Luis Obispo City Government

For 20 years, San Luis Obispo City has devoted almost all of its Community Development Block Grant public services funds to homeless services,³ but that effort has not met the need of the homeless population.

THOSE WHO DREAM AND HOW

The Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness

With support and input from the county and city governments and a variety of non-profit agencies, an eighty-six page document titled *Path to a Home: San Luis Obispo Countywide 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness*⁴ was published in October 2008. It was prepared by a consultant who had drafted plans for other localities with the same framework and used data collected locally. The Grand Jury understands that the cities and county have “*accepted*” the ten year plan. However, skeptical witnesses told us that our local governments have not “*adopted*”

³SLO City Housing Element 2010, p. 113.

⁴Available on line at <http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/Assets/HSCC/Documents/Ten+Year+Plan.pdf>, *Path to a Home* outlines “what needs to be done to help people who are homeless or at-risk arrive ‘home’ to stable housing...” and lists the “system, policy and program changes necessary for the Cities, Communities and County to arrive at their goal of ending homelessness in ten years.” Quoted from page 6.

it, because “adoption” would obligate them to actually implement the plan’s objectives. We were informed that the plan was written at least in part because it is an eligibility requirement for federal grants.

Path to Home includes a “housing first model” for helping the homeless. The theory is that the best way to assist the homeless population is to *first* put the people in stable housing and *then* provide supportive services to help them remain housed while addressing the problems that led to their homelessness. This approach, we were told, has worked well in large urban areas that have old or empty buildings that can be converted to low cost housing. Whether “housing first” will work as well in San Luis Obispo County is problematic, because housing here is scarce and expensive.

The Proposed Homeless Services Campus

The county wants to build a “homeless campus” that will combine services now provided at the Prado Day Center and the Maxine Lewis Shelter. It would also have offices where county agency staff (e.g. from DSS and the Health Agency) would serve homeless clients, who would then no longer need to travel around the county seeking services. Plans call for it to be located on county land on lower Higuera Street adjacent to the building that houses the Department of Social Services. The County Board of Supervisors is firmly behind this plan and individual supervisors are working to see that it becomes a reality.

Homeless Services Oversight Council (HSOC)

To move forward with the campus and the ten year plan, city and county officials as well as members of the county’s many non-profit homeless organizations have formed HSOC, a committee which meets monthly to work to implement the Ten Year Plan and end or, at least mitigate, the homeless situation in the county. HSOC is large and widely representative of constituencies serving the homeless population. While having all the players at this table is valuable, HSOC is probably too large to be an effective governing body. HSOC’s first major goal was obtaining funds to hire a part time “executive director,” a move not without controversy. As this Grand Jury report was being prepared recruitment to fill the job was

completed. Whether the person selected will have the skill, resources and clout to really coordinate and otherwise improve local support for our homeless citizens remains to be seen.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING: A CONTINUING NEED

In San Luis Obispo County affordable housing is hard to come by. Although housing authorities, Peoples' Self-Help Housing, and other groups have hundreds of units for low-income residents, demand outstrips supply. Obstacles to increasing the inventory of housing that low-income people can actually afford are many. They include zoning regulations on where such units can be built, restrictions on the number of units per acre that get approved, building codes that promote safety but inflate costs and political resistance from neighbors who fear for their property values.

Specialized Housing and Shelter

In San Luis Obispo, the Women's Shelter has about 40 beds for women and children who are homeless, displaced or abused. There is also a Women's Shelter in the north county. Transitions Mental Health, a private non-profit agency, has housing for about 70 single adults who are dealing with mental health issues. These facilities, in various parts of the county, frequently house at risk persons who might otherwise be, or become, homeless.

HSOC's Housing Subcommittee is developing recommendations to address the need for more affordable housing. HSOC supports *permanent housing* for the long-term solution, *supportive housing* for people who need assistance and *interim housing* (a.k.a. homeless shelter facilities) for temporary housing for the homeless. All three types of housing are needed and are consistent with the ten year plan.

CONCLUSION

At last count (January 2009) more than 3,800 people in San Luis Obispo County were homeless. That number included 1,300 under the age of 18. Most sleep on other people's couches, in cars or outside. About a hundred find beds in shelter in Atascadero (ECHO) or San Luis Obispo

(CAPSLO and the Interfaith Coalition). The volunteer “peoples kitchens” provide meals in various locations. The Prado Day Center offers laundry and other services in San Luis Obispo. The county and most city governments help fund these programs. All of these efforts are commendable but insufficient. No one is in charge; no government takes more than partial responsibility.

Based on its investigation, the Grand Jury concludes that for the situation to truly improve, the responsibility and authority for coordinating and managing all the various available resources needs to reside with one person, independent of city or county control, but funded by them. Unless local governments and private organizations join together and expand available resources, the homeless adults and children of San Luis Obispo County will continue to struggle and far too many including hundreds of our children will remain *homeless*.

