

# Sonoma County Has a Homeless Crisis

## *Is There a Response Plan?*

### **SUMMARY**

Approximately 3,000 county residents are without permanent housing each night. About 2,000 of them also have no temporary shelter. They sleep in cars, RVs, doorways, and temporary encampments under a freeway overpass, along a road, or on public property. Recent encampments include “Homeless Hill” off Farmers Lane, “Camp Michela” in Roseland, and a large collection of tents and temporary shelters along the Joe Rodota Trail. The numbers of homeless individuals have remained virtually unchanged over the last several years despite various plans to find or generate housing. Homelessness is as extreme an emergency as a natural disaster. As such, it deserves the same sense of urgency and a response of similar scope.

When the fires of 2017 occurred, the reaction was immediate and overwhelming. An emergency response center was set up at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds in a matter of days. Hundreds of first responders were housed in trailers and tents within hours. Emergency response teams such as the Red Cross connected fire victims with temporary housing immediately. Floods and fires in 2019 similarly involved large-scale evacuations and temporary shelter options. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted shelter-in-place orders, massive business shutdowns, and park closures to help ensure “social distancing.” The approximately 3,000 homeless residents require a crisis response as well.

Homelessness does not respect political boundaries. Multiple governmental and private agencies provide services to the homeless in Sonoma County. Much of the funding for these services comes from state and federal sources and is disbursed on a year-by-year basis, making long-term planning difficult. Use of these funds must adhere to guidelines based on the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development model known as Housing First, which prioritizes permanent housing over temporary shelters. The policy places the most vulnerable at the highest priority for housing.

The greatest constraint on housing the homeless population is the lack of available accommodations of any type. There are simply not enough beds to fulfill the needs. Nevertheless, multiple plans and policies to “solve” the homelessness crisis have been adopted, with little change in the numbers of people sleeping on the street.

Perhaps the most glaring example of the lack of adequate planning was that of the encampment on the Joe Rodota Trail in the fall of 2019. The homeless encampment grew to nearly a mile in length and at least 250 strong before public awareness and pressure dominated the news. The Board of Supervisors responded to the crisis with a hastily developed plan that committed over \$12 million for various shelters and services. This occurred while under the restrictions of a legal settlement in response to the October 2018 decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in the *Boise* case. The settlement required that homeless people displaced from encampments on public land be offered suitable shelter as well as a number of other services. Sixty (60) of the trail occupants were placed in tiny houses installed at Los Guilicos and approximately thirty (30) others were placed in other temporary shelters. Over 150 homeless

people determined there was no viable option for them and chose to search for another spot to pitch their tents.

Despite representing less than 10% of the county homeless population, the Joe Rodota Trail emergency resulted in a significant redistribution of homeless funding. The Joe Rodota Trail problem could have been averted had a plan been developed and implemented to provide adequate shelter options.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Sonoma County homeless population has remained relatively constant for the past four years. During this period, Sonoma County has struggled to address homelessness with a variety of reorganizations, leadership changes, and planning studies. These efforts have produced little change.

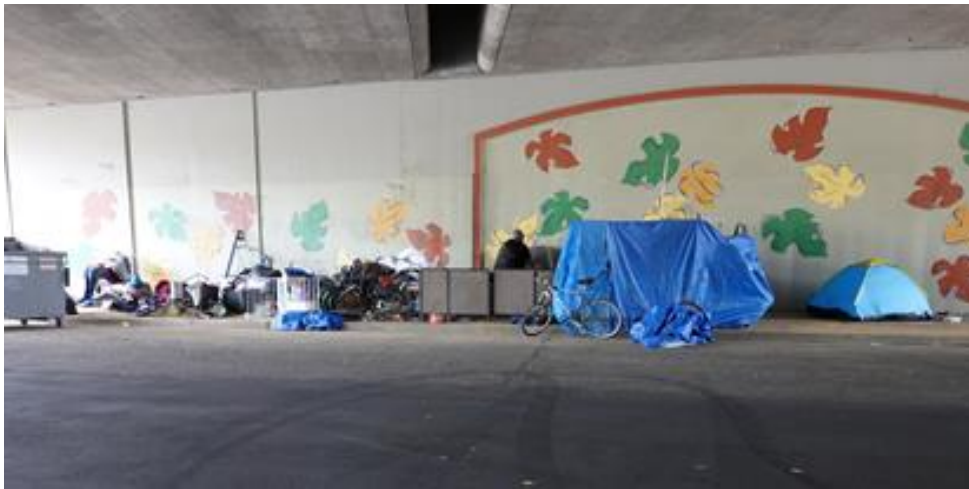
During this time, the County and the City of Santa Rosa used Housing First as a model for addressing homelessness. In 2018, these governmental entities, along with the City of Petaluma created a new governing body, the Home Sonoma County Leadership Council (LC), intended to be the homelessness policy coordinating governing body for the County. The Community Development Commission (CDC) currently serves as the lead agency. In addition, the Home Sonoma County Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) was formed to serve as an advisory body to the LC. The LC began meeting in mid-2018 and disbursed \$14 million in state and federal funding for homelessness-related services in 2019. On the advice of the TAC, the LC subsequently adopted a Coordinated Entry System (CES) for making assessments and decisions regarding both shelter and permanent housing.

