A REALITY BASED APPROACH TO
ENDING
HOMELESSNESS
IN LOS ANGELES

**A Petition by the Inter-University Consortium
Against Homelessness
January 30, 2007**

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In Los Angeles today, current policy on homelessness is preoccupied with providing emergency shelter beds and policing people who are homeless.

Skid Row disproportionately – and unfairly – cares for the region's homeless people because so many other communities in Los Angeles County provide no services to help them. These communities are using Skid Row as their solution to homelessness.

Everyone in LA wins if we work together to end homelessness.

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Great cities are places of opportunity.
People come to cities to make better lives for themselves. They find work, home, friends and family in the metropolis. Others, less fortunate, stumble on the path to achieving their dreams, and require help from neighbors, charities and government. Cities have always offered opportunities for rich and poor alike. Great cities have also shouldered the responsibility to help those who stumble along the way. This is the work that cities do.

From the very beginning of our nation's history, there have been folks in need of help. It could be something as simple as a bed for the night, meals for hungry families temporarily down on their luck, or longer-term care for people with disabilities. Also from the very beginning, cities and towns have contained zones where people in need could find help. Typically, these places were located near the heart of the urban area close to transportation, and operated by religious and philanthropic agencies.

Today, in Los Angeles County, there are close to 10 million inhabitants, and homeless people are found throughout the region. But the greatest single concentration resides in Skid Row, the place that has attracted most public attention.

'Skid Row' has always been part of downtown Los Angeles.
The term 'skid row' is a nineteenth-century coinage deriving from a street in Seattle along which felled logs were slid to the waterside for shipment. The so-called 'Skid Road' also hosted a collection of flop houses and transients, and over time it was this feature of the street that became identified with the name, soon corrupted to Skid Row. The new term was subsequently applied to many inner-city districts across the country that already had a long history of helping people in need.

In Los Angeles, the first transcontinental rail locomotive arrived in 1876, ushering in the modern industrial age. Successive waves of immigrants came to LA for seasonal and temporary work, and there was a huge demand for short-term accommodation close to the downtown railhead. Hotels and services sprang up catering to the transient workers, including bars, entertainment, as well as social service agencies affiliated with religious missions.

By the mid-twentieth century, things in and around LA's Skid Row began to change considerably. Pressures for industrial and commercial growth escalated in the Central City East district, which included Skid Row. Half the single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel rooms were demolished, often because they were seismically unfit. Worried about this trend, in 1975 the City of Los Angeles Redevelopment Agency (CRA) adopted an official policy to stabilize the Central City East district by: maintaining the low-income housing base (primarily through the acquisition, rehabilitation and management of the remaining SRO hotels); consolidating Skid Row social services in close proximity to the population they served (a policy known as 'containment'); and expanding the district's industrial base.

Then, in the early 1980s, the crisis of homelessness exploded across America. Tens of thousands of homeless people crowded the streets of LA, which quickly became known as the homeless 'capital' of the United States. The CRA set up the Single Room Occupancy Housing Corporation to acquire, rehabilitate and manage the SRO hotels on the Row. Simultaneously, a massive expansion occurred in the city's inventory of emergency shelter beds, funded mainly through an influx of federal dollars. There was, however, no equivalent growth in ancillary services needed by homeless people, such as job training, health and mental health care, and affordable housing.

It's no secret, homelessness is caused by poverty.
Homelessness is usually viewed as a personal tragedy brought about by the inability to afford the cost of renting or owning a home. But why, during the 1980s, did millions of Americans find themselves homeless? The answer to this question is in four parts: declining personal incomes, loss of affordable housing, deep cuts in the welfare state, and a rising tide of personal vulnerability. The decline in personal incomes and the squeeze on affordable housing created a broad class of precariously-housed families and individuals who were only a paycheck or two away from eviction. With diminishing help available from welfare agencies, it took only one more personal setback to precipitate a crisis that would cause homelessness. And deinstitutionalization of patients from psychiatric hospitals left many more needy people in search of affordable housing. Personal vulnerabilities also increased: more people faced substance abuse problems, diminished job prospects because of poor education, or health difficulties while lacking medical coverage.

