

Supervisors hear homeless report

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A stark presentation on homeless deaths in Santa Barbara County became a call to arms on Tuesday for public officials and community groups to confront and forestall the growing problem.

The county Homeless Death Review Team, which reviews homeless deaths and their causes, compiled data for a report identifying recent trends about factors related to homelessness – the economy, education, mental and physical health, substance abuse, affordable housing and lack of services or the failure to seek them – and explored ways to prevent homeless deaths.

“For these reasons, data is valuable in helping bring awareness to the issue and highlighting areas where we can improve, with the goal of preventing unnecessary deaths in this very challenging and vulnerable population,” Dr. Takashi Wada, director of the Public Health Department, told the Board of Supervisors.

The team, comprising public health, law enforcement, social service and substance abuse prevention officials, reported to the board that from Jan. 1, 2009, to Dec. 31, 2010, 90 people died in the county.

Approximately 5,000 homeless people live in Santa Barbara County, and death among the population totalled 40 in 2009 and 39 in 2010.

The data showed that 86% were male and the average age of death was 52. A breakdown by ethnic group showed 63 were white, seven Hispanic, four black, two Native American, one Asian/Pacific Islander, and two of ethnicities that were not determined.

About 40% died from natural causes, 35% from accidents, 1% from suicide and 24% of the death certificates did not list a manner of death. Two people died from exposure and hypothermia and their deaths were related to acute alcohol intoxication. In fact, the majority of the homeless population struggled with alcoholism and drug abuse. More than three-quarters of the deceased suffered from alcoholism, while more than half used illicit drugs. Nearly half had cardiovascular disease and mental health diseases, which had a strong correlation with substance abuse.

Dr. David Lennon, a physician with the county Public Health Department, led the project and stressed that because alcohol and drug abuse were rampant among the population, additional acute treatment and services were needed. He noted that though many homeless people have used services, many stopped treatment around the time of their deaths.

Another problem is homeless people who were discharged from hospitals to the street, where they were left to fend for themselves. "Oftentimes these are the folks bouncing back into the emergency rooms or being re-admitted into the hospital, and I think that's part of the trend as to why you see such a high cost of \$3 million for care for the homeless," Lennon noted, calling for more housing, particularly sober living homes.

Public outreach for help was also paramount, he noted. Since the team started studying homeless deaths, it has teamed up with various county agencies to improve housing and street outreach. The Common Ground Vulnerability Index was issued by volunteers last spring to help provide housing for the most vulnerable people. Since the last survey, 90 have found housing, Lennon noted.

"We really need to look at more street outreach," he said. Lennon noted that Doctors Without Walls, a non-profit organization in Santa Barbara that provides medical care to unsheltered homeless people, has been a pivotal player in the collective effort to curtail homelessness and homeless deaths.

The most glaring challenge, he stated, was a dearth of respite care. The Casa Esperanza Homeless Shelter and WillBridge are the only agencies that provide limited care in the South County. None exists in the North County. Lennon advocated for a mobile clinic (or "clinic on wheels") to allow "outreaching to those in areas where people are congregating are resistant to going to the traditional, stationary clinic."

Third District Supervisor Doreen Farr said a mobile clinic would be "huge" in assisting the homeless population. She noted that a mobile clinic from San Luis Obispo County has provided a huge benefit to areas in northern Santa Barbara County as far as Las Alamos.

She said from a dollars-and-cents perspective, it made sense to partner with cities, non-profit groups, the philanthropic community, homeless advocates and other stakeholders to get "specific information out there so we can start addressing the needs."

Rob Fredericks, chief administrative officer of the Housing Authority of Santa Barbara and a member of Common Ground Santa Barbara, agreed that there needed to be more collaboration on homeless issues.

"We are working on ideas that will create a true continuum of care for people moving from street to home," he said. Deborah Barnes, founder of Worth Street Outreach for the streets of Santa Barbara and Carpinteria, said she and her group are seeing a greater need for respite care and medical help.

"When we're on the streets, the bushes, the parks, the creeks, what we see is astounding," she said. "The amount of vulnerable mentally ill people on the streets, unable to defend for themselves properly, is serious and is not being addressed. There is little to no support services for them, and those gifted with extensive knowledge of homeless community on the ground are gone and have not been replaced.

"There is a serious need for supportive services, much more outreach, and to know the streets," she added. "And we need a mobile clinic, not from San Luis Obispo, but from Santa Barbara County. We need supportive services, foundations of support for those we hope to house, and respite beds from

Cottage Hospital's revolving doors, sending the poor out of their doors and directly into our community."

Emily Allen of Legal Aid lauded the efforts of the review team.

"There is an identified need in Santa Barbara County for coordinated interdisciplinary outreach teams that can provide mobile services," she said. "We also need home-style respite care for people leaving the hospital who are homeless and medically vulnerable."

She said many things can be "done cost-effectively by working with the growing volunteer movement. This is not just about more resources, but rather using resources more effectively."

After public comment, Farr spoke to the 14% of the homeless population who are Veterans.

She said more and more Veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are on the streets and said the county should track this group so data can be shared with The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

First District Supervisor Salud Carbajal said he wanted the board to "follow up on some of these glaring challenges and come back with an idea of what is the unmet need, what are the dollars, and how all stakeholders can work toward meeting some of those needs."

"Until we do that, we'll just have another report, and we will pat ourselves on the back for doing such a great report and will have done this community a disservice," he said. As part of his motion, he asked the board to revisit the issue with an action plan in six months or a year.