Finding safety and security in groups, many homeless people form encampments throughout Sonoma County. The largest and most visible of these was the Joe Rodota Trail (JRT) encampment in 2019, but many encampments had formed and disbanded in earlier years.



Joe Rodota Trail (JRT)

Examples include “Camp Michela” in the Roseland neighborhood, “Homeless Hill” near Farmers Lane, and a sidewalk encampment in the 6<sup>th</sup> Street undercrossing of Highway 101. Other homeless encampments formed in Guerneville, Cloverdale, and Glen Ellen.



Sixth Street Undercrossing

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is a self-initiated investigation by the 2019-2020 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury.

The Grand Jury interviewed 18 key leaders involved in the homelessness crisis in Sonoma County. The interviewees represented law enforcement, appointed and elected officials, governmental department heads, homeless service providers and formerly homeless individuals.

The Grand Jury attended Board of Supervisors meetings (in person or through streaming video) when homelessness was on the agenda. Additionally, the Grand Jury obtained data from the [sonomacounty.ca.gov](http://sonomacounty.ca.gov) website, including data from the many departments tasked with addressing homelessness.

The Grand Jury also reviewed a variety of documents, listed in the bibliography.

## **DISCUSSION**

The County of Sonoma and the City of Santa Rosa have a history of generating plans and funding programs meant to address homelessness. Each plan lays out a strategy for funding various programs intent on improving the homeless condition. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Housing First model is intended to place individuals into stable accommodations — a condition from which other problems can then be more easily addressed. This policy has been adopted as the guiding policy within the County. Less clearly addressed is the question: “What do we do about the 2,000 people who are unsheltered tonight?” Despite these plans and programs, from 2016 through 2019, about 2,000 in Sonoma County have remained without shelter every night. This problem needs to be addressed forcefully to avoid the establishment of more homeless encampments like the one on the Joe Rodota Trail.

## The JRT Encampment and the County's Response

Homeless encampments existed in Santa Rosa and elsewhere in Sonoma County before the JRT encampment. However, the JRT encampment serves as a perfect example of a flawed planning process and a response hampered by the realities of politics.

The JRT encampment was the largest and the most visible, with its lengthy array of tents and makeshift shelters easily seen from Highway 12. It was adjacent to private housing on the South, just beyond a fence delineating the trail boundary. For the homeless residents, the JRT was complicated and very difficult to manage. The trail is part of the County Parks system, and Park Rangers have legal authority to control the area, but policing is not their primary function or training. As a result, enforcement eventually fell to the Santa Rosa City Police Department and to a lesser extent, the City Fire Department. While many residents of the trail came to the site seeking mutual protection, many felt that they and their belongings were unsafe.

By the fall of 2019, the homeless encampment on the JRT had grown to over 250 people. In December, amid a great deal of media coverage and pressure from neighbors and the general public, the Board of Supervisors (BOS) declared an emergency and directed staff to quickly present plans to clear the trail. On December 23, 2019, County Department of Health Services (DHS) and the CDC presented their plan to the BOS. In a special meeting to address the JRT crisis the BOS approved plans that redirected over \$12 million from the general fund and reallocated grant funding to construct 60 individual shelters at Los Guilicos, purchase two homes and enter into lease agreements for two additional facilities. The BOS also issued a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for at least two new indoor/outdoor temporary shelters and directed staff to prioritize the establishment of shelters, along with low-barrier navigation centers and outdoor shelter alternatives. Indoor/outdoor shelters provide a safe, supported environment with options for those homeless people who are not able to transition to indoor living arrangements. Additionally, the BOS increased funding to hire seven full-time caseworkers in DHS.

The BOS actions represented a series of reactive responses to the JRT crisis. As of the publication of this report, the results of those actions are:

- Sixty tiny shelters at Los Guilicos
- Purchase of two houses
- Seven additional full time DHS caseworkers
- Early occupancy of 19 homeless in ten (10) former FEMA trailers located on the Sonoma County Fairgrounds.

Subsequently, the Leadership Council cut previously approved funding for homeless support organizations by 34% due primarily to projected reductions in state funding. The Grand Jury could not confirm that the reduced funding was a direct result of the JRT mitigation measures.

Public awareness, neighborhood pressure, extreme visibility and the sheer extent of the JRT encampment made it a high-profile case demanding a rapid response. There were, however, further impediments to simply clearing the trail and dispersing the campers. In July 2018, Santa Rosa and Sonoma County reached an agreement with the homeless rights activist group, *Homeless Action!* The resulting 12-month temporary injunction, now renewed to the end of 2020, specifies a series of steps required before relocation can be undertaken. This injunction was based upon the October 2018 decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in

the *Boise* case, which held that it constitutes cruel and unusual punishment under the U.S. Constitution to arrest homeless people living on public land without first offering them alternative housing. Consistent with *Boise*, a requirement of the injunction is that adequate shelter must be offered before relocation occurs. The agreement also recognizes that barracks-style placement is not appropriate for all homeless people. In addition, safe storage of possessions of the displaced individual must be provided and other needs accommodated.

