

Legislators to try tackling homelessness



Johnny 2/3 leads his weekly feeding of the homeless at Noble Park in Hermosa. Photo by Kevin Cody

by David Mendez

Local State Senator Ben Allen and Assemblyman Al Muratsuchi have both introduced bills during this legislative session aiming to provide solutions to the growing number of homelessness-related issues across the state.

Allen's bill, Senate Bill 1229, is still a work in progress — according to his staff, it's still in its early stages, with little to discuss as of this point. Currently, the bill text is one sentence, stating the intent of the legislation “to provide timely and effective mental health and line substance abuse services to homeless individuals.”

Muratsuchi's Assembly Bill 2339 takes an existing model within the legal system to provide solutions to homeless individuals that may be dealing with mental health or substance abuse disorders.

AB 2339 is intended to provide what he calls “Homeless Aid Courts,” using a deferred judgement model. Under the bill, defendants charged with quality of life crimes such as disorderly conduct, public nuisance or trespassing, may be given the opportunity to have their charges dismissed following successful completion of a mental health or substance abuse treatment program.

When arraigned, a person charged with those offenses would be given the opportunity to enter a guilty plea, but have judgement deferred until they complete a program assigned by a judge. If they fail to complete the program, they will be found guilty and sentenced accordingly. If they complete the program, their charges will be dismissed.

“We're modeling this after the diversion courts that have existed with drug courts and mental health courts, like in Sacramento,” Muratsuchi said in an interview. “Rather than criminalizing poverty and homelessness, we are using this intervention as an opportunity for the courts to direct the chronically homeless to support services, as well as available shelter, because there's no better treatment than a roof over your head.”

The bill, as currently written, would connect defendants and the court system with a mental health professional or social worker that would provide access to housing services.

Muratsuchi's bill, if passed, would formalize an existing informal process that's already taking place within the City of Redondo Beach's prosecution system.

Deputy City Prosecutor Anastasia Papadakis is the prosecutor largely in charge of the city's "Homeless Court," which has developed over the last year following Redondo's adoption of its "Homelessness Enhanced Response Pilot Program."

"These are non-violent offenders, overall, and we're trying to help them avoid a conviction if they follow through and work on getting housing," Papadaikis said. "That's the whole goal — to get them housed, rather than proliferating the cycle of shuffling people around."

The program attempts to get to the heart of a person's needs — whether it's a residential facility or a detox program or even obtaining identification.

"We're trying to incentivize accepting services and make it as easy as possible using the system we're operating in," Papadakis said.

Muratsuchi described the bill — which, like Allen's, is still in its early stages — as a sort of pilot program as well. It is currently written to only establish "homeless aid courts" in the counties of Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco. "We wanted to start in the counties with the largest homeless populations," Muratsuchi said.

AB 2339 has been assigned to be heard by the State Assembly Committee on Public Safety. A date for that hearing has not yet been scheduled.