

A plan for the homeless residents of Redondo Beach



Harbor Interfaith's Lila Omura, right, goes over plans with client Mark Evans during a lunch at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Photo by David Mendez

Down, But Not Out

by David Mendez

Jem La Don is a man of ideas. He grew up in South LA, and like many living on the bounds of society, he's moved around quite a bit over the years, including Glendale, and the San Fernando Valley. But Redondo Beach feels like home to him (his assumed name borrows Redondo's second syllable), so he's started paying attention to its civic process.

In recent weeks, Jem has been observing Redondo Beach city meetings — Harbor Commission one night, City Council another — because he wants to help the city. His first idea? Repurpose the former home of the SEALab into a homelessness hub — a shelter with an emphasis on harm reduction, allowing drug users a safe space that sequesters them so they can't harm themselves or others with the side effects of drug use.

"Take some of the stress off, ease the people, and you'll see that out there," Jem said.

He agrees with some resident groups that there are problematic people experiencing homelessness on Redondo's streets — fighting, performing indecent acts openly, using drugs — and he worries they'll spoil programs that are there for him and others out on Redondo's streets. But, a religious man, he believes them to be capable of changing, too.

"As they see the opportunity that they've been given, they're going to see the change that they need to do for themselves," he said.

Over the last four years, the City of Redondo Beach has been exploring ways to do just that: provide opportunities to its residents experiencing homelessness to find the programs that they need to succeed, starting with housing.

The success is there: Since last May, People Assisting the Homeless has permanently housed 15 people, and referred 18 people to rapid rehousing. Since last October, Harbor Interfaith has connected 21 people to permanent housing, with 12 more waiting for their placements to process.

Since 2016, Redondo has been working from a three-phase plan, born from a City Manager's task force: Build up its core to offer social services; connect with stakeholders — including churches — to help people find roofs; and now, to deal with habitual lawbreakers. The City is now ramping up a new five-year plan, approved in April, to fit County requirements

Since establishing its first contract with PATH in 2016, the City of Redondo Beach has approved at least \$506,000, from various funding sources, on its three-phase plan. That sum has been applied to contracts with service providers (including PATH and Harbor Interfaith); funding enforcement operations with its City Attorney's Office and Redondo Beach Police Department; and to help the city secure beds in shelters for its population of people experiencing homelessness.

That's not enough for some residents, who believe that Redondo is being overrun by the homelessness crisis, and urge the city to take further action.

"It's not a snap-your-fingers problem — that's another aspect of homelessness we're trying to address as best we can," said Redondo Beach City Councilman Christian Horvath. "People shouldn't have to feel scared, to feel like it's getting worse. But how can we address that?"

For years, the city has focused on services and solutions, based on recommendations from the city's Homeless Task Force Report, published in May 2015.

Redondo Beach has identified homelessness as a potential issue since 2012, when RBPD performed a survey and needs assessment to understand the backgrounds of Redondo's population of homeless residents.

Of the 180 people surveyed, police found that 68 percent — 122 people — were involuntarily homeless, put there by circumstance. The report also found that 67 percent had some sort of criminal history, 63 percent use or abuse alcohol, and one-third display or admit to a personality disorder or mental condition.

The report also noted that, though many various programs existed to help the city's homeless and at-risk populations, there was "little in the way of overall coordination of these services."

Taking that as its marching orders, city staff began to assemble and organize its departments (Police, Fire, Library and Community Services among them) with outside agencies, like the Beach Cities Health District, the South Bay Coalition to End Homelessness, the South Bay Cities Council of Governments, PATH and Harbor Interfaith. A homeless-contact tracking system was developed for both outreach and law enforcement. LA County's Department of Mental Health was brought in, first with trainers for RBPD, then with a clinician who rides along with officers.

Redondo has since taken a position amongst the Beach Cities as a leader regarding homelessness — the City has hosted multiple regional outreach programs, both at the Redondo Beach Main Library and at the city's Performing Arts Center. The first was an opportunity for organizations to familiarize themselves with each other, while the second helped people experiencing homelessness enter into the coordinated entry system, to begin the road to obtaining documents and identification cards they may have lost, and to even have hygiene services, like haircuts.