### **Housing First and the Coordinated Entry System**

While the Joe Rodota Trail injunction requirements were in large part reflected in the preexisting encampment closure policy of the City of Santa Rosa, compliance with them in the context of the JRT highlighted weaknesses in the City of Santa Rosa and County of Sonoma homelessness programs. Some of the weaknesses are due to the Housing First model and the Coordinated Entry System (CES), which Sonoma County is required to adopt in order to receive federal and state homelessness funds. Almost all of the funds for direct support of homeless programs in Sonoma County originate from federal and state sources.

#### *Housing First*

California law SB 1380 requires all state-funded housing programs to adopt Housing First. Originally developed in New York City in 1992, the Housing First model was intended to replace the “staircase” model in use at that time in which an individual graduates from the street to a temporary shelter, to transitional housing, and finally to permanent housing. The model had limited success for those with psychiatric diagnoses, especially those with co-occurring addictions. Many participants left the program or were evicted because they could not comply with the strict rules and treatment requirements or became “stuck” and unable to advance to the next step. They were expected to be perfect citizens rather than ordinary citizens. In contrast, housing provided “first” rather than “last” as in the staircase model, was found to be more effective. The Housing First approach asserts that a homeless individual’s primary need is stable housing, without regard to substance abuse or other problems, and that, once settled, they are more amenable to accepting services and treatment. Although now practiced in several other countries and supported by copious research, it does have its detractors. Some object to providing government benefits to those who have not proved themselves deserving. Others point to the severe shortage of housing in general as an impediment to success. Without available housing stock or appropriate shelter, homeless people continue to wait on the street.

#### *Coordinated Entry System*

The Coordinated Entry System (CES) is a computerized uniform information gathering system, administered by the CDC to identify homelessness history, special needs and determine a vulnerability index. CES is a County-mandated component of the Housing First policy. The coordinated entry process, created originally for making permanent housing decisions, is also used in Sonoma County to make temporary shelter admission decisions.

Additionally, the CDC implemented the use of the Vulnerability Index Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT) within the CES to help prioritize shelter placements. The VI-SPDAT identifies the most vulnerable individuals and prioritizes them for immediate shelter placement. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable are, in many cases, also the most problematic in a multi-occupant shelter environment. Interviews with providers indicated that shelter staff became

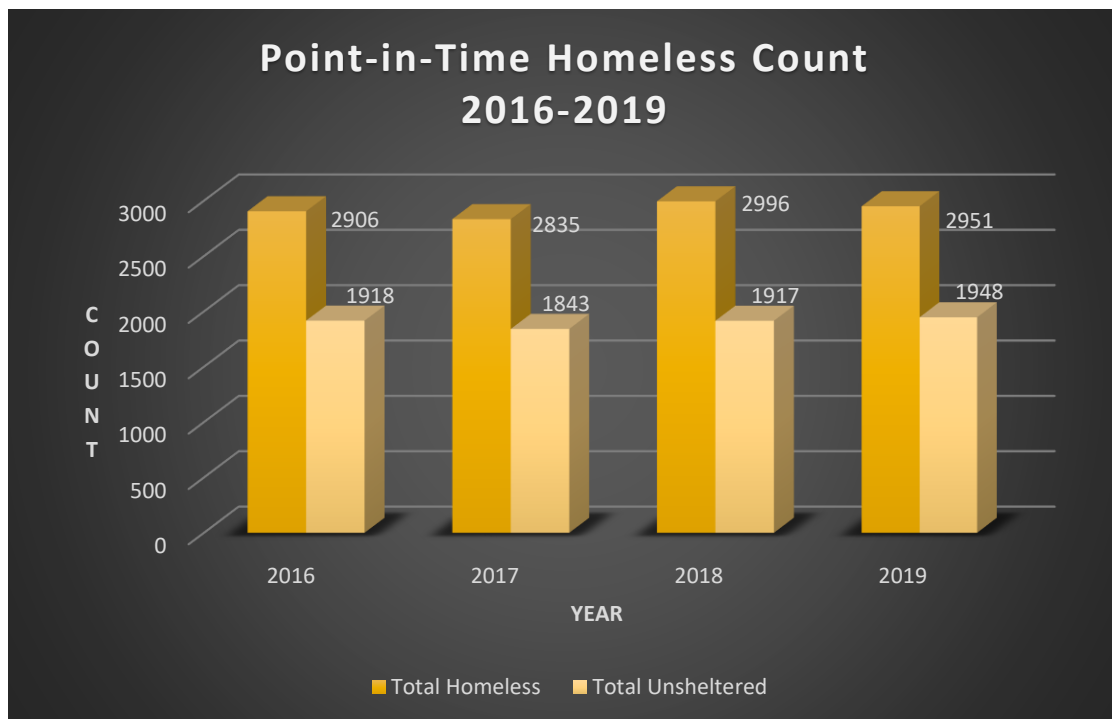
overwhelmed after the implementation of this policy. In addition, with limited shelter options, women, children and LGBTQ+ could potentially be placed in unsafe environments. In 2019, the Leadership Council (LC) modified their interpretation of the CES requirement, allowing shelter applicants direct admission to 50% of shelter capacity, bypassing the CES and VI-SPDAT process entirely.

