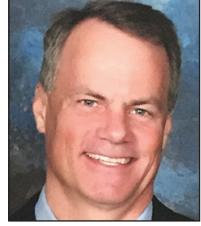


COMMENTARY

Editorials, letters, columns and other opinions

The Crisis On Our Streets

Business Community Must Help Fill Critical Voids


COMMENTARY

George Mullen


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Brian Caster

This must stop, and now. In order to do so, San Diego's business community must fill the void and lead the charge. If this doesn't happen, we are heading for big problems that will negatively impact all of us.

San Diego is the eighth largest city in U.S., yet, we now have the fourth largest homeless population. Federal statistics reveal that chronic homelessness nationwide actually declined 30 percent from 2007 to 2015 yet rose an alarming 77 percent here. This is proof that something is gravely wrong with San Diego's approach.

9,116?

The latest annual homeless count cites 9,116 unsheltered people in the county, but we hear the real number is closer to 20,000. Furthermore, we

For 30 plus years we have been helping San Diego's homeless, but mostly on the periphery — donations, church and service club efforts. Over the past several years though, we've watched this situation deteriorate into a crisis with death on our streets. Many areas of our beloved San Diego are beginning to resemble a third-world country.

are in the midst of the largest hepatitis A outbreak in the United States in decades. The disease is ravaging our homeless population — there have been 481 confirmed cases, 337 hospitalizations, and 18 deaths. Even before this outbreak, San Diego's homeless deaths had doubled in the past two years from 54 in 2014 to 117 in 2016.

Our greatest enemy in this crisis is time.

Aside from the obvious humanitarian catastrophe, this has also become a public relations disaster for San Diego with both national and international news widely reporting on our hepatitis epidemic.

Best Practices to Emulate

In the midst of this horrific situation there is a great deal of good happening. Dozens of organizations and thousands of San Diegans are tirelessly helping our homeless. We, the business community, need to be analyzing what is working and not working, and crafting a comprehensive solution to this problem based on best business practices.

Four organizations we are currently analyzing and learning from are:

East County Transitional Living Center: Run by **Harold Brown**, ECTLC houses 400 homeless persons at a time — guiding residents to sobriety, employment, and independent living. In 2016, it served over 400,000 nutritious meals to those in need at a cost of 17 cents per meal. Through its employment contracts, residents work and generate 80 percent of ECTLC's income.

Father Joe's Villages: In 2016 it helped 828 homeless people move into

permanent housing and served nearly 1 million meals to over 7,000 individuals. The 6,800 acute care visits to its federally qualified health clinic saved the City of San Diego \$2 million due to decreased use of hospital emergency rooms.

Solutions for Change in Vista is run by **Chris Megison** and funded almost entirely by the private sector. The group has solved homelessness for over 850 families and 2,200 children through a multidisciplinary approach of workforce training, sustainable agriculture (aquaponics farms), and school outreach.

Veterans Village of San Diego's Stand Down is an annual July weekend event that brings together nearly 1,000 homeless veterans and family members with more than 150 organizations. Stand Down is a role model for what we would like to see year round.

Possible Citizen's Initiative

With these organizations and best business practices in mind, we are in the midst of exploring the viability of a sweeping 2018 Citizen's Initiative to finally bring forth a comprehensive homeless solution. In doing so, we intend to fully support the vision of the **Regional Task Force on Homelessness** and to invite all city and county leaders, all special interest groups, and all San Diegans, to join the effort.

San Diego's business community must lead the charge. Are you ready to help?

George Mullen is a principal of Studio-Revolution.com and a leader of a proposed transition center called Sunbreak Ranch. Brian Caster is CEO of A-1 Self Storage.

Three Steps to Take for More Housing Solutions


COMMENTARY

Paul Downey

effects of the growing homeless population in our community. No longer can we step over those who need to be lifted up. Businesses and the entire community must work together now on a solution.

Many of those afflicted with homelessness once contributed to society as business owners and employees themselves, like Bruce, a Vietnam veteran originally from Cape Cod, who worked as a building supervisor in an upscale building in downtown San Diego.

In 2014, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. While undergoing cancer treatment, Bruce suffered a brain aneurysm and stroke. He was hospitalized and unable to work, undergoing frequent surgeries and treatments. When he was eventually released from the hospital he returned to work, but was soon let go. Bruce then suffered a heart attack and was re-hospitalized. When he was released from the hospital

tal a second time, it was to the street. Bruce couldn't afford to rent even the smallest, apartment or motel room. At 67, Bruce was officially homeless.