"I think Redondo was quite innovative and ahead of its time in making sure that their city, specifically, was taken care of and not just clumped into other plans," said Haley Fuselier, PATH's

Regional Director of West Los Angeles. “Redondo and the other Beach Cities are unique in that they aren’t huge cities, but that the problem is huge to them.”

According to Fuselier, PATH has connected 112 individual clients to public benefits, including General Relief, provided by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services, and Social Security. The organization has also connected 58 people to primary care, which helps prevent the development or spread of contagious disease.

Housing, however, is among the highest priorities for helping those experiencing homelessness.

“That’s the first tenet of outreach: Housing first. How can you clean yourself up, get a job, take your meds, do all of those things, if you don’t have a roof over your head?” said RBPD Sgt. Jeff Mendence. “For a lot of people, it’s tough enough to make ends meet. Now imagine not having shelter and trying to do those things.”

Police, he said, are good at solving problems — identifying needs and taking actions. But when it comes to finding shelter, that’s for the community to determine, he said.

Right now, Redondo Beach doesn’t have shelters for the homeless — and one doesn’t exist anywhere between the city and the Los Angeles Harbor area.

In late 2017, the City passed an ordinance to comply with state housing law, adding provisions for emergency shelters to the city’s municipal code, essentially designating two areas within the city — one just east of the AES power plant, the other in North Redondo Beach’s industrial area — as possible sites for homeless shelters.

Whether or not those shelters will be built is a matter of political will — and that will, according to Councilman Todd Loewenstein, just isn’t there.

“In representing residents here, I’ve not heard anybody say that we need to build a homeless shelter — but I’ve heard plenty of people say that we should not have one in the area,” Loewenstein said. “I think we should do everything possible to support the homeless, but my own personal opinion is that I don’t think we should build one in the area.”

It’s a matter of unintended consequences — that creating temporary shelters could lead to a spread of problems in the area around the shelter.

Further, he believes that residents simply don’t want a shelter in their backyard.

“Everyone wants to deal with it, but the question is how, and what’s the way that’s politically palatable to people...it’s difficult to me to have to turn people away, when residents express they don’t want that in their neighborhood. It’s representative democracy.”

Though homelessness is a regional problem, spread throughout the city, one thing is clear: Loewenstein has the largest silent constituency among his colleagues on the City Council. According to the 2019 LA County Homeless Count’s preliminary city-area data, Redondo Beach had 175 people experiencing homelessness in the city during the early January census. Though the city’s district lines don’t quite match up with local Census tract boundaries, Loewenstein’s District 2 — which includes the Redondo Pier and Veteran’s Park areas — accounted for at least 49 people during the count.

Loewenstein admits that he doesn’t hear from his area’s people experiencing homelessness — neither in votes nor in voicing their opinions to him.

“All they have to do is go up to City Hall. That’s probably not the first thing on their list of things to do, but if someone came up to me and said ‘I need service, can you help?,’ of course. Even if they’re not my constituent I would,” Loewenstein said.

The residents that Loewenstein has been hearing from have been quite loud as of late. The Redondo Beach Residents Action Committee celebrated a victory on their policy agenda last Tuesday after successfully lobbying the City Council against funneling federal money toward First United Methodist Church's dinner ministry serving the homeless ("Boiling Point," June 20).

The organization is led in part by Debby Striff, a resident who lives south of First United, and was spurred to action when she found human excrement in her flower bed. She took a photo to police, she said, where they told her how to clean up the excrement, but her concerns were deeper.

"I went to the District 1 council meeting and spoke about the situation I noticed — increasing numbers of people who were not behaving as the normal kind of homeless that we've been used to seeing here; they were behaving in anti-social ways," Striff said. The organization was born there, after residents began to band together. In recent months, she said, the situation seemed to grow out of hand, leading to greater membership and an eventual community meeting with Mayor Bill Brand, District 1 Councilman Nils Nehrenheim, Loewenstein, City Attorney Michael Webb, and Police Chief Keith Kauffman.

That meeting, Webb said, reminded him of something he hadn't seen in more than 20 years, when the city began brainstorming ways to combat gang issues in North Redondo: of the more than 40 residents in attendance, Webb only recognized one person who regularly attends city meetings. This was a new crop of residents, presenting a new challenge to the City.