While this compromise may relieve the stress level of shelter staff, and create a safer environment, it also leaves many of the most vulnerable without appropriate shelter. The prevailing opinion among providers is that the problems with CES and the VI-SPDAT are due to the lack of available shelter options, not the placement protocols themselves.

A related problem associated with CES is that at current staff levels there are not enough outreach workers to assess the homeless where they live. Through the Homeless Outreach and Stabilization Transition (HOST) teams, the homeless can apply for housing or other services from organizations such as the Homeless Services Center in Santa Rosa or Mary Isaak Center in Petaluma. Unfortunately, HOST is significantly understaffed to serve a population of approximately 3,000 homeless residents dispersed throughout Sonoma County.

### Who are the Homeless?

Every year during January or February, the County contracts with Applied Survey Research (ASR) to conduct a one-day census followed by a weeks-long survey of the homeless, known as the Sonoma County Point-in-Time count (PIT). Similar surveys are conducted at the same time throughout the United States. Data for Sonoma County from 2016 through 2019 showed a population of approximately 3,000 homeless individuals — 2,000 of whom were unsheltered in encampments, vehicles, abandoned buildings and on streets and roadsides. Eighty-five percent of the 3,000 reported that they were residents of Sonoma County prior to becoming homeless.



Adapted from ASR data

The total homeless population and the total unsheltered population remain consistent over the four-year period, as shown above. It is important to note that the homeless population is not monolithic, but consists of several subpopulations with distinctly different needs.

Subpopulations in the PIT report include veterans, families, youth, LGBTQ+, older adults, unaccompanied children and the chronically homeless.

### *The Chronically Homeless Population*

This last group comprises individuals with one or more disabling conditions who have been continuously homeless for one year or more or have experienced four or more episodes of homelessness within the past three years. Among some of the sickest and most vulnerable, averaging over those years, 45% of chronically homeless persons reported one or more disabling conditions:

- Physical or developmental disability
- Mental illness
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Chronic health problems

Public opinion of the homeless is as varied as the homeless population. Some researchers describe the public perception as love-hate: sorrow and pity along with anger and fear. Compassion is common; many see the homeless as unlucky and simply unable to afford housing in Sonoma County through unemployment or underemployment, illness, or other personal difficulty. Others classify the homeless as outsiders, shiftless, mentally disturbed, addicted, and inherently dangerous. Not surprisingly, proposed solutions and remediation to this seemingly intractable societal issue are varied as the homeless themselves. Limited funding and differing approaches on how to spend it effectively complicate the issue further. The need for temporary shelter versus permanent housing is debated; some would place an emphasis on prevention by aiding the near homeless, the short-term homeless or specific subgroups. Still others would direct funding to the roughly 10-30% of the homeless community, the chronically homeless, who are responsible for the overwhelming majority of the negative societal impacts attributed to the homeless community at large. Detox centers and facilities for treatment of addiction and mental illness are severely lacking, even for those with private insurance. The estimated annual cost for someone to remain chronically homeless ranges from \$60,000 to \$100,000, mostly due to Emergency Room visits, hospitalizations, and involvement with the criminal justice system. (In Reno, Nevada, one homeless man famously ran up a total of \$1,000,000.) According to at least one researcher, a person could be housed and provided intensive supervision and guidance for much less than half the above range. The savings could then fund other services for the homeless. Helping a few people a lot is more cost-effective when directed at the few who account for most of the monetary and social costs. This perspective faces resistance from both sides of the political spectrum: the left view the calculus as a cold cost-benefit analysis while the right resent the idea of special treatment for those whom they perceive as undeserving.

Doing nothing is the most expensive option.

## **Who Provides Services to the Homeless?**

Homelessness in Sonoma County is a multi-jurisdictional challenge. The County's CDC is the core agency providing support and grants to the nonprofits that directly provide shelter and services. Other County departments are involved, including the Department of Health Services, the District Attorney, the Sheriff, and Public Works. The City of Santa Rosa Housing and Community Services Department, Police Department, and Fire Department work with homeless policies and services in the City of Santa Rosa. Unless otherwise stated, this Report did not consider other cities in Sonoma County.

