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OPINION

To fight homelessness, turn Project 50 into Project 10,000

The pilot program that puts the 50 most chronically homeless into supportive housing is a success. L.A.

By Dennis P. Culhane

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In 2007, Los Angeles County launched a pilot program, Project 50, intended to provide "housing first" — no treatment or sobriety required — to the worst 50 cases of homelessness on skid row. A recent series in The Times profiled several of the new tenants and their caretakers.

To readers familiar with the story of Nathaniel Ayers, the occasional subject of Steve Lopez's columns and of a subsequent book and film, the portraits were unsurprising. The lives of the tenants were tragically derailed by unyielding addictions and terrifying, untreated psychoses, and the train wreck is tough to watch.

But the real news in the series wasn't mentioned until the fourth installment, when The Times finally reported that the program worked. More than 80% of the hardest-core homeless of L.A. stayed housed, and nearly all were in treatment voluntarily, many now sober. Moreover, the program operated at a net savings to taxpayers. Had any comparable solution for cancer or failing schools been found, one would expect it to be the lead of the series.

Permanent supported housing for people who are chronically homeless, even with no strings attached, is a scientifically proven intervention. Consider that as L.A. officials struggled to gather support for 50 units, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced his plan to create 10,000 such units in five years. This is on top of the 30,000 units New York City developed since 1990 for homeless people with severe mental disorders and with AIDS, including thousands of active injection drug users. Bloomberg wasn't taking a radical chance; he was instead acting on the basis of well-established research and the proof on the streets.

One need only compare the streetscapes of L.A. and New York to see the difference. In the late 1980s, New York had homeless people practically underfoot on virtually every street corner and subway station. Some parks were home to hundreds of homeless

residents. In 1990, the U.S. Census Bureau counted 10,000 people on the streets of New York, a figure subsequently revised to 15,000 because of undercounting. This year, the city pegged the number at about 3,100. The streets, and tens of thousands of lives, have been transformed, and New Yorkers no longer dread the constant need to confront public destitution at every turn.

Los Angeles, by contrast, counted about 28,000 people living on its streets last year. L.A. looks like New York once did, with the streets overtaken by people failed by traditional treatment programs and living their tragic, destitute existence in full public view.

Project 50 is a major success, well beyond the painful stories of the people it has helped. Moreover, many of the city's chronic homeless are not "worst cases" and will have even better chances of success. Readers shouldn't get distracted by the stories of pathology; these folks and their stories would still be living on L.A. streets if not for the new housing program, and at greater cost to the taxpayers.

Los Angeles should go from the pilot program to a real policy. Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky has proposed expanding the effort to Project 500.

Based on the pilot program's results, and if the public wants a real and visible victory, the county would do better to be even more ambitious. Congress and both Presidents George W. Bush and Obama have accepted the evidence and created 70,000 such housing units for the chronic homeless since 2000. Another 20,000 are pending in the federal budget, including 10,000 for veterans. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development credits the efforts with a one-third decline in chronic homelessness since 2005, now at 112,000 persons nationwide.

If Los Angeles wants to join this national success story, it should think about Project 5,000 — or better yet, Project 10,000. The homeless, taxpayers and local communities deserve the effort.

Dennis P. Culhane is a professor of social policy at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy and Practice, and is director of research for the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

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