Two decades later, homelessness remains a problem because the factors causing it have gotten worse.
In the economy, after many years of tax breaks, the rich have become super-rich, while the working poor and middle classes have become poorer. In the housing market, property prices have gone through the ceiling, and the number of affordable rental units has declined. The welfare state in 1996 received a major overhaul that helped shrink the number of people on welfare by 60 percent (though most of that reduction was attributed to an improved job market). But the percentage of people living in poverty is on the rise again, and since 1996 more than a million people in the U.S. have joined the numbers living in deep poverty.

There are three other conditions that make homelessness worse in Los Angeles today.

Reality-resistance, or not understanding the problem. We have done little to stop the manufacture of homelessness across the city and region. Virtually no-one is born in Skid Row. The great majority of homeless people arrive there from other areas of the metropolis. Even if we housed, fed, trained, and found jobs or other support for all the homeless people currently on Skid Row, their places would soon be taken by homeless people from adjacent communities who would migrate to Skid Row in search of the bare means to survive, which are lacking in their own communities. These include single men and women but also families, prisoners discharged from jails, the mentally disabled, and foster children (as many as half of whom end up becoming homeless as they attain the age of majority). Finally, let's face it, homelessness is also about racism. Homeless people are disproportionately from racial minorities, especially African-American, and they come from the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Los Angeles that also offer little in the way of shelter or services.

Service-resistance, or not facing up to your problem. A conservative politics of privatization has starved government social welfare programs and are cultivating a society that cares more about individual rights than collective responsibility. This is evident in the rampant NIMBYism throughout Southern California: the majority of communities are still without significant services to prevent homelessness or assist the homeless; communities and institutions continue to dump homeless people on LA's Skid Row; the anti-homeless rhetoric of downtown business interests reached a new fever-pitch during the recent property market boom; and the LAPD has a newly-invigorated campaign to clean up the sidewalks of Skid Row in response to community and political pressures.

Change-resistance, or not recognizing the need for new programs. The main response to the 1980s homelessness crisis was to grow the emergency-shelter capacity on Skid Row, which was

undoubtedly a much-needed first-stage response. The emergency-bed providers have their hands full dealing with the immediate needs of homeless people, and are unable to deliver sufficient specialized services, job training and permanent housing that are vital to getting people off the street for good. By themselves, emergency shelters cannot solve the problem of homelessness, but LA seems unable to go beyond its emergency-shelter mentality.

Under such circumstances, complaints that homeless people are 'shelter-resistant' (i.e. they fail to take up available shelter and service opportunities) are deeply misguided. The failure to end homelessness is instead indicative of resistance – to reality, to services, to change – on the part of our policy makers.

Los Angeles has the biggest homeless population of any U.S. city today.
The homeless are extremely poor, with disproportionately large numbers of African-Americans and Native Americans in their midst. People become homeless because they run out of money (say, through loss of a job); because they run out of family and social connections (through domestic violence, for example); or because they run out of luck in terms of their health (up to one-third of homeless people on Skid Row have mental disabilities). People remain homeless because they don't get help, have lingering problems (including drug and alcohol addictions) for which they cannot obtain adequate help, and have poor employment prospects (especially veterans).

The truth is that LA's current policies will not end homelessness.
Skid Row disproportionately – and unfairly – cares for the region's homeless because so many other communities in Los Angeles County have few or no services to help them. Currently, only 25 of 88 cities in the county spend money on housing and services for the homeless. The remaining communities, in effect, are using Skid Row as their solution to homelessness. For now, Skid Row remains the largest housing and social service provider in the entire metro region. Until other communities shoulder their responsibilities, dismantling Skid Row would be tantamount to a death sentence for many poor people in LA, because they have nowhere else to go. Moreover, without adequate alternatives, efforts to remove visible homelessness in Skid Row can only force homeless people to move to streets, parks and alleys in other communities.

City and county policymakers are unable or unwilling to face up to what needs to be done about Skid Row. They have settled instead on the "three C's" to combat homelessness: contain it in Skid Row by concentrating mission-based services around San Julian Park; control it through personal property seizures, arrests and incarceration, which is why 50 additional police officers were recently deployed in the downtown area; and cleanse it by closing homeless encampments and promoting gentrification.