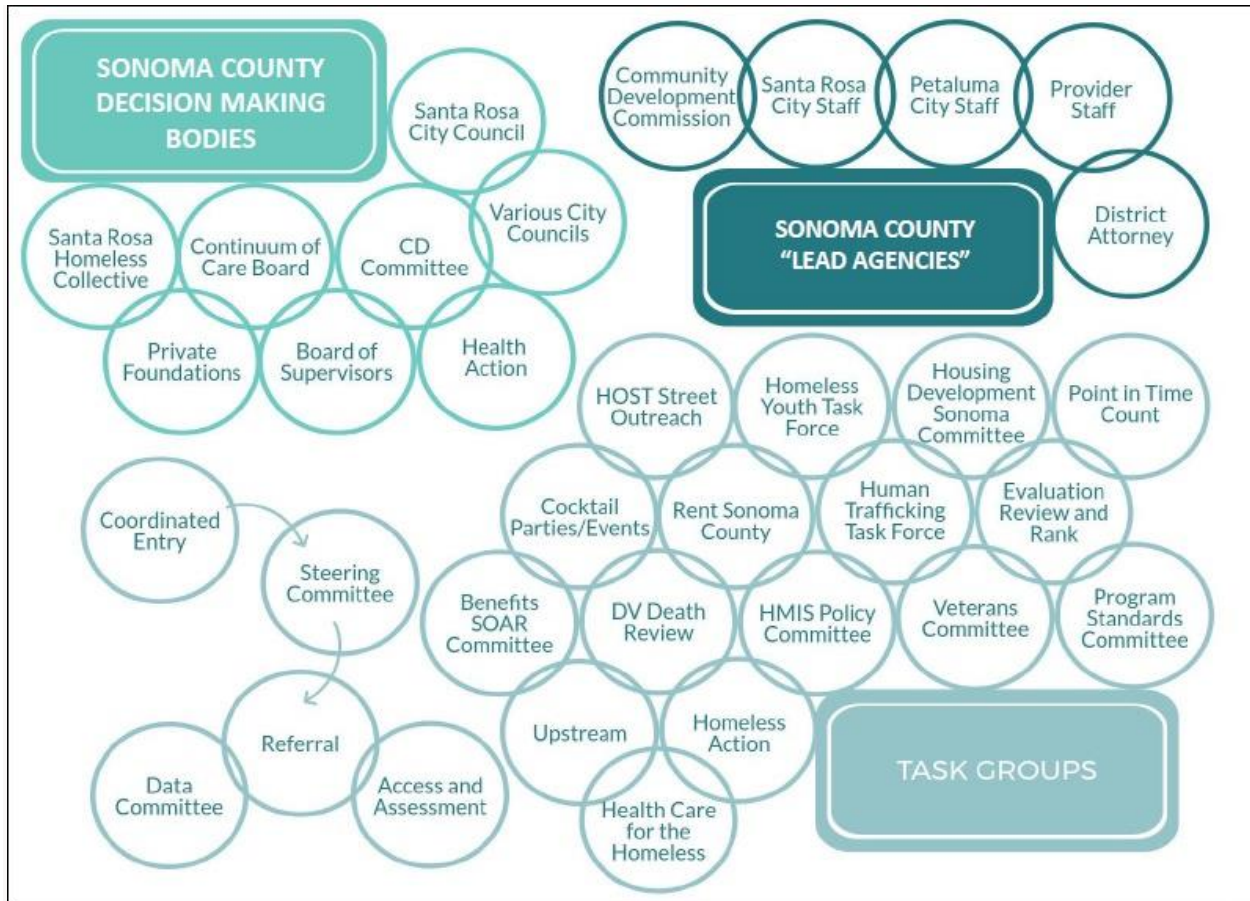
The County and the Cities do not operate most services directly to the homeless. Rather they manage the funding and oversee contracted not-for-profit organizations that provide homeless services. The major service providers in the County and cities of Santa Rosa and Petaluma are Catholic Charities and the Committee on the Shelterless (COTS). Many other organizations play smaller but important roles. The services provided include shelter, meals, tenancy counseling, and casework.

The recent introduction of HOST adds caseworker outreach to the homeless living outside of shelters. HOST workers are able to seek out homeless individuals where they are living in camps, cars, parks etc. and link them to the organizations and services that can benefit them. Highly trained professionals have the skills and expertise required to assess individual needs and deliver targeted help appropriate to the individual. Prior to the JRT crisis, Santa Rosa funded only five HOST caseworkers through Catholic Charities, to serve the homeless in the urban core. At the December 23, 2019 BOS meeting, seven additional full-time positions at the Department of Health Services (DHS) were authorized to provide additional homeless services. Although a good start, a larger team of skilled caseworkers is critical to the success of any program tasked with reducing homelessness.

## **How Are Services to the Homeless Organized?**

The 2016-2017 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury investigated the homelessness emergency in the City of Santa Rosa and recommended better cooperation between the City and County in tackling the housing crisis. On November 7, 2017, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors and the Santa Rosa City Council held a joint meeting to discuss the local system of care for homeless individuals and families in the County. They reviewed recommendations from a report commissioned by the CDC assessing the current state of homeless systems of care. The report found the systems to be highly fragmented, with uncoordinated decision-making, a lack of an overall vision and an isolated understanding of funding among the organizations that comprise the system. The Homeless System of Care Redesign Ad-Hoc Committee was created because of this meeting in order to develop guidance and recommendations for a new homeless leadership group. This Ad-Hoc Committee recommended change, starting with the implementation of a new decision-making group that would oversee and direct County efforts to combat homelessness. This decision-making group became the Leadership Council.





