

# Will Sacramento Steps Forward survive?

A new director takes over the region's main homelessness organization, but old problems remain

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Shamus Roller, who runs the statewide nonprofit Housing California, has been filling in as Sacramento Steps Forward's caretaker director since October 2013. Last week, the public-private partnership announced it has selected a new permanent director.

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**One floor above a bookstore, Shamus Roller hits** a switch and watches the flat surface of his standing desk hum up to meet him. He acquired the trendy office tech after herniating a disc in his lanky back. Understandable, considering the youthful 36-year-old spent the past four months carrying Sacramento Steps Forward.

Formed less than three years ago to brainstorm solutions to end homelessness and dispense federal housing grants, Steps Forward nearly lost a war of attrition this past fall. Financial issues forced it to lay off six staffers. Around the same time, its executive director abruptly resigned amid rumors of misspent funds. And a combination of shallow pockets and delayed federal checks meant Steps Forward couldn't do its job of fronting payments to service providers like Volunteers of America.

While that last issue hasn't been resolved, Roller has done what he can to pull Steps Forward from the brink. He's secured funding that will put the streamlined outfit "back in black," and just in time for a new director to take over in March.

But questions about the future remain.

Critics argue that Sacramento County, which previously administrated homelessness grants, never fully committed to a transition of authority that would mean firmer financial footing for Steps Forward. A promised "joint-powers" alignment of the region's housing policies never materialized.

And even a surprise \$1 million funding commitment from the city of Sacramento last week may come with business-appeasing strings.

As Sacramento County enters the final two years of its "10-year plan to end homelessness," the public-private centerpiece created to resolve this very humanitarian crisis is still learning to walk.

**One night before Mayor Kevin Johnson** pumped an adoring State of the City crowd with arena bluster, his Sacramento City Council colleagues made a less-heralded announcement. During a sparsely attended midyear budget hearing on February 11, Councilmen Jay Schenirer, Steve Hansen and Steve Cohn revealed they had been quietly meeting with Roller to brainstorm ways to get homeless residents more help.

"For a number of years, this city has kind of punted to the county to deal with this issue," said Schenirer, who called the \$100,000 spent annually on motel vouchers "a Band-Aid."

By the end of the night, the council—minus K.J., who was dining at the White House—agreed to steer \$1 million in general-fund savings to Steps Forward for unspecified programs envisioned to benefit the city's chronically homeless.

The "chronic" tag is used to describe single, adult men who have been homeless for more than a year or for multiple periods of time. The category also accounts for the smallest share of Sacramento's homeless residents, according to point-in-time figures and homeless experts.

Before the vote, Hansen tried to explain why the city favored spending money on this population. "They're not only a danger to themselves, they really impact everyone around them," he reasoned. "They defecate on themselves, they leave things for everyone else, they're screaming on the corner."

He added that they often present significant physical and mental-health issues, and are more likely to tax emergency rooms, shelters and jails.

They're also more likely to piss off the local business community, a desired partner in the new, unfolding effort. Which may be one reason why Steps Forward last week named Ryan Loofbourrow its incoming executive director.

Loofbourrow spent the past 20 years running homeless-outreach teams for downtown business partnerships in San Diego and Sacramento, and said he has an "eye toward the impacts the homeless population can have on the business district."

**As the dominoes align for a publicly** financed sports arena, local elected officials are paying more attention to those who rack up public-nuisance complaints, not the families who quietly stock church shelters or double- and triple-up in motels.

Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness, said this division comes at a potential cost.

According to Erlenbusch, the number of homeless families and chronically homeless adults in Sacramento County and around the region is increasing. He said a conservative estimate for Sacramento County is between 2,500 to 7,500 homeless individuals at any given time, though school districts say Sacramento County is home to nearly 12,000 school-age homeless children.

"The flawed thinking is ... after five or 10 years [of prioritizing programs for the chronically homeless] then that frees up resources to address families and blah, blah, blah," Erlenbusch said.

Hospitals and law-enforcement agencies are more likely to keep any savings they realize than invest them in affordable-housing trust funds, he added.

A request from Councilwoman Angelique Ashby may lead to some of the money being set aside for families. Yet low-cost housing for the working poor remains a critical need, Roller said.

One of the biggest causes of homelessness is when someone “can’t afford where they’re living, and they don’t have another thing lined up,” he explained. “Having affordable housing in our community is a really essential prevention program.”

But there hasn’t been much political appetite for such policies. Sacramento County recently scrapped its pioneering inclusionary-housing ordinance in the hopes of spurring residential development. Sacramento city officials are considering doing the same.

**As nice a surprise at it was, the city’s \$1 million investment won’t address Steps Forward’s biggest financial challenge.**

The county used to facilitate federal grants to homeless service providers. When it backed out of that role, Steps Forward went from being a policy initiative to a full-on grant-juggling operation. Albeit one with much shallower pockets. The county could pay service providers with its own money when federal reimbursements were slow to trickle in. Steps Forward can’t.

Housing advocates believe the county should do what it did when it privatized Meals on Wheels, and provide Steps Forward a zero-interest “float” so that it can pay providers until checks from the Department of Housing and Urban Development arrive. The county would be fully reimbursed and providers wouldn’t risk closing programs or laying off staff, they say.

“It’s the responsibility of the county, because they’re the ones who created it,” Erlenbusch remarked. “And then they bailed.”

Roller said the current setup forces service providers to take out interest-bearing lines of credit. Talks between the county Department of Health and Human Services and Steps Forward are occurring, but it remains to be seen whether a fix is at hand.

“From my perspective, the county ought to play a role in making sure the providers aren’t out