

**Mark Ridley-Thomas**

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Supervisor for the Second District of Los Angeles County

# A Dynamic and Deepening Crisis That Demands Our Attention

Posted: 09/26/2015 2:54 pm EDT | Updated: 09/26/2015 2:59 pm EDT



Sadly, the sight of people sleeping on the streets, begging strangers for money and scavenging for food in the trash has become all too common.

In Los Angeles County, an estimated 44,000 people are homeless on any given night, many of them families with children.

It's a crisis that has been building for decades, driven by declining incomes and rising housing costs. As a result, a startling one in four Angelenos now lives in poverty.

Los Angeles County has half a million more very low-income households than available apartments so the typical monthly rent has skyrocketed 27 percent since 2000; however, the typical renter's monthly income plunged 7 percent during the same period, partly due to the Great Recession.

These days, a typical household must earn about \$80,000 a year to afford the \$2,000 average monthly rent sought by landlords, and still be able to buy groceries, pay for utilities, and other expenses.

This means even preschool teachers, medical assistants, emergency medical technicians, paramedics, and many others with full-time jobs cannot afford to live in Los Angeles County. The most vulnerable - those with mental or physical disabilities and drug or alcohol addiction, and who lack family support - are the hardest hit.

The problem is particularly acute in the Second District, which accounts for about one-third of the County's homeless population, according to the 2015 Homeless Count.

As Supervisor of the 2nd District, I feel a moral imperative and political responsibility to intervene, while recognizing that the effort will require going upstream on a deeply entrenched problem.

We do know what works - a humane and holistic approach that is also fiscally sustainable in the long term, aimed not only at housing the homeless but preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place.

Since the beginning of my tenure at the Board of Supervisors, I have pursued a three-pronged strategy:

- Building strong and coordinated crisis response systems to get people back on their feet;
- Creating affordable housing with, if necessary, supportive services such as mental health and substance abuse treatments, and even job training and placement, in partnership with community-based organizations; and
- Putting money in people's pockets by raising wages and spurring economic development that creates jobs easily accessible through public transit.

Our most recent initiative set aside \$4 million for teams of social workers and health professionals to go out into the streets of Skid Row and connect homeless single adults to housing and supportive services.

Separately, we redirected \$7 million from underperforming County programs for homeless families, plus \$10 million in other funds, to support the innovative Family Solutions System. Over the past year, it has rapidly rehoused 1,000 families, only 6 percent of whom have fallen back into homelessness.

More than 1,600 affordable housing units have been constructed over the past six years in the Second District alone.

We have also allocated \$1 million of 2nd District funds to jumpstart the County's Flexible Housing Subsidy, giving homeless patients a path to independent living after their discharge from County hospitals. This has been so successful that the County now invests \$4 million a year to keep it going. So far, 1,000 units have been made available and another 1,500 units are expected to be available by next summer.

We are also chipping away at income inequality and the disparity between wages and housing costs. The County's Board of Supervisors has adopted policies to ensure County-funded construction jobs, such as those at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Hospital, go to local residents.

The Board has also adopted motions to ensure employees of County contractors, as well as homecare workers who look after our elderly and disabled, receive a just wage.

Given the magnitude of the homeless crisis, however, it is time to scale up.

The Board of Supervisors is poised to approve an additional \$51.1 million for homeless prevention and affordable housing programs, in addition to the \$50 million previously allocated in the 2015-2016 County budget. It is critical that the County reflect its commitment by dedicating ongoing funds to address this crisis.

The County Chief Executive Officer recently launched a Homeless Initiative that, in partnership with the 88 cities that comprise the County, will look beyond traditional solutions and the usual funding sources to develop a comprehensive strategy. The Board of Supervisors is posed to consider these proposals immediately.

We encourage all 88 cities to take part in the Homeless Initiative in any way possible. Cities have the authority, for example, to protect existing housing through stronger rent control enforcement and by clamping down on unscrupulous landlords and developers, both of which would aid in stabilizing rents and housing costs.

There are new tools at our disposal, including the Affordable Care Act, which will help connect more people to needed health and mental health services, and the new Office of Diversion and Reentry, which will provide low-level offenders with the support they need to avoid homelessness and become stable and productive members of society.

Combatting homelessness is not for the faint of heart. I know we cannot extinguish homelessness, but significant progress can be made with real and thoughtful partnerships among the government, business and philanthropic sectors. It must be stressed, however, that our success will depend on our collective commitment to solving what is an undeniable and deepening crisis.

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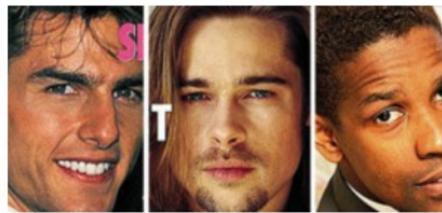
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