The “old” Homeless Support Organization, pre-2017  
 Source: County of Sonoma Agenda Item Summary Report – 10/9/2018

**The Leadership Council and Technical Advisory Committee**

In November 2018, the County Supervisors and Santa Rosa and Petaluma City Councils created the Home Sonoma County Leadership Council (LC), a nine-member group with representatives from governmental and other homeless related organizations. The LC was tasked to “own” the homelessness problem and develop budget and policy initiatives.

The LC is a high-level policy making organization and follows the Housing First guidelines mandated by the State of California and federal HUD funding. The nine members of the LC include two County Supervisors (at least one of whom must represent a rural area), two Santa Rosa City Council Members, one Petaluma City Council Member, and four individuals who are involved in service to the homeless population and are members of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC). All members serve two year terms; some flexibility in LC composition is possible. In accordance with the Brown Act, meetings of the LC are required to be open and regularly scheduled.



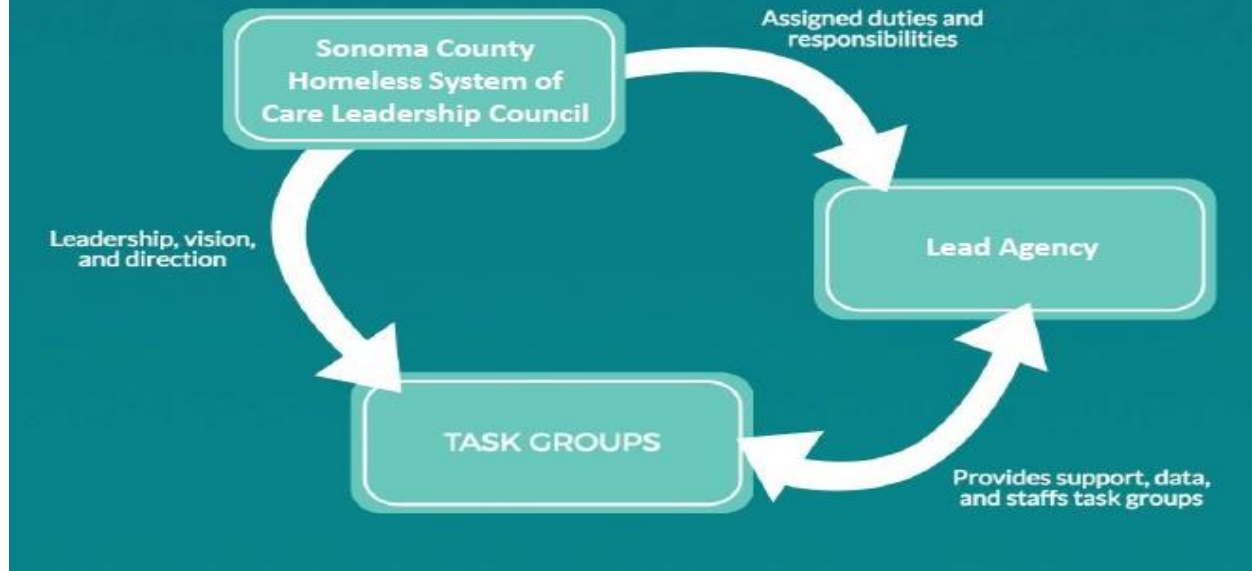
Source: County of Sonoma Agenda Item Summary Report – 10/9/2018

The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), created in conjunction with the LC, is also part of the homeless system of care and serves to advise and support the LC. The TAC is a research and recommendation body consisting of 25 members. In accordance with HUD regulations, TAC members include non-elected government officials, representatives of service organizations and community resources, homeless advocates, and formerly homeless individuals. Appointment to the TAC is by individual application, with final approval by the LC. Members of the TAC must serve on at least one of six Task Groups dealing with:

- Coordinated Entry and Housing First
- Performance Measurement and Evaluation
- Data Initiatives
- Housing Unit Production/Rapid Rehousing
- System Funding
- Emergent Issues

The TAC's responsibilities include representing the larger community in advising the LC, expediting and optimizing housing activities, and recommending best practices to implement and evaluate homeless programs.

# SONOMA COUNTY HOMELESS SYSTEM OF CARE



Source: County of Sonoma Agenda Item Summary Report – 10/9/2018

## Success of the LC in the First Year

The LC held its first public meeting in December 2018. They met monthly until April 2019, when the LC allocated its Continuum of Care (CoC) funding to homeless service providers. After April, the LC met only every two months because there were no additional funds to distribute.

