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L.A. boosts help for homeless: Huge numbers, recent deaths raise skid row's political profile

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By Laura Mecoy -- Bee Los Angeles Bureau

LOS ANGELES - It's been known as the City of Angels, home to Hollywood and gateway to the Pacific Rim.

Now Los Angeles officials are recognizing the city has another, less desirable, reputation as the nation's homeless capital.

On any given night, more than 82,000 men, women and children sleep on sidewalks, under bridges, in vacant cars and in shelters here.

In this county alone, there are more homeless people than in any other state, except California.

Even so, the homeless have, for the most part, been out of sight and out of mind - until now.

"There hasn't been a really sustained focus on homeless issues in the city and county" until recently, said Mitchell Netburn, Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority executive director. "Los Angeles is a huge county - the largest in the country - and there are a lot of places for the homeless to be out of the public eye."

In the past year, though, deaths, patient dumping and new development on skid row have put the homeless on Los Angeles' political agenda.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors set aside nearly \$25 million in June to build and maintain new transitional housing to help homeless people with health and drug problems.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa put \$50 million into the city's Housing Trust Fund in October to provide housing for the homeless.

The City Council recently created an ad hoc committee on homelessness, and Sen. Gil Cedillo went to skid row Friday to unveil a legislative package to attack crime in the area and expand services beyond downtown.

"This issue is now emerging as a very serious issue," the Los Angeles Democrat said. "It is a national disgrace."

In January, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority released a homeless count that found 72,413 people living unsheltered in the county and another 9,878 in shelters or transitional housing.

The census came on the heels of four deaths discovered on skid row in one day and accounts of hospitals leaving patients - some who couldn't even walk - at skid row shelters.

Pressure was already building to clear out the homeless encampments and crime along the 52 blocks of skid row because the conversion of old buildings into lofts is bringing the affluent back to downtown to live.

"In the past, we had day workers who left early in the evening," Netburn said. "Now you have a pretty large number of people renting units at market rates ... and they want to be living in a nicer environment than what skid row is."

The Los Angeles Times turned up the heat on local officials with columnist Steve Lopez's accounts of skid row life last year, editorials and a homeless forum last week.

"We have really become the laughingstock of the nation," Casey Horan, Lamp Community homeless program executive director, said at the forum.

She said every other major city has "far surpassed" Los Angeles in taking care of the homeless.

While Los Angeles has spent about \$65 million a year in the past, she said New York City is devoting \$735 million annually to the homeless.

"There is a dire, dire scarcity of money and services" in Los Angeles, Horan said.

The services the city and private organizations provide are concentrated on skid row, creating a squalid environment where criminals prey on the weak.

Capt. Andrew Smith, who commands the Los Angeles Police Department's central division, said people from all over the city come there to buy drugs and engage in other unlawful activity.

"They call it Mardi Gras on crack," he said. "It's a 24-hour party for people down here."

He said he stepped up foot patrols but doesn't have enough officers to eliminate crime.

Smith also said the drug dealers the police arrest are back on the streets within weeks because they get short sentences and are released early because of overcrowding in the county jail.

"The penalties are almost negligible," he said.

Cedillo proposes to increase penalties for selling drugs on skid row and around treatment centers with one of the measures he introduced Friday, Senate Bill 1318.

He also proposed Senate Bill 1320, which would prohibit - as a condition of probation - convicted drug dealers being in the skid row area.

Perhaps most important for the homeless on skid row, Cedillo's Senate Bill 1322 seeks to help homeless programs move out of downtown. It would require cities and counties to designate places for homeless programs in their general plans and would prevent changes in that plan when the programs try to locate there.

This could help agencies like the Volunteers of America, which spent the past five years fighting to get title to abandoned naval housing in San Pedro.

Jim Howat, the agency's director of homeless services, said it wound up with just 160 of the 500 units, even though federal law says the homeless should have priority in such cases.

He said the opposition was more than the usual "not in my backyard" protests: "It's nowhere on the planet Earth."

"I've been at a couple of meetings where (city and county leaders) have said we need to move these services out to other parts of the city," Howat said. "And my question always has been: Who is going to take them?"

Andrew Bales, Union Rescue Mission president, said his agency is fighting to get the county permits to move 51 homeless families into a former retirement home near Sylmar.

In the meantime, he said these families are in danger on skid row because it's home to some 300 registered sex offenders.

"There were two kids who were (victims of) attempted kidnappings by sexual predators," he said. "I have worked with the homeless for 20 years, and I have seen both the talk and the action. I am hoping we are going to see talk and action now."

As mayor, Villaraigosa has vowed to make a "substantial and visible" dent in homelessness in the city. He said the \$50 million he's already dedicated to housing for the homeless is the most ever for the city.

"The entire state spends \$50 million on supportive housing, so this is a big investment," he said. "It's not just talk. We are putting some money with our walk."