

Homeless on streets remains issue as Victorville tries new programs

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VICTORVILLE — The number of inmates from an Adelanto jail being dropped off in the Old Town neighborhood after their release has plummeted by 75 percent, a city spokeswoman says.

Since the first week of April, county inmate releasees have largely been transported instead to the bus stop nearest the High Desert Detention Center, a bus voucher in hand. Only during one drop-off at night, when buses in Adelanto stop running, do those released from jail still get taken to a transportation center in Old Town.

The 75-percent reduction of jail releasees in the neighborhood, cited by Victorville spokeswoman Sue Jones, would represent a remarkable turnaround in only a month since the new procedure was initiated.

San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department officials "will continue to monitor closely to ensure it continues to work efficiently and safely for all involved," Jones said.

In July, the Daily Press reported that inmate releasees without arranged transportation were being dropped off at the transit center near D and Fourth streets, at the bottom of the troubled Old Town neighborhood.

The practice unnerved residents there and organizers who have been working for the past two years on a comprehensive plan to incrementally uplift the area, which suffers from stigmas of crime, poverty and an undesirable business

climate.

At about the same time, law enforcement and public officials huddled to find a solution, and city officials suggested that the drop-offs might be contributing to Victorville's homelessness crisis.

The city has routinely ranked near the top for homelessness among municipalities in the county, and it hasn't been a problem to which officials have been oblivious or proud.

In efforts to tighten its grip on the dilemma, the city has turned to creative ideas in hopes of finding solutions.

Last July, it partnered with the Sheriff's Department to institute the Bus Ticket Home program, where law enforcement officials screen and identify homeless who have become stranded in the city and who have verified help elsewhere. The city then purchases the bus ticket to the individual's destination.

Since last summer, 73 homeless men and women have used the program, including a toddler and her mother, a victim of domestic violence, who were living in the Mojave Riverbed; and an 18-year-old man kicked to the streets when he aged out of the foster system.

Destinations have included New York, Maryland, Mississippi and Nebraska, according to Jones. So far, the program has cost about \$10,450. Yet as indicated by former City Manager Doug Robertson last year, "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."

Victorville is also charting new territory as the first to request from the county to operate a permanent housing facility for the chronically homeless within city limits. The former Queens Motel, a once run-down cesspool for criminal activity, is being refurbished into a 31-unit facility housing one to two individuals in each room.

"This facility will provide much more than safe shelter for our most vulnerable population," Jones said, "this shelter will provide much-needed wraparound services such as mental health, substance abuse counseling, employment

counseling and other social services needed to help individuals break the cycle of homelessness.”

The city Planning Commission and Council are expected to act on the project within the next two months, barring any delays, in time to officially finish it by December, she added.

But despite the efforts and early positive feedback, one recent indicator used to identify the scope of homelessness in county communities showed a disappointing trend: The unsheltered homeless population in Victorville — meaning those on the streets — doubled year over year in 2018.

Volunteers in this year’s Point-In-Time Homeless Count, a one-day measure conducted in January, tallied 187 unsheltered homeless in the city — up significantly from 81 who were counted in 2017.

It was the second-highest unsheltered population in the county, only behind San Bernardino (333), and accounted for 8.8 percent of the population countywide. While volunteers also kept track of homeless found in shelters and transitional housing, only some cities have such facilities so the Daily Press focused on those found on the streets.

“We believe 2017 was an anomaly,” Jones said. “To say that our homeless count has doubled in a year, would really be inaccurate.”

Officials point to the 81 unsheltered homeless counted last year and compare it to the two previous years when 127 and 198 were totaled — figures more in line with this year’s count.

Offering a possible explanation, she said officials noted there were fewer volunteers last year (15) than in others (60 this year; 50 in 2016).

Homeless advocacy groups have also warned that the one-day count, required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for funding and strategy purposes, does not entirely identify the scope of the homelessness situation.

“In no way are we proud to be ranked second in the county on this indicator,” Jones said, “but it’s certainly a tool for us to garner more resources to help us address this issue for our community.”

As far as federal dollars received through HUD, she said the city this year has awarded nearly \$165,000 in grant money for homeless services and construction projects. It includes portable buildings for the warming shelter at the fairgrounds, a program organized by High Desert Homeless Services and the Victor Valley Rescue Mission.

The homeless population rose 13.5 percent countywide in 2018 over last year, an uptick officials largely attributed to the state’s unaffordable housing crisis.

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