

County deciding on plan to end homelessness

\$2.1 billion housing initiative would help 15,000 of area's poorest people

11/8/2006 By Michele R. Marcucci, STAFF WRITER

Alameda County supervisors are set today to decide on an ambitious plan to end chronic homelessness in the county.

The plan calls for pulling together existing and new housing for 15,000 of the county's extremely poor and homeless, at an estimated cost of \$2.1 billion.

County Housing Director Linda Gardner said those involved in the years-long process had started working on housing for the mentally ill when they realized they already had similar but separate housing plans for low-income people with AIDS and others who are homeless.

"We realized that there was a better way to go about this, that these populations often overlapped," Gardner said.

As many as 16,000 people in the county are homeless in the course of a year, and more than 5,000 are homeless every night, according to the plan's summary. A countywide homeless count is slated for January, according to the plan.

In 2003, President George W. Bush and the Interagency Council on Homelessness announced a 10-year goal of ending chronic homelessness, and many communities are creating plans to do it, Alameda County's plan says.

The plan's first focus will be on housing people with AIDS and mental illnesses. By 2020, it aims to help veterans, domestic violence victims and substance abusers and people who could be in danger of losing their housing, like the developmentally disabled.

Gardner said other counties, including Contra Costa and San Francisco, have put together similar plans. But she said Alameda's is unique in part because it also includes strategies for housing families.

The federal definition of chronic homelessness excludes families, focusing only on individuals, Gardner said. But about 43 percent of the county's homeless are families, according to a 2004 report. In addition to creating housing, the plan calls for support services and better information on the housing help available to those who need it. The plan also calls for measures to track its success.

She said Oakland and Berkeley have already adopted the plan, and she said other cities, including Fremont and San Leandro, are considering it now. She hopes to have the plan fully adopted by early next year.

In the meantime, she and others have started implementing strategies outlined in the plan, Gardner said.

Steps for this year and next include figuring out what information systems and resources the county already holds; finding ways to pool grant and other money across jurisdictions and finding developers to build housing; and analyzing successful supportive housing models.