

Los Angeles report on homelessness reveals widening funding gap

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A recent report from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) shows that homelessness in Los Angeles is growing at a much higher rate than was previously thought, outstripping the already limited funding allocated to programs aimed at aiding the homeless.

Existing shelter programs are trailing their housing targets by about 20 percent, as set in 2015 when several ballot initiatives—“Measure H” and “Proposition HHH,” purporting to reduce homelessness were passed. The 2015 targets behind the measures were calculated to keep pace as more people fell into homelessness, but rather than decreasing homelessness by the planned 14 percent annually, the Los Angeles homeless population has grown from 44,000 in 2015 to 59,000 in 2017. The programs’ existing funding gaps are being further strained by this surge in homelessness.

The LAHSA report looks at different forms of subsidized housing, ranging from the more temporary to the permanent. In nearly every category, there is a gap between the 2015 target and what was actually met.

“Permanent supportive housing” is by far the largest category in the report and constitutes the bulk of the deficit. While 19,000 units in this category were created since 2015, the recommendation by LAHSA is that this figure needs to be raised to at least 41,000 to meet demand. The report further recommends the creation of 11,000 new units for “rapid re-housing,” for those who are relatively financially stable but facing imminent homelessness, 3,000 new emergency shelter units, and 5,000 for “diversion/prevention,” for those at high risk of becoming homeless.

Significantly, the only category of housing showing a surplus is that of “Transitional Housing,” which is aimed at providing homeless youth with temporary housing so they can financially stabilize. The longest one can stay in transitional housing is 24 months, though there are other

restrictions that can make tenants subject to eviction sooner.

This excess of transitional housing may conceal an even greater number of people experiencing homelessness over the year than is counted in the report. The LAHSA report collected its data through a “Point-in-Time count” that was carried out in January. This means while LAHSA was able to accurately report the number of homeless people on a single day, the report says less about how many people were homeless for part of the year and doesn’t say much about the rate that people enter and exit homeless.

The report also reveals that while it is still much more common for individuals to fall into homelessness, families with children are experiencing homelessness at a growing rate. The gap between what affordable housing was planned for families in 2015 and what was actually funded for them in 2017 has roughly doubled.

According to reports from California schools, collected from 2016-2017, the average statewide homelessness rate for students is 3 percent. However, there are several schools in the state with well over 40 percent of their students experiencing homelessness. In hotspots like the city of Norwalk, a suburb of Los Angeles, the average is about 20 percent across schools. The number of minors experiencing homelessness in the state has grown over 20 percent since 2014.

In sum, to end homelessness in the county the LAHSA report recommends some 35,000 more units for individuals and 5,000 more units for families.

“While there may be debate over the nuances of what housing type and population should receive particular resources,” the report concludes, “such debate exists within the general assumption that substantial progress will not be achieved without a significant increase in the county’s housing stock...”

“Fortunately, the financial resources of Measure H,

Proposition HHH, and other local efforts, coupled with the demonstrated commitment of local leaders and community members to prevent and end homelessness, will make it possible to address the considerable gaps outlined in this report.”

A more realistic comment on the severity of the situation came from Michael Weinstein, the president of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, which in recent weeks has called for more serious measures, with particular attention to the health crises that homelessness inevitably begets.

Referring to a recent pledge by city council members to ensure the creation of 222 units of permanent housing in the next two years—a figure far beneath the deficit in the LAHSA report—he said: “It’s not even a drop in the bucket. If [City Council President] Herb Wesson and [Mayor] Eric Garcetti are serious, they should declare a state of emergency. They should back a right to shelter. And they should come up with an emergency plan to offer a roof over everyone’s head this year.”

The LAHSA report’s optimistic conclusion is belied by the everyday reality workers confront across America. In the spheres of education, health care, retirement, and so on, the working class’ standard of living has been consistently cut down over the last four decades. It is in no small part due to these conditions that homelessness is on the rise in the first place. So why would the descent into homelessness by the most vulnerable layers of the working class demand any special attention? As indicated by the funding shortfall, the existing measures were half-hearted to begin with.

This is not to say that the money to eradicate homelessness does not exist. Using the least conservative estimates, and ignoring existing funding, it would take about \$20 billion to end homelessness in the US. This price tag is just under 2 percent of the \$1.2 trillion which is to be spent modernizing the US nuclear program. There are ample resources to provide basic housing for everyone. The issue is that those resources are controlled by a tiny financial oligarchy, and are put towards their own enrichment, and towards the militarization of society in preparation for war.



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