

On homelessness, Victorville embraces gradual progress, aware of risk

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In the conservative High Desert, City Manager Doug Robertson is aware that some might rather see a far more aggressive approach than a compartmental strategy.

VICTORVILLE — City officials view a program offering the homeless a free bus ticket to support elsewhere as one tool toward combating a problem more prevalent here than almost anywhere else in San Bernardino County.

The Victim Assistance Program, already relocating 15 willing individuals to family and friends, in one instance as far away as New York, since its inception in July, authorities said.

The program is a partnership between the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, which identifies candidates, and the city, which bankrolls it.

According to City Manager Doug Robertson, who spoke at length to the Daily Press about the city's homelessness struggles, no amount of money spent on the program — which could also include plane tickets — is too much.

“If they're successful reuniting someone with a family member, there's no cap,” Robertson said. “There's no reason to have a cap, because it helps with the public perception of safety in Victorville and I can't think of a ticket anywhere that is going to be more expensive than the cost to public safety on this end.”

The promising plan, an admittedly gradual approach, comes as the city was counted this year as having _____ in the county and as _____

Homelessness has long been problematic in Victorville, whereas it's seemed to only graze neighboring municipalities, leaving city officials at a loss over why they're bearing the brunt.

_____ certainly hasn't relieved the issue, but officials are actively working to soften the impact. Robertson said weather, freeway access and possibly the “convenience factor” of established homeless services here have all likely contributed.

But city leaders in the past, he suggested, were also maybe too hands-off with engaging the county, the entity which receives the funding and administers social services programs. A renewed sense of cooperation, he said, could prove to be a boon to tackling the problem.

“I think what the current City Council has recognized is that, from a funding/legal sense, yes, that’s true — it’s a social issue. But it’s impacting the businesses and residents of Victorville,” he said, “so they wanted to take somewhat extraordinary measures to get more involved to help solve the problem, but in a balanced, measured way that doesn’t create additional problems.”

Part of that engagement has led to a rather unique initiative, whereby the old Queens Motel on Stoddard Wells Road, a one-time “absolute mess” shuttered for health reasons, will be given a county-approved \$3 million makeover

The 61-unit motel will be converted into a 30-unit one-bedroom apartment complex, according to county spokeswoman Felisa Cardona, who said the county Housing Authority-approved project will use a model that “quickly connects homeless individuals and families to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment or service participation.”

The county has committed to social services there for 20 years, Robertson said, and officials have targeted mid-2018 for occupancy readiness.

While the project could reduce the numbers of homeless on the streets and in shelters, city officials are also boosting code enforcement efforts in an attempt to break-up the seemingly regular appearance of encampments that have plagued downtown and isolated shopping centers.

In 2015, when authorities kicked out homeless from the Mojave riverbed, community concerns were that the mass exodus could cause a migration to mid-town or the outskirts of downtown, but Robertson said evidence so far has shown little of that.

Still, business owners, particularly in the Old Town district, have oft complained about the makeshift residences staked near them, which they say has threatened safety and business.

City officials say code enforcement has increased contacts with businesses to control what they can, but the legal precariousness in addressing the homeless has meant diluted, procedural tactics. After all, homelessness, in itself, is not illegal.

Backed by local ordinances, the city has focused on breaking up loitering on private property, and has worked with property owners to post “no trespassing” or “no loitering signs” because those can shorten the mitigation process.

Ultimately, the goal is compliance, but the challenges faced include having to store and not immediately dispose of property found on the streets, which could otherwise be deemed trash, in the event someone comes to claim it.

Code officers have also conducted nighttime operations at the former Target shopping center parking lot, a particularly popular homeless-gathering site off Palmdale Road.

“We’ve had some success there,” Robertson said, “but it always feels like it’s temporary.”

In the conservative High Desert, he is aware that some might rather see a far more aggressive approach, and that the compartmental strategy may seem too slow-moving or offer up “the public perception we’re doing nothing.”

Yet he said officials believe that success will likely hinge on focusing on the homeless individual and not the whole, “because everyone’s different.”

“I will tell you,” he concluded, “if someone wants assistance who is homeless, there is assistance.”

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