

Los Angeles officials declare “state of emergency” over homelessness

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Los Angeles city officials declared a “state of emergency” last week to address the city’s homeless population, the largest in the United States. An estimated 26,000 people live on the streets of the city on any given night. City officials propose spending at least \$100 million toward increasing the length of time shelters are open and providing rent subsidies for the homeless.

According to city budget officials, however, the \$100 million pledge is mostly symbolic since Los Angeles spends more than this already on homelessness annually, the vast majority of which (\$87 million) goes to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to issue citations and remove the homeless.

In fact, few details have been released by Mayor Eric Garcetti’s administration as to how the program will be funded or how it will be implemented. Since Garcetti became mayor in 2013, LA’s homeless population has grown by 16 percent, according to a recent survey by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA).

The proposals, which still must be approved by the city council, include designating public facilities like parks and schools as homeless shelters, easing restrictions on churches and non-profit groups that provide emergency housing, and speeding up the permit process for affordable housing. These tepid measures follow Garcetti’s announcement last July that he had a “battle plan” for a “war on homelessness here in Los Angeles.” Several months later, Garcetti unveiled the “main pillars” of his plan.

The measures include an expansion of the tracking system used by county and city officials to monitor homeless individuals, new centers for the homeless to store their belongings, and “anti-poverty” measures like the move to raise the minimum wage in the city.

The city’s winter shelters are also being asked to stay open two additional months during a season that will see heavy rain and floods. These token steps are seen as stopgap measures until the mayor releases a finalized plan. Much of the \$100 million will come from the city’s reserve fund, typically set aside for emergencies.

According to LAHSA, the number of homeless people living in an encampment or a vehicle has increased by 85 percent over the last two years. Some officials have stated the goal of the mayor’s directive is to seek additional funding from the federal government for homelessness programs, while demonstrating that LA is willing to provide resources to both housing services and the police. In May, the city council passed an ordinance allowing the police to clear sidewalks that were home to encampments and confiscate their property.

Downtown Los Angeles, in particular Skid Row, is home to entire city blocks of homeless tents and encampments. The dramatic increase in homelessness is a direct result of the increase in poverty and unemployment since the start of the recession in 2008. Los Angeles has the highest rents in the country, with city and housing vouchers covering only a fraction of what is needed to rent a home near public transportation. The city spends only \$26 million on affordable housing, about a quarter of what it spent 10 years ago. In 2008, before the recession, the city spent \$108 million on affordable housing.

Areas of the city that were once home to cheap motels and one-room apartments have been cleared to make room for expensive condominiums and hotels for the rich. Los Angeles County released a census in May that found that the number of people living in tents, encampments or vehicles was 9,535, double the figure two years ago. The Economic Roundtable estimated

that 13,000 people in Los Angeles become homeless every month.

More than 44,000 homeless reside in Los Angeles County, up from 39,000 in January, according to LAHSA. More than half this number, nearly 26,000 people, live within the city limits.

Gary Blasi, a law professor at UCLA, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “Encampments used to be contained to Skid Row, where city officials would try to control or ignore them. Plans have been made, and never made it off the paper they’re written on. It’s not clear what will be delivered. And do the math here—it doesn’t amount to much at all.” In New York City, Blasi said that hundreds of existing housing vouchers were unused because many landlords would not accept them.

Mayor Garcetti and his “state of emergency” will not address the root cause of homelessness. Nearly one in four Californians live in poverty, the highest rate in the nation. Despite the need for affordable housing, there has been a 69 percent reduction in state and federal assistance in housing since 2008, dropping from \$2.6 billion to \$807 million.

Rent has increased by 22 percent since 2000, while the median income has fallen 8 percent. There is no county in California that has enough affordable housing to meet demand. The state is one of the most expensive to live in, with 21 of the 30 most expensive rental housing markets in the United States. California is also home to 131 billionaires and over 660,000 millionaires.

Years of policies slashing essential welfare programs such as food stamps, affordable housing and health care for workers and their families have reduced hundreds of thousands to misery in California and across the US. Administrations led by both Democrats and Republicans at the federal, state and local level hold responsibility for this humanitarian disaster.

In order to make areas like Skid Row safe for gentrification, the city uses the LAPD to clear out the dispossessed. In March, the LAPD was caught on video shooting and killing unarmed Charley Saturmin Robinet, a mentally ill man from Cameroon. Last December, the LAPD shot and killed David Wear, another unarmed homeless man who made tips as a street performer in Hollywood. These murders have their intended consequence: to drive people out of Skid Row and into the surrounding neighborhoods, alleys,

freeways and sewers throughout the city, to make room for the elite’s fancy living.



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