As described in their mandate, the duties of the LC include:

- Serve as Sonoma County's Housing Urban Development (HUD)-required Continuum of Care (CoC) Board
- Support the vision and principles of the Sonoma County Homeless System of Care
- Own the issue of homelessness within Sonoma County and be widely recognized as the owner of the issue
- Provide the leadership required to realign homelessness-related funding and policies throughout Sonoma County
- Approve and monitor standard performance outcomes
- Approve the submission of applications to Notices of Funding Availability published by HUD
- Establish policy related to achieving functional zero homelessness (rehoused within 30 days after becoming homeless) in Sonoma County
- Establish Sonoma County's homelessness funding priorities and make funding-related decisions

During its first year the LC:

- Allocated \$14 million in CoC funds (essentially directing federal and state funding)
- Received reports evaluating the Coordinated Entry System (CES) and the use of the VI-SPAT in the CES, and containing interim governance recommendations
- Approved changes to the CES to allow 50% of shelter admissions to be direct rather than via the CES (see discussion above)
- Approved changes to the governance of the LC and the TAC
- Initiated a strategic planning process for future improvements to the LC

Despite the actions described above, the LC's lack of response to the Joe Rodota Trail encampment suggests that the LC did not initially embrace the more comprehensive role of "owning" the issue of solving homelessness. The Leadership Council never discussed a strategy to address the encampment on the JRT prior to its December 2019 meeting, even though Sonoma County and the City of Santa Rosa agreed to a federal court injunction governing encampment closures in June 2019. Meanwhile, the JRT population expanded dramatically from July to December of 2019. At a September 2019 LC meeting, a suggestion to develop an encampment policy first arose as part of a strategic planning conversation. However, the JRT crisis was not discussed at the LC until the December meeting, at which it approved the re-allocation of \$220,000 to efforts on the Joe Rodota trail. The LC met only bimonthly during this time; their level of concern did not seem to dictate additional or special meetings. During the course of this investigation, several interviewees characterized the LC and TAC as inefficient, ineffective, understaffed, and slow to act.

Although the LC was created to take charge of the homeless crisis and direct a countywide response, the LC membership was not geographically diverse enough to represent the different constituencies in the County. Additionally, the LC was not given adequate staff resources to function well within the Brown Act requirements for public meeting scheduling and notifications. Policies governing certain important actions, such as clearing an encampment like the JRT, remain in exclusive control of the BOS, whose members are often conflicted between serving their district constituents and serving the County as a whole.

### **Funding Impediments to Providing Services**

Homeless funding from the State is unpredictable and contingent on the condition of the State's most recent budget. Additionally, the distribution of federal funds may be subject to political constraints. It is not possible to build and sustain a robust and effective program to combat homelessness without a secure, predictable, ongoing source of funding. Whatever the source, it must be dedicated and include stringent oversight in order to avoid the "enact and forget syndrome." As an example of this syndrome, the 1967 legislation known as the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act provided funds to depopulate state mental hospitals in favor of community-based facilities and local treatment programs. Few of these funds materialized and the money was diverted to state budgets. Many of the released patients became homeless because the community-based programs meant to care for them were underfunded.

## **NIMBY-ism**

Another impediment to solving homelessness is the public resistance known as NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), defined as a person who objects to the siting of something perceived as unpleasant or potentially dangerous in their own neighborhood, such as a landfill, hazardous waste facility or homeless shelter, while raising no objections to similar developments elsewhere. In order to provide adequate shelter and services for homeless individuals, governing bodies must be able to set aside pressure from NIMBY groups and make the selections regarding homeless shelter sites and services based on what best serves the homeless community.

Indoor/outdoor shelters could house many of the approximately 2,000 unsheltered homeless at the Fairgrounds, at the County Center complex, or at a number of other locations. The State of California delivered six mobile homes (from FEMA) to Sonoma County in January of 2020. Additionally, as of June 2020, over 50 trailers sit unoccupied on the Sonoma County Fairgrounds back lot. It remains unknown to this Grand Jury why these trailers have not been offered for use by the homeless, even though space and utilities currently exist at several locations.



Unoccupied trailers stored between horse stalls at Sonoma County Fairgrounds

Several possible shelter sites, with the exception of Los Guilicos, have yet to be approved by district-elected Supervisors. One day, after we get through the current COVID-19 crisis, the BOS and LC attention will return to solving the homeless crisis. Whichever governing body is tasked

with selecting homeless shelter sites must be able to set aside pressure from NIMBY groups and make the selections based on what best serves the homeless community.

In response to community concerns, the BOS promised that the Los Guilicos complex would be removed by April 2020. As of June 2020, Los Guilicos shelters remains occupied, due in part to the COVID-19 Shelter-In-Place order.

Despite their concerns, neighbors adjacent to Los Guilicos delivered significant amounts of food and clothing for the homeless to a local church. Overwhelmed by the largesse, church officials asked for it to stop. An abundance of compassion exists alongside NIMBYism.



Los Guilicos Temporary Shelter

### **How Much Does Sonoma County Spend on Homelessness?**

The Grand Jury attempted to answer this question, but found there is currently no mechanism in place to provide even a rough estimate. While the homeless population remained static over the past four years, there is no way of knowing whether costs rose or fell over that period. Without a means of tracking expenses, it is also difficult to evaluate the success of programs. Some expenditures are clear: state and federal grants that support homeless services and are administered by the County or specific budget items in County and municipal budgets are available. Indirect spending by County and city agencies is more difficult to quantify. For example, police interactions that involve a homeless person may involve a short conversation or a long and complex interaction involving several officers and other support staff. Other services such as fire, medical emergency or mental health find it difficult or impossible to attribute specific costs to homelessness. They consider the costs part of their normal services to the public.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the past eight months, our research into Sonoma County homelessness has exposed an insufficient sense of urgency when it comes to providing adequate temporary and permanent housing for the homeless community. Safe, temporary housing options for the homeless are largely unavailable while they wait for permanent housing. Santa Rosa owns a shelter in Sonoma County called the Samuel L. Jones Shelter, but the barracks style accommodations are not appropriate for everyone. Even though there are other shelters in Sonoma County, a significant portion of the homeless population feel they have no viable option but to live on the street or public property while waiting. Sonoma County has a robust network of private, public, and community/religious based organizations that are dedicated to improving the lives of the homeless, but temporary shelter options remain critically limited.