These strategies have, in effect, criminalized homelessness, shifted the blame for Skid Row's problems onto homeless people themselves, and allowed other cities to shirk responsibility for caring for their own homeless residents. These strategies do not address the root causes of homelessness. Rather than trying to contain, control and cleanse Skid Row, we should revise our policies to end homelessness.

Our goals must aim to stop the manufacture of homelessness; close off the flow of homeless people to the streets of Skid Row; and assist those already homeless to get off the streets permanently.

Here's a 5-point plan:

1. Help homeless people help themselves by generating jobs for them. Work is the surest way out of poverty, so a share of public-sector jobs – tree planting, highway construction, for example – should be set aside for homeless people who are able to work. Such a program could be paid for with some of the infrastructure bond money approved in November by California voters.
2. Make sure that public assistance is enough to allow recipients to afford a roof over their heads. General Relief, the last-resort L.A. County program for unemployed and disabled people, amounts to $221 a month, the same as it was 25 years ago. Back then GR would let you rent a room for four weeks; today it buys only one week in the worst housing in the city. Many county assistance dollars could be saved if the homeless entitled to federal Social Security benefits and veterans' disability payments were helped in obtaining them. These savings could be used to raise General Relief payments.
3. Go beyond the shelter mentality to provide affordable housing and services for the homeless. This would be a relative bargain compared with the cost of warehousing people in jails, hospitals and emergency shelters. In Los Angeles a night in supportive housing costs approximately $30, compared with $37 in a shelter, $64 in jail, $85 in prison, $607 in a mental hospital, and $1,474 in a general hospital.
4. Stop the flow of additional homeless people into Skid Row. Other municipalities must scrap zoning restrictions that make it possible for some neighborhoods to keep out low-income housing and essential public services. It makes sense to support a law on the lines of SB 1322, introduced in 2006 by state Sen. Gilbert Cedillo, that would require cities to include emergency shelters and special-needs facilities in their general plans. Homeless people discharged from hospitals and jail should not have to travel to Skid Row in search of a cot. They should be able to find social services, housing and health clinics in their own communities.
5. Be willing to spend the political capital necessary to end homelessness. Long-established divisions of political authority cannot be used as an excuse for inaction. The old ways are not the only ways. The mayor and City Council of L.A. and the county supervisors can no longer avoid working together to solve the problem. And Southland cities should stand up to NIMBYism.

Until these actions are undertaken, nothing should be done that threatens the remaining stock of affordable housing for the extremely poor in Skid Row or anywhere else in LA. Until these actions are undertaken, the existing supply of shelter beds in Skid Row must be preserved and maintained.

We can afford to end homelessness.
In 2005, the City of Los Angeles spent less than $1 per capita in locally-generated support to address homelessness, (compared to $3 in Chicago, $8 in Boston, and $13 in Seattle). In L.A. County overall, local jurisdictions using local, state, and federal funds as well as private sources currently spend about $600 million annually. This compares to the annual cost of sheltering and sustaining every homeless person in Los Angeles County, which would be approximately $1.5 billion.

But a large homeless population itself has a very high price tag. We pay that price in the form of emergency hospitalizations, jail and prison stays, and a variety of other public service costs incurred as a result of homelessness. When homeless people live in supportive housing, however, their use of emergency shelters and hospitals drops, and their involvement in the criminal justice system declines, all of which results in savings.

New York City spends $1.7 billion each year on services and housing for its (much smaller) homeless population, in part driven by the state's right-to-shelter law but also by the realization

that not providing supportive housing and services to homeless people is expensive. The rapid construction of affordable and supportive housing there has reduced the homeless population to such an extent that the city's largest shelter, with 1,000 beds, will be closed in June. Los Angeles could do likewise, and come out ahead.

The causes of homelessness are not mysterious, and experiences in other U.S. cities prove that our five-point plan would go a long way to ending homelessness in L.A. Any great city-region that has 'come of age' has built the institutional capacity to help poor and homeless people. This is something that Los Angeles has yet to accomplish, but must now discover how to do. A reality-based approach to ending homelessness will never succeed through the unilateral actions of a small group of stakeholders, however powerful. It's time that Mayor Villaraigosa and Chair of the LA County Board of Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky sat down together to talk about dollars and guts – about finding the money and political will to end homelessness and about helping Los Angeles come of age as a great city.