Lack of Housing

We have a serious problem in San Diego, where the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment has skyrocketed to \$1,748. With a vacancy rate of less than 3 percent, fewer landlords are willing to accept housing vouchers, which are increasingly more difficult to obtain.

According to the **San Diego Housing Commission**, "Approximately 46,000 households in San Diego are on a waiting list to obtain a federal Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8). The average wait to obtain a housing voucher is 8 to 10 years."

For adults age 55 and up, there is a severe shortage of elder-friendly housing. In 2016, the population of homeless older adults increased 20 percent.

If you don't think that your business will be impacted by the growing homeless problem across the county, you are misled. The homeless sleep in your doorways, trolley stations, alleyways and parking lots. Their presence affects ability to do business and attract customers. And the economic and social costs are far reaching.

What Can Business Do?

Donate: Consider sponsoring an event or program that directly supports and helps the homeless. Or you can donate in-kind items and services to support programs and services for the homeless.

Volunteer: Many nonprofits that support the homeless work with a skeleton staff. Companies can start volunteer initiatives that provide much-needed people-power to help these nonprofits.

Advocate: Explore ways in which your company can advocate for solutions like affordable housing, particularly for seniors. Work with your local business improvement district or community planning group. Reach out to your city councilmember and encourage them to make affordable housing a priority.

County officials have taken the first step toward a solution: County land and money are being offered specifically for the creation of affordable housing: \$25 million in San Diego County funds has been set aside for gap financing; \$500,000 from the Neighborhood Reinvestment Program has been designated for pre-development expenses; 11 County-owned properties are being evaluated as possible sites for affordable housing development. But we need to do more.

Paul Downey is President & CEO of Serving Seniors, a nonprofit serving seniors living in poverty.

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4909 Murphy Canyon Road, Suite 200

San Diego, CA 92123

858-277-6359 • Fax 858-277-6398

Email: sdbj@sdbj.com • www.sdbj.com
PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER
Huntley Paton hpaton@sdbj.com • 858-277-2914
PUBLISHER EMERITUS
Armon Mills amills@sdbj.com • 858-277-6795
EDITORIAL
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Nels Jensen njensen@sdbj.com • 858-277-6897
Managing Editor
Vik Jolly vjolly@sdbj.com • 858-634-4623
Copy Editor
Steve J. Adamek sadamek@sdbj.com • 858-277-6591
Reporters
Sarah de Crescenzo sarahd@sdbj.com • 858-277-6971Brad Graves bradg@sdbj.com • 858-277-6586Lou Hirsh lhirsh@sdbj.com • 858-277-8904Brittany Meiling bmeiling@sdbj.com • 858-634-4625Jared Whitlock jwhitlock@sdbj.com • 858-634-4636
Special Sections Editor
Patti Anderson panderson@sdbj.com • 858-634-4634
Contributing Writers
Reo Carr rcarr@sdbj.comStephanie R. Glidden sglidden@sdbj.com
Photographers
Melissa Jacobs mj@sandiegophoto.comJamie Scott Lytle jamiescottlytlephotography@gmail.comStephen Whalen peak15@roadrunner.com
RESEARCH
Researcher
Gina Bertuzzi gbertuzzi@sdbj.com • 858-634-4635
ADVERTISING
Sales Manager
Dale Ganzow dganzow@sdbj.com • 858-277-4832
Account Executives
Norma Bialas nbialas@sdbj.com • 858-634-4234Rick Bushree rbushree@sdbj.com • 858-277-6692Don Sciascia dsciascia@sdbj.com • 858-277-6397Melissa Scofield mscofield@sdbj.com • 858-277-1516
Director, National Accounts & Local Brand Partnerships
Jim Barker jbarker@sdbj.com • 858-277-6499
Classified/Legal Advertising Executive
Lucinda Lauridsen llauridsen@sdbj.com • 858-277-6359
ART & PRODUCTION
Director
Sandra Powers spowers@sdbj.com • 858-634-4628
Production Artists
Angela Castillo acastillo@sdbj.com • 858-277-6359 x 3117Suzan Peterson suzanp@sdbj.com • 858-277-6359 x 3116
CIRCULATION & EVENTS
Audience Development Director
Shelley Barry sbarry@sdbj.com • 858-277-6391
Events & Marketing Manager
Audrey Marlow amarlow@sdbj.com • 858-277-6359 x 3145
Events Specialists
Aleah Durkee adurkee@sdbj.com • 858-277-6359
Administration
Controller
Mark J. Misiano mmisiano@sdbj.com • 858-277-6778
Receptionist
Vanessa Quartuccio vquartuccio@sdbj.com • 858-277-6359