There is a strong need for leadership in the county to address the homelessness crisis. On paper the Leadership Council is described as a high-level policy making body. It played no role in developing policies or procedures to address the JRT problem. The County Board of Supervisors (BOS) did take action to resolve this crisis, but did not include the Leadership Council in its efforts. When the BOS did act, it did so in a reactive, rather than a proactive way. Prior to the JRT emergency, the BOS had no plan in place for addressing encampment emergencies, or the shelter and service needs of the homeless population in Sonoma County as a whole.

## **COMMENDATIONS**

The 2019-2020 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury wishes to acknowledge that government agencies and service providers have strived to improve services for the homeless.

In addition, the Grand Jury specifically commends:

- C1. Sonoma County and the Cities of Santa Rosa and Petaluma for creating the Leadership Council when they did and as they did. While the LC was created more quickly than desirable in a perfect world, there was a need to act quickly in order to continue to obtain federal Continuum of Care (CoC) and state funds.
- C2. The Leadership Council for changing the Coordinated Entry System to allow 50/50 shelter admissions.
- C3. The County for putting the Department of Health Services (DHS) and the Community Development Commission (CDC) under single leadership in January 2020. This connection of services for the same homeless population should make communication and coordination more effective and efficient than it was under the previous separation of programs.
- C4. The County for opening the temporary indoor shelter, with a navigation center, at the Los Guilicos site.

## **FINDINGS**

- F1. The absence of a sufficient number of temporary shelters, including support services, is a primary factor in the consistently high number of unsheltered homeless in Sonoma County.
- F2. For temporary shelter sites to adequately meet the needs of homeless individuals, temporary shelters must be geographically dispersed and designed to encompass the needs of different target demographics such as families, mentally and physically disabled and LGBTQ people.
- F3. In dealing with the Joe Rodota Trail encampment crisis, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors did not follow a strategic planning process.
- F4. Sonoma County does not yet have a countywide plan to address future homeless encampments.
- F5. Because the Department of Health Services and the Community Development Commission were not, until January 2020, under single leadership, there was a lack of coordination of housing and supportive services.
- F6. Currently, short-term federal and state block grants provide the majority of funding for homeless programs.
- F7. The County has no method to track local funding for homelessness services. It therefore, has no metric to determine the effectiveness of these funds in reducing homelessness.
- F8. The Leadership Council played no role in developing policies or procedures to respond to the Joe Rodota Trail crisis.
- F9. The fact that the Leadership Council does not include members from all cities in Sonoma County limits its ability to develop policies on a truly County-wide basis.
- F10. Neither the Leadership Council nor the Technical Advisory Committee has the resources necessary to adequately address the homeless crisis in Sonoma County.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors direct the Leadership Council to develop policies and procedures to manage the homeless crisis on a Countywide and strategic basis by December 31, 2020. (F1, F2, F3, F4)
- R2. The Leadership Council develop and implement a strategy for funding appropriate shelter space that addresses the needs of sub-groups within the homeless community by December 31, 2021. (F1, F2, F3, F9)
- R3. The Leadership Council adopt a plan to deal with homeless encampment emergencies by December 31, 2020. (F9, F10)



- R4. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors develop a funding source for consistent and predictable funding of homeless programs by December 31, 2021. (F7)
- R5. The Department of Health Services and Community Development Commission remain under single leadership. (F6)
- R6. The County of Sonoma Board of Supervisors direct the County Administrator to develop a methodology for tracking all costs of homeless services and programs across County agencies by June 30, 2021. (F8)

## **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

Pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury requires responses from the following officials as follows:

- Board of Supervisors (R1, R4, R5, R6)
- Leadership Council elected representatives (R2, R3)

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda, and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

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## GLOSSARY

- ASR Applied Survey Research
- CDC Community Development Commission
- CES Coordinated Entry System
- CAO County Administrative Office
- CoC Continuum of Care
- COTS Committee On The Shelterless
- DHS Department of Health Services
- FEMA Federal Emergency Management Agency
- FJC Family Justice Center
- HEAP Homeless Encampment Assistance Program
- HMIS Homeless Management Information System
- HOST Homeless Outreach Stabilization and Transition
- HUD House and Urban Development
- JRT Joe Rodota Trail
- LC Home Sonoma County Leadership Council
- NIMBY Not In My Backyard
- PIT Point-In-Time
- VI-SPDAT Vulnerability Index Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.