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Gov. Gavin Newsom talks homelessness with San Bernardino County officials

With state funding growing for shelter, he heard about local ideas to solve a stubborn problem.



Gov. Gavin Newsom talks with formerly homeless mother Atiya Willis, service providers and local officials at the Arrowhead McKee Family Health Center in San Bernardino on Tuesday, April 16, 2019. (Photo by Terry Pierson, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

By **SANDRA EMERSON** | semerson@scng.com |

San Bernardino County's work converting hotels and motels into housing for the homeless was among several initiatives that grabbed the attention of Gov. Gavin Newsom, who was in town Tuesday, April 16 to learn more about the county's efforts to combat homelessness.

Newsom, who met with county leaders and formerly homeless people and service providers at the Arrowhead McKee Family Health Center, said he heard some big ideas to take back to Sacramento.

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“There are a lot of wonderful things happening at the local level,” Newsom said, while sitting next to Philip Mangano, chief executive of the American Roundtable to Abolish Homelessness, and Gary McBride, chief executive of San Bernardino County.

During his campaign last year, Newsom said homelessness would be a priority for his administration. On Tuesday, he said he has been meeting with local leaders across the state to hear innovative solutions, some of which figure to get part of the nearly \$2.5 billion in new funding the state has set aside for housing and homelessness programs.

“The question for me is ‘Am I making a case to my legislature that I’m directing those dollars appropriately?’” Newsom said. “That’s why I’m here. I want to make

Earlier in the afternoon, Newsom was briefed by supervisors and county officials on five of the county's housing initiatives. Those included the county's effort to convert hotels and motels into dwellings.

By at least one estimate, that effort is more economically efficient than new home construction. The American Roundtable to Abolish Homelessness projects that the cost of building studio and one bedroom apartments in San Bernardino County runs more than \$350,000 per unit, while the acquisition and rehabilitation of motel and hotel units is estimated to cost \$150,000 to \$170,000 per unit.

Newsom suggested he's interested in the project: "I want to look to redirect some of that money in a much more robust way in this space."

Newsom highlighted the county's work helping homeless people find jobs, saying that mindset is missing in much of the current discussion on homelessness, and in the current state budget. He also said the county's use of technology during its Point-In-Time Count in January was very important.

"I'm looking for the novel. I'm looking for the innovation. I'm looking for the breakthrough," Newsom said. "And, today, I heard a number of things that enliven me."

Leaders of agencies that provide services for the homeless, including Step Up and Lighthouse Social Service Centers, said they'd like to see some money spent to expand mental health services and to speed up the process of providing housing.

Two county residents who recently struggled to find shelter — Atiya Willis and Michelle Padilla — told the governor about finding housing and gaps in the system. They also told him about what is working.

Willis said that in 2016, after she'd been medically discharged from the Army, she and her three children moved to California, only to find that the apartment she'd thought she'd secured had fallen through.

Veterans services, she said, helped connect her with a transitional home in the county. Then, about two years ago, KEYS and Lighthouse found her housing.

"My children are able to receive mental health services for the trauma we received during our experience," she said. "We're now living very healthy and stable lives."

Padilla, who was homeless and dealing with substance abuse from 2007 to 2015,

“I’m greatly appreciative on being more comfortable with my surroundings, with my city. And (I’m) just happy to be employed and living on my own.”

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