

**A REPORT BY
THE 2011-2012 CONTRA COSTA COUNTY GRAND JURY**

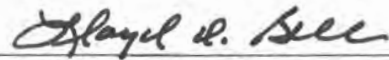
725 Court Street
Martinez, California 94553

Report 1212

Help for the Homeless

APPROVED BY THE GRAND JURY:

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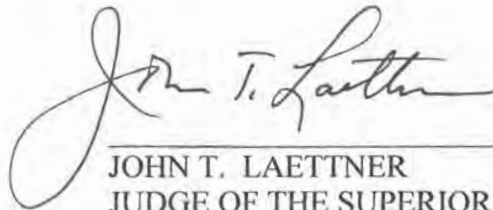


LLOYD D. BELL
GRAND JURY FOREPERSON

ACCEPTED FOR FILING:

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JOHN T. LAETTNER
JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1212

Help for the Homeless

**TO: Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors
Contra Costa County Department of Health Services**

SUMMARY

Homelessness is a complex problem; addressing it requires a multifaceted approach. There are elements of homelessness that require prevention, intervention, support, emergency shelter, and rehousing and there are structural aspects that require efforts to increase the availability and affordability of housing. Coordinating all this in the urban/suburban/rural mix of Contra Costa County (County) is complicated.

The County's Homeless Program is a unit within the Health Services Department's Division of Behavioral Health Services. With funding from state and federal agencies, and the assistance of non-profit partnerships, the County provides comprehensive services to assist the homeless in obtaining permanent housing and other support through a number of programs.

In 2004, the County developed plans and programs to end homelessness in ten years. However, major challenges continue to obstruct this goal.

The County has a homeless data management system; it needs to implement an integrated performance planning, measurement and reporting system that can be used for internal decision making and for communicating to its stakeholders the results and progress achieved.

Compounding the homeless situation has been the economic downturn and the impact it has had on the housing sector. As a result, survey and demographic data show a significant increase in the number of youth and families with children among the County's homeless population. The County should consider reordering its priorities to respond to these increasing numbers.

BACKGROUND

Homelessness occurs when people are unable to acquire and/or maintain housing they can afford. Recent federal policy on homelessness has become less restrictive and more inclusive in defining that population. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a person meets the current definition of homelessness if the individual falls into one or more of the categories below:

- Living in a place not meant for human habitation (abandoned building, car, on the streets, etc.)

- Living in an emergency shelter, safe house, or transitional housing program
- Exiting an institution (prison, hospital, detox facility, etc.) where the individual resided temporarily for up to 90 days, and was homeless immediately prior to entering that institution
- Losing the primary nighttime residence, which may include a motel/hotel or a doubled-up situation, within 14 days and lacking the resources and support networks to remain in housing
- A family with children that is unstably housed and likely to continue in that state. This category includes families that have not had a lease or ownership interest in a housing unit in the last 91 or more days, have had three or more moves in the last 90 days, and who are likely to continue to be unstably housed because of disability or multiple barriers to employment
- Fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, have no other residence, and lack the resources and support networks to obtain other permanent housing

There are numerous reasons why someone becomes homeless. It could be the result of a youth running away from home or exiting foster care unprepared to deal with life outside of a supportive environment or without a sound plan. It could be individuals and families experiencing economic hardships as a result of a job loss or a home foreclosure. In some cases, homelessness is the result of serious medical conditions, such as mental illness, substance abuse, or alcoholism. There is no one cause to address, no one susceptible group to watch, and no one solution to offer.

The Behavioral Health Division of the County's Department of Health Services administers the Homeless Program. The Homeless Program's mission is "to ensure an integrated system of care, from prevention through intervention for homeless individuals and families within our community."

With funding from state and federal agencies, and the assistance of non-profit partnerships, the County provides comprehensive services to assist the homeless in obtaining permanent housing and other support through a number of programs. The County's Department of Conservation and Development disburses HUD funds for prevention of homelessness and for rehousing services.

HUD mandates that local jurisdictions conduct a biennial homeless "point-in-time" census in order to receive federal funding. The census determines the number of homeless people living on the streets as well as people living in shelters and transitional housing. The January 2011 Homeless Census counted 4,274 homeless individuals in the County, of which 2,784 were considered "sheltered" and 1,490 "unsheltered." Over 1,000 of the "unsheltered" lived in encampments. The 2011 census found that the number of families with children accessing services increased by approximately 32% from the prior census.

A major source of data on local homelessness is the County's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The County uses HMIS to collect and report data quarterly.

Selected demographic information provides a snapshot of the changing nature of the County's homeless population. However, the Grand Jury found no evidence that such data were being used for performance planning, measuring, and communicating to County stakeholders (government entities, community partners, and the public) the results and progress achieved.

According to County data shown in Table 1, the number of children and youth reported as homeless over the prior year increased by 91%. This includes children who are part of a family as well as youth who are on their own.

**Table 1: Age Ranges of Contra Costa County Homeless
July 2009 – June 2011**

Age Range	July 2009 – June 2010 Number Served	July 2010 – June 2011 Number Served	Change
Up to 24	1,246	2,384	+91%
Adults 25-54	3,258	3,031	-7%
Seniors 55+	883	946	+7%
Total	5,387	6,366	+18%

As shown in Table 2, the number of families with children reported as homeless increased over the prior year by 200%.

