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A Symbol of Hope on Skid Row

Ramping up desperately needed services for the homeless in Skid Row, the Los Angeles County Downtown Mental Health Center has reopened after a \$10-million renovation.

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas cut the ceremonial ribbon at the entrance to 529 S. Maple Street, flanked by Supervisor Hilda Solis, Sheriff Jim McDonnell, District Attorney Jackie Lacey and Department of Mental Health (DMH) director Marvin Southard.

“I am morally outraged that 2,000 persons sleep on the streets of Skid Row every night,” Supervisor Ridley-Thomas said. “This new facility will connect residents of Skid Row as well as the rest of downtown Los Angeles to a continuum of psychiatric services.”

He called it a “symbol of hope” that will serve as a “critical access point for comprehensive, holistic and customized services to both the homeless and the formerly homeless who need continued assistance.”

Supervisor Solis issued a rallying cry — “Sigue Adelante!” — which translates into “Let’s keep moving forward.”

The Board of Supervisors approved the renovation after DMH cited overcrowding and structural problems in the original clinic, which began operating in 2001. Funding came from the Mental

Health Services Act, a ballot initiative approved by California voters in 2004, which imposed a 1% tax on millionaires to pay for programs that would improve the public mental health system.

District Attorney Lacey said the project was a way of “helping those who cannot help themselves,” while Sheriff McDonnell emphasized the general public stood to benefit more from providing services to the mentally ill than locking them up in jail.

“Let’s chart a new path and be a model for the rest of the nation,” Sheriff McDonnell said.

The renovation will allow the DMH to provide services to about 3,300 patients on site at any given time, while connecting thousands of other patients to several specialized DMH programs in the vicinity, creating a network of critical mental health services.

“This new facility should be seen as the next step in the County’s total commitment for finding the combination of housing, addiction, mental health and other services that aim at ending the scandal that is Skid Row,” added Director Southard.

“As a homeless person journeys towards recovery, it is essential that he or she have meaningful and timely connections to ongoing mental health and substance abuse services,” Supervisor Ridley-Thomas said. “This Center will act as a linchpin, connecting folks who are on the streets of Skid Row or in the Missions to crisis resolution services, and then wellness services, as they recover.”

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