

San Leandro seeks demise of homelessness Study helps city recognize ways to assist the needy

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Whenever John wakes up in the morning and peers out at the bright sun beaming through the trees along the San Leandro Creek, he knows it's going to be a good day.

During the three weeks he has lived there, he's been able to get meals three times a week from a local food program, collect recyclables throughout the day for a little cash and lay his head down at the makeshift encampment he found among the creek brush.

But when it starts raining and the food runs out, he said, it's going to be a whole different world.

"Lunch is one thing," he said. "But a roof over your head is another."

For the first time in San Leandro, the city has taken a comprehensive look at homelessness and surveyed all its homeless services and programs in hopes of connecting agencies across the Bay Area in a countywide effort to end homelessness within 15 years.

But while the city has invested its time and money into gaining a better understanding of the problem, it exposes a world many don't even know exists — and one that counters most notions of who the homeless really are in San Leandro.

"The homeless are not all people in your front yard or in the doorway of some restaurant on East 14th," said 49-year-old John, who lives in the creek along with about a dozen other homeless people. "They're just down on their luck, might have been hurt on the job and they've got heads on their shoulders. They've got intelligence."

Earlier this month, the city's Recreation and Human Services Department presented an in-depth look at the number of homeless living in San Leandro and what services they use, as well as the services already provided to them through the county and other agencies.

The department was able to count the city's homeless by collecting data from the various agencies that have contact with them. This enabled the staff to identify the needs of the homeless and how the city could address the issue in the coming years — the bottom line being funding.

The results were staggering.

Using a countywide survey and police data, the city concluded there are about 600 people who live in shelters, transitional housing, their cars, or who are at risk of losing their homes.

Numerous county, city, nonprofit and faith organizations already provide prevention and support services for these "transients." The real issue, said Joann Oliver, the city's

Recreation and Human Services manager, is the nearly 40 people the city has identified as living on the streets on any given day. These people are the main ones the city is hoping to reach in a countywide plan called Every 1 Home.

Its main thrust is to marshal the efforts of all of the various agencies that provide services, such as food or temporary shelter, to the county's homeless and add a new goal to the mix: to put a permanent roof over their heads.

"This is a regional problem," Oliver said. "Every community has homeless and, because it's a community problem, it's a national problem."

While there may be only a small number of homeless living on the streets of San Leandro, however, homeless advocates say many often go unnoticed and don't fit the profile of what most people would consider to be homeless.

"A lot of the homeless are invisible," said Tom Breckenridge, an officer with the Interfaith Homelessness Network of San Leandro that runs the April Showers program. "But in the meantime, there are literally hundreds living in cars, open space, not causing anybody any trouble or they are sleeping in one friend's floor one night and another friend's the next."

Breckenridge said many of the homeless living on the streets — most of them men — couldn't afford the city's housing costs anymore or succumbed to their addictions.

But if you ask the homeless, many remain skeptical.

"It's big business to have programs for homeless," said Dan, who has been homeless for the past 20 years after spending time in prison and college before ending up on the streets. "They give you shoes, food and old clothes but they never give you a home. If they really want to stop homelessness, they would give us a home."

Joe, 60, a retired longshoreman and veteran who lost his apartment in San Leandro, said the city has told them before that something would be done about homelessness, but it's all starting to sound like broken records.

"San Leandro keeps making promises," he said. "But promises are never happening."

Others complain that the shelters throughout the city don't allow men or single women, so their only other options are to go to the creek, a vacant lot or underneath the freeways.

"If we don't try to go at the root then there's no hope," Breckenridge said. "And so to make a really dedicated push to absolutely end it is the way to go. ... Will there be zero homeless in San Leandro? No. But can we get a significant portion of this population with improved lives? Yes, I think so."