**Table 2: Family Configuration of Contra Costa County Homeless Population Served
July 2009 – June 2011**

Household Configuration	July 2009 – June 2010 Number Served	July 2010 – June 2011 Number Served	Change
Without Children	451	521	+15%
With Children	473	1,419	+200%
Single Individuals	3,666	3,366	-8%
Total	4,590	5,306	+16%

In 2004, the County adopted a plan called “Ending Homelessness in Ten Years: A County-Wide Plan for the Communities of Contra Costa County” (Plan). The Plan’s strategy is to prevent homelessness as much as possible and help the homeless to acquire long-term housing in lieu of emergency shelter. The Plan has five priorities:

- Help homeless people gain or regain housing as soon as possible
- Provide integrated, wraparound services to facilitate long-term residential stability
- Help people to access employment that pays a “housing wage”
- Conduct outreach to link the chronically homeless with housing, treatment and service

- Prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place

The Plan identifies three main tasks:

- Creation of a blueprint to detail the actions for carrying out the Plan's five main priorities
- Creation of a Homeless Management Information System, for purposes of data collection on outcomes and program effectiveness
- Development of public education designed to enhance the understanding of homelessness

The blueprint has been created. The Homeless Management Information System has been implemented. The only public education materials found were on the County's website.

To implement this Plan, the County oversees an integrated approach that addresses housing needs as well as mental/physical health and substance abuse issues. The County coordinates and collaborates with non-profit agencies to perform advocacy, outreach, shelter, health care, and other support services.

The following are examples of services and programs provided by the County:

- Project AACT (Application Assistance for Contra Costa Titles 2 and 16) - Helps disabled, homeless persons living in shelters/detention facilities apply to the Social Security Administration for assistance. This fast-track program began in 2010 with 81% of the applications reviewed being approved.
- Homeless Court - Court sessions are held at local shelters or agencies to resolve outstanding minor offenses for homeless individuals. Participants must be referred and meet eligibility requirements.
- Project Homeless Connect – One day a year, nonprofits, corporations, government agencies, faith-based organizations and homeless services and housing providers come together and provide homeless individuals with various types of services free of charge.

The County funds and manages homeless shelters for youth and adults. The County contracts with the Greater Richmond Inter-Faith Program (GRIP) to provide professional personnel who work at the shelters; GRIP personnel are supervised by a County manager.

The County operates three youth shelters with a total of 32 beds for which there are waiting lists.

Case management services, which include job training, counseling, and health services, are provided at each youth facility. The County's objective is to expand homeless youth services into Central and/or East Contra Costa County but, currently, all youth shelters are located in West Contra Costa County.

The County also operates two emergency shelters for adults, one in Concord and one in Richmond. Each shelter can accommodate 75 men and women and is open 24 hours every day. Shelter residents are allowed to stay at these shelters up to 120 days if they agree to participate in

case management services.

There has been a significant increase in homeless families and the County relies on nonprofit groups, such as Shelter Inc. and GRIP to provide needed shelter and services to families. The site for one of these shelters is a County-owned building for which the County charges the nonprofit agency rent. Family shelters are designed to be short-term accommodations and the services are entirely free to the families.

Most families move from a shelter to transitional programs, which consist of apartment buildings with extensive support services available onsite. For these families, the goal is to increase their income so they can afford their own apartment when their transitional housing ends in a maximum of two years. On average, most families exit transitional housing in 14 to 18 months. However, there is a lack of affordable housing in the County.

There are multi-service centers located in Antioch, Concord, and San Pablo where homeless individuals and families can drop in during the day to access food, clothing, shower facilities, employment training, transportation, health care or other support services at no cost. In addition, there is a respite center for homeless adults who have been recently discharged from local hospitals and require medical stabilization services.

General information about homeless programs, housing, or crisis intervention is available by calling the 24-hour homeless hotline answered by the Contra Costa Crisis Hotline. There is also an 800-number for people interested in accessing emergency shelter between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

The Homeless Program works with and supports the Contra Costa Inter-Jurisdictional Council on Homelessness (CCICH). CCICH meets quarterly and provides guidance in policy development, implementation, accountability, and evaluation of the Plan. After several years of data collection, efforts are now underway to develop measurement tools to evaluate the effectiveness of many homeless programs. CCICH is composed of senior level personnel from various County Departments, representatives of several cities, numerous nonprofit service providers, homeless advocates, and people who are homeless or formerly homeless.

FINDINGS

1. There are an inadequate number of shelter beds in the County for the homeless youth population.
2. Adding to the problem of an inadequate number of youth shelter beds, there are no youth shelters outside of West Contra Costa County, which does not serve the needs of the rest of the County.
3. Little has been done to educate the public about homelessness even though it is identified as one of the three main tasks of the County's Homeless Program.
4. There has been limited progress toward establishing benchmarks, measuring achievement of outcomes, and using these data to evaluate and communicate the effectiveness of programs and services.

5. The lack of available, affordable, permanent, supportive housing in the County poses an even greater challenge than in past years given the increased number of homeless families with children.
6. Because of ongoing economic challenges, it is likely that temporary shelters will continue to be necessary to serve the homeless population.
7. Without the extensive collaboration that now exists among concerned organizations, the Homeless Program would be less effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Board of Supervisors should consider exploring the development of additional shelter services for homeless youth and transitional housing for individuals leaving foster care.
2. The County should develop educational outreach beyond the information included on the County's website to strengthen public awareness of homelessness.
3. The County should consider incorporating data from the Homeless Management Information System to create a performance planning, measurement, and reporting system that can be used for internal decision-making and for communicating results and progress achieved to its stakeholders.
4. The County should consider reordering its priorities in serving the homeless population in order to address the increasing number of homeless families with children.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Findings:

Board of Supervisors	1 through 7
Department of Health Services	1 through 7

Recommendations:

Board of Supervisors	1 through 4
Department of Health Services	1 through 4