FINDINGS

1. With public and private funding, CAPSLO (by far the largest non-profit serving the homeless) operates the Prado Day Center and the Maxine Lewis Shelter. CAPSLO provides case management for homeless clients in the north and south county and the City of San Luis Obispo.
2. The Maxine Lewis Homeless Shelter is not large enough to provide beds in San Luis Obispo for all who seek them. The facility is in poor physical condition.
3. The “overflow” shelter program that CAPSLO runs with the Interfaith Coalition provides beds for homeless women and families each night of the year at local churches and synagogues. This arrangement has logistical challenges but also provides the important advantage of engaging many volunteers to serve as chaperones, thus giving hundreds of citizens some awareness of what it means to have no home.
4. Among private non-profit groups serving the homeless, ECHO, in Atascadero, is exemplary.
5. In Paso Robles, which has a large homeless population, there is no shelter.

6. The South County People's Kitchen, in Grover Beach, serves lunch daily and the recently created Five Cities Homeless Coalition wants to have a comprehensive day center for the population they serve. As presently contemplated, the vision for that facility does not include overnight sleeping accommodations.
7. No single county official or agency is charged with overall responsibility for assisting the homeless.
8. The County Departments of Social Services, Mental Health Services and Drug and Alcohol Services assist homeless persons who are eligible for their programs, but simply being homeless does not qualify an individual for any particular service.
9. The extent to which the key county agencies (DSS, Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol) integrate services to the homeless is uncertain. Agency leaders offer differing assessments.
10. Some homeless persons who are afflicted with drug and alcohol problems or mentally ill are not well served.
11. The widely endorsed *Path to a Home: San Luis Obispo Countywide 10- Year Plan to End Homelessness* has been accepted, but not "adopted," by cities and the county.
12. The county, with support from cities and private groups, wants to build a homeless service campus in San Luis Obispo.
13. The need for low cost housing in the county substantially exceeds supply.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The county and all the county's incorporated cities should "adopt" and begin to implement the Ten Year Plan to End Homelessness.
2. The county and all the incorporated cities should establish and fund a line item in their budgets specifically supporting services, including more housing for homeless persons.
3. A full-time Homes Services Coordinator (a senior official who is more than the currently contemplated HSOC "Executive Director") should oversee the implementation of the ten year plan. This person should be supplied with a staff, including a grant writer.

4. The Homeless Services Coordinator should monitor funds directed towards helping the homeless and make recommendations and offer guidance to all involved agencies and groups throughout the County.
5. The Homeless Services Campus should be built as soon as possible. The coordinator and appropriate staff from DSS, County Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol should also be stationed there. These professionals need to meet with the homeless where they eat and sleep. Each department should have one or more staff assigned to the Prado Day Center on a regular basis until the campus is occupied. Appropriate arrangements should be made to address issues of client privacy and confidentiality as required by law, but such requirements should not provide a rationale for not delivering services.
6. The county, south county incorporated cities and appropriate non-profit groups should vigorously pursue joint efforts to build and operate a facility that provides both day services and night time shelter for homeless persons in the five cities region.
7. Cities in south county, the county itself and The Five Cities Homeless Coalition should begin to work with local churches and service groups to provide temporary shelter until the facility is operative. ECHO in Atascadero provides an excellent model.
8. Non-profit organizations, including churches, and the City of Paso Robles should establish shelter and meal serving program for people who are homeless.
9. Because ECHO has a system that works, their ideas and methods should be expanded to other areas within the county. CAPSLO, Five Cities Homeless Coalition and other groups now working with the homeless should meet with the staff of ECHO and be mentored in the areas of recruiting, training and effectively utilizing volunteers.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors is required to respond to Findings 2, 3, 6 through 13 and Recommendations 1 through 8. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The San Luis Obispo County Department of Social Services is required to respond to Findings 7 through 10 and Recommendations 1 and 3 through 7. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **August 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The San Luis Obispo County Health Agency is required to respond to Findings 7 through 10 and Recommendations 1 and 3 through 7. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **August 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The Community Action Partnership (CAPSLO) is required to respond to Findings 1, 2, 3, 10 & 12 and Recommendations 3 through 9. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The El Camino Homeless Organization (ECHO) is required to respond to Findings 4 & 10 and Recommendations 3, 4, 7, 8 & 9. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The Five Cities Homeless Coalition is required to respond to Findings 6 & 10 and Recommendations 3, 4, 6, 7 & 9. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the

San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The City of San Luis Obispo is required to respond to Findings 2, 3, 11, 12 & 13 and Recommendations 1, 2, 3 & 5. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The City of Atascadero is required to respond to Findings 4, 11, 12 & 13 and Recommendations 1, 2, 3 & 5. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The City of Paso Robles is required to respond to Findings 5, 11, 12 & 13 and Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 5 & 8. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The City of Arroyo Grande is required to respond to Findings 6, 11, 12 & 13 and Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 & 7. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The City of Pismo Beach is required to respond to Findings 6, 11, 12 & 13 and Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 & 7. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The City of Grover Beach is required to respond to Findings 6, 11, 12 & 13 and Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 & 7. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of

the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **September 13, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The mailing addresses for delivery are:

Presiding Judge	Grand Jury
Presiding Judge Charles S. Crandall Superior Court of California 1050 Monterey Street San Luis Obispo, CA 93408	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93402