

Report: Shelter, housing are top social service priorities in Sacramento County

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Published: Friday, Apr. 18, 2014 - 10:17 pm

Shelter and housing for vulnerable seniors, domestic abuse victims and homeless people are Sacramento County's most pressing social service needs, according to a new county report.

The county faced [budget deficits](#) between 2008 and 2012, during which it cut or eliminated many social services. Local nonprofit agencies also reduced their services in the same period as they weathered a decline in charitable giving.

Now that the economy has improved, county supervisors are trying to get a grasp on how to prioritize funding for social services. They directed county staff to survey social service advisory committees, as well as community leaders throughout the county, to get a sense of what's needed.

The county was once the lead local agency for homeless services, but four years ago it formed a coalition with the city of Sacramento and others to create Sacramento Steps Forward, a private nonprofit that handles those responsibilities.

[Sacramento County](#) expects to spend about \$6 million on homeless programs in the current fiscal year, about half of what it spent seven years ago. Although the county is no longer the

lead local agency, county staff recommends additional efforts on homelessness, including an emphasis on securing regular housing for the homeless instead of short-term shelters. An initial step in that direction will involve spending state welfare funds on permanent housing, officials said.

The Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness issued a report last year that found at least 501 homeless people have died in the county since 2001, one of the reasons supervisors wanted a full review of safety-net services. The coalition's Bob Erlenbusch supported directing money toward permanent housing.

"The cost of doing nothing is more expensive than housing people," Erlenbusch said, referring to the costs of emergency response, hospitalization, jail and other services spent on homeless people.

The county's social services report also addresses the need to shelter vulnerable seniors. The county recently had to come up with \$200,000 to keep Senior Safe House, an emergency shelter for abused and neglected elderly people, open until the June 30 end of the fiscal year. The county needs to find a stable solution for that need, the report states.

Seniors who remain at home need greater protection, too, said Sherri Heller, health and human services director. The county should consider reinstating a financial fraud unit that was cut from [Adult Protective Services](#) a few years ago, as well as lost prosecutors and detectives who were once dedicated to elder abuse, she said.

[Paul Lake](#), director of the Department of Human Assistance, said victims of domestic abuse need help. The county needs to spend more money on domestic abuse shelters, as the county expects to spend \$230,000 in the coming fiscal year for shelter capacity, he said.

Michelle Steeb of the St. John's shelter said her 130 beds are typically full and she must turn away 250 to 350 women and children a day.

Supervisor Phil Serna said the report could help frame the debate over social services in the 2014-15 budget, which the board will begin discussing June 17. The county has not released a proposed budget, but based on budgets released by other local governments, officials can expect a modest increase in revenue.

Serna encouraged supervisors to rethink the county's past funding policies. "We have to look for different models of doing things," he said.

Supervisor Susan Peters said she appreciates the opportunity to consider spending options after years of cuts. However, "I am afraid that everyone thinks we have oodles of money now, which we do not," she said.

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