The 2019 Los Angeles County Homelessness Count, totalling 172 unsheltered people across the city — a 10 percent increase over 2018. The highest concentrations are near the Redondo Pier and the South Bay Galleria. Image credit: LAHSA/OpenSourceMap/Easy Reader

“We do a lot more than many surrounding cities to address the needs of the homeless. What we perhaps need to do more is to address the impact of the homeless on the community,” Webb said. “People talk about the homeless as if it’s one group, but they’re not. There are people down on their luck, struggling, and we’ve done a great job partnering to address those needs.”

But what he feels the City must acknowledge is those people who regularly commit crimes of opportunity, and those who are unwell — either with serious mental illness or substance use disorder — who may prove disruptive to the community.

“We’re not interested in becoming a magnet for people who have no interest in getting off the street, and the City Council is taking a very proactive approach to continuing to maintain services that we coordinate,” Mayor Brand said. “But we’re not going to stand for being taken advantage of by people who have no interest in getting help themselves.”

The common belief regarding homelessness is that approximately 30 percent of people experiencing homelessness are dealing with either serious mental illness, substance-use disorder or a physical disability.

“But the mental health specialists who are part of feeding programs totally disagree — they believe it’s way higher,” said Grace Harwell, of the South Bay Cities Council of Governments. “Of those who are chronically homeless — at least a year being homeless, or repeatedly experiencing homelessness — those are the ones seen with higher incidence of serious mental illness or substance-use disorder.”

To that end, the City is continuing to make strides.

Of the \$245,000 committed to homelessness-related issues in Redondo’s 2019-’20 annual budget, approximately \$52,000 of that will go to a City Prosecution pilot program that will focus on prosecuting homelessness-related quality-of-life crimes. The program will ensure that prosecutors will follow these crimes every step of the way, from being assigned the case, to trial, to ensuring that Redondo’s police officers are aware of a person’s terms of probation when applicable.

Among the city’s other big challenges is ensuring that residents are aware that it’s not a crime to be homeless, thanks in part to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling in *Martin v. City of Boise*. That ruling states, in part, that cities can’t punish people for sleeping on public property unless there are adequate and relatively accessible indoor accommodations.

“We do not have a shelter here. If someone is sleeping on a sidewalk, you can’t arrest them because there’s nowhere for them to go,” Police Chief Kauffman said.

The city is working on acquiring bed space in local shelters, using more than \$100,000 from this year’s budget (transferred from the city’s pension reserve fund). Other money from the \$245,000 budgeted to deal with homelessness this year will go to reorganizing RBPD’s Special Operations Division to streamline response to resident complaints — which police encourage residents to do as soon as they see a problem.

“What we can do best now is realign the resources within the Police Department, focus more attention, do additional patrols, work closely with the City Attorney’s office and continue looking for the best way to decrease homelessness here in Redondo,” Kauffman said.

Part of that is in partnering with faith-based organizations. Pastor Peter Dunn, of Saint Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, oversees a number of ministries among his congregation, including twice-weekly lunches for the needy and FAITH (Friends Assisting and Inspiring The Homeless) which helps connect people experiencing homelessness find places to homes and resources. Saint Andrew’s

also provides a mail service for homeless members of its congregation, so they can receive much-needed documents to help them move out of homelessness.

“Our goal is to place people in solvent, holistic solutions, to end the problem of homelessness,” Dunn said. “I think one of the things we’re hoping to be is a model...from my point of view, the NIMBYism aspect is that people may not like people in the neighborhood that are homeless. But the reality is that they’re there, so what are you going to do about that issue?”

Dunn’s goal is connection — to partner with the city, with social services, with local faith communities — “because we need all-hands-on-deck here,” he said.

Now the city is embarking upon its new five-year plan, which will aim to help prevent homelessness among residents, strengthen both the City’s and region’s response to homelessness issues, educate the community and support local and regional housing and shelter development.

The million dollar question is, how can homelessness be solved?

“I’m just trying to figure it out,” said Councilman Horvath, who heads the SBCCOG’s Homeless Services Task Force. “We’re not going to be able to solve it overnight. We’re going to be up against this for a while — we’ve got to solve for affordability and income disparity issues. We’re going to perpetuate the cycle unless we figure out how to have more preventative measures to keep people from falling into homelessness.”