

Homeless will be counted this week

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In the first countywide effort of its kind, hundreds of people from the South Bay, the Harbor Area and elsewhere around the region will fan out to bridges, parks, freeway off-ramps and other sites this week to conduct a census of homeless people.

The three-night count is expected to benefit the county in several ways, including:

- * Determining whether a widely used estimate of the region's homeless -- an astonishing 80,000 people on any given night -- is high, low or right on target.

- * Giving local government and nonprofit agencies solid data on which to base their applications for federal funding for the homeless.

- * Helping these agencies devise ways to funnel the money into programs where it can be the most effective.

"If you want to have a better basis for developing plans and designing services and outreach, it's pretty important to have a count," said Jennifer Wolch, a geography professor at USC who has co-authored two books on the homeless.

Many experts are convinced the census will also help bring focus to a high-profile regional effort to end homelessness that was launched with great fanfare more than a year ago but has lagged due to a lack of consensus and specific priorities.

Bring Los Angeles Home, a blue-ribbon panel that includes the mayors of Los Angeles, Santa Monica and Pasadena, business executives, academic experts and advocates for the homeless, was revamped in recent months after many of its members complained that a draft plan produced under its name was overly ambitious and vague.

In August 2003, organizers set a one-year goal to complete a blueprint for ending homelessness countywide within 10 years. But several members of the panel's newly created executive committee recently acknowledged that the final plan is unlikely to be ready until mid-2005 at the earliest.

Some critics say that despite having done a good job gathering input from various community groups, the 66-member blue-ribbon panel is unwieldy and its agenda has been poorly organized.

"It's very difficult to meet with a group (that large) regularly and get anything done," said Wolch, who is a member of the panel.

Carol Schatz, president and CEO of the Central City Association, a downtown business group, charged that the panel also is weighted toward advocates for the homeless. The draft strategic plan it released last fall "was vague, pie-in-the-sky, didn't prioritize, was fundamentally unimplementable" and seemed to assume that unlimited funds were available to address the

problem, added Schatz, who likewise is a member of the blue-ribbon panel.

Other members defend the lofty agenda. "I'm proud of the fact that the mission of Bring LA Home is ambitious," said Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness. "We said from the get-go we were going to end (homelessness) for everybody, and I'm not going to back away from that goal."

He conceded that planning for the effort has gotten behind schedule. But with the reorganized, smaller executive committee, he insisted, "Now we're starting to pick up steam."

The group has compiled the most authoritative information available on the county's homeless population. A report issued last fall, for example, showed that Carson and Hawthorne lead all South Bay cities in estimated homeless populations, with 200 and 157, respectively.

Research done for the panel has also shown that homeless families are more prevalent in the South Bay and Harbor Area than so-called "chronic" homeless adults, who often have drug and/or mental health problems. Across the South Bay and Harbor Area, 77 percent of all homeless are family members, compared to 47 percent countywide.

"It's a more suburban area, with a higher concentration of families as opposed to single adults," explained Dan Flaming of the Economic Roundtable, a research group working with Bring Los Angeles Home.

More detailed demographic information is to be collected as part of the upcoming census, and many experts believe it will enable the blue-ribbon panel to focus its efforts where they can have the most impact.

Stephani Hardy, executive director of the Inglewood-based U.S. Veterans Initiative, is hopeful the census will show that the main cause of chronic homelessness -- often defined as being without shelter for a year or more -- is not joblessness, as some advocates have argued.

"We find at our facility that if we can get them stabilized and dealing with their issues -- which generally speaking are health, mental health or substance abuse -- it's not difficult to get them a job," she said.

Mitchell Netburn, executive director of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, a joint city-county agency, agreed that the chronic homeless are of prime concern. But obtaining a more precise count for such groups is only one of several ways the census will "dovetail" with the ongoing efforts of Bring Los Angeles Home, he added.

"To track (the panel's) progress we need to have an accurate baseline on how many people we have. Otherwise we won't know whether we're making progress," Netburn said.

A more intangible benefit will be making the scope of the homeless problem clear to the public, he pointed out.

"It's generally out of sight, out of mind," he said. "But the more people are aware there is a homeless problem ... the more general support there will be" for addressing it.

Wolch agreed. "I think one of the outcomes will be to be able to show people throughout the region that this isn't a problem that's just downtown," she said. "Relatively upscale cities also have homeless."