

HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS IN SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Becoming Part of the Community Again

SUMMARY

In 2021 the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors approved the Homeless Encampment Resolution Strategy, a three-year plan to transition persons from encampments to housing. The 2023-24 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury studied the issues surrounding encampments and the progress made as the Strategy approaches the end of its first phase in mid-2024.

The Jury found that the Encampment Resolution Strategy energized several departments and agencies to address homelessness in new ways, generating collaboration among them, which has led to positive and helpful contact with unhoused people in the encampments. Many placements in housing were made and encampments were “resolved,” or removed. Yet, many encampments continue to have negative impacts on neighborhoods. Heightened health, safety, mental health issues, substance abuse, along with environmental harm, remain concerns for everyone. Our local agencies are still handicapped by lack of affordable housing availability, impeding movement from encampments. Local economic challenges detract from the success of the Encampment Resolution Strategy, as more people are becoming unhoused than those being housed.

These multiple social problems would require unparalleled resources were it not for the enhanced collaboration among government and community agencies fostered by the Homeless Encampment Resolution Strategy. Ideally, the next phase of the Strategy will find more ways to ensure that collaboration is thoroughly planned, enacted, and funded.

Commendation

Stereotyping individuals without housing by labeling them as “the homeless” or “the mentally ill” can lead to misconceptions about unhoused persons as somehow different. The Grand Jury commends our community leaders, service agencies, and news media for using appropriate language when referring to our unhoused citizens. This fosters greater compassion and empathy, empowering society to better address the needs of those without housing.

BACKGROUND

Homelessness used to be dealt with by getting the person back to their family. Then local communities and their respective churches made efforts to feed, house, and care for them. America's early exposure to this phenomenon occurred after the Civil War. Wounded or shell-shocked veterans (today known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) were put on trains headed to their last known hometown. A note was pinned on their jackets with the shorthand version of "Homeward Bound," or the "hobo." Many of them never made it home. Santa Barbara was known for its encampment of people labeled as hobos on the famed Child's Estate.

Since 2005 Santa Barbara County has actively sought long-term solutions to homelessness. Its first attempt to bring together partners to address chronic homeless issues resulted in a 10-year plan, *Bringing Our Community Together*, in 2006. Lack of sustainable funding impeded the plan's progress.

The County revived its effort to tackle homelessness after the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in December 2015 required communities to create regional planning bodies in order to receive federal funding and develop a database to match unhoused individuals with services. The County responded with a Community Action Plan to Address Homelessness Phase I, which began in 2019, and Phase II, which started in 2021. The County Community Services Department began to create networks of agencies and data banks of individuals needing housing and services. A Continuum of Care (CoC) was established to create partnerships among local government bodies and community agencies. It funneled federal and state monies to its member agencies.

The five overarching goals of the two Community Action Plans were:

- Increase access to safe, affordable housing
- Deliver supportive services for individual needs
- Build a database and improve data sharing
- Strengthen available support systems
- Build provider capacity to address the needs of specific populations

Although access to housing did not guarantee housing itself, just over 1,100 individuals were placed in housing, both transitional and permanent, during 2019 – 2021.

During the continued drought in 2019-21, numerous fires around homeless encampments in the Santa Barbara area placed scrutiny on those sites. These fires alarmed residents who feared the fires would spread beyond the encampments. In May 2021 the City of Santa Barbara declared a State of Emergency in fire-prone areas. These fires also prompted the County to focus its attention on homeless encampments, devising an Encampment Resolution Strategy (Strategy), which the Board of Supervisors adopted on August 31, 2021.

An encampment has been defined as any location where one person or more stays unsheltered every night in areas not meant for human habitation. Often included in the definition of a homeless encampment is that a person has more personal property than can be carried in one trip and is stored at the site. The County estimates at the beginning of 2024, about 750 people live in encampments.

Part of the 2021 funding for the Strategy went to new mapping software that pinpoints encampment locations. Each encampment site is counted rather than just the larger clusters. By August 2022, there were 961 encampments mapped in the County, making this problem more conspicuous. At the time that this report was written, 721 sites are identified on the encampment map, with an estimate of more than a thousand total. There are potentially many more because some encampments can be difficult to locate or reach, even by mapping drones.

Also in 2021, the State made emergency funding available to resolve encampment issues, especially along waterways and traffic corridors. The major hubs for encampments in Santa Barbara County were the Lompoc riverbed, the Santa Maria riverbed, and creeks throughout South Santa Barbara County.

In contrast to the Community Action Plans, the goals of the Strategy emphasized the safety and cleanliness of streets and open spaces, medical and behavioral health, service needs, and information sharing. For this, the Strategy promoted person-to-person connection. Outreach to unsheltered individuals was the primary directive. In its proposal to the Board of Supervisors, the Community Services Department noted:

A key best practice in encampment response is *consistent* outreach and engagement that includes individual case management and housing navigation.... Successful street outreach requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders and strong coordination among teams. Approaches by teams should: permit ample time for engagement and rapport-building; allow for individualized case management; be client-centered, trauma-informed, and voluntary; be paired with availability of housing resources; and be transparent and consistent at every point of contact.

While the natural environment is not part of the County’s homeless plan – nor a beneficiary of state grants – the Strategy directs attention to the unsafe conditions presented by encampments: the “risk of fire, impacts on public recreation areas and the environment, safety of the greater community and visitors, and concern for the health and safety of those experiencing homelessness.”

An Encampment Response Coordinator was hired in 2021 to convene focus groups, including persons who had experienced homelessness, and forge a Response Team from many sources. The Encampment Response Team includes almost every department in the County and some outside agencies: Community Services, Public Health and Environmental Health, Public Works, General Services, Code Enforcement, Parks, the Agricultural Commissioner, Behavioral Wellness, Social Services, as well as the Public Defender’s Office. Notably, the Strategy team members participate

with the County Fire Department, the Sheriff's Office, as well as many non-profit organizations in the efforts to resolve encampments.

The inclusiveness of the Encampment Response Team helps in approaching the totality of the homeless encampment dilemma.

Navigating Legal Issues of the Unhoused

Historically, interaction between the unhoused population and law enforcement has included writing citations for loitering, vagrancy, panhandling, or disturbance of the peace. Occasionally, the unhoused would be asked to remove themselves from public property, which might escalate to an arrest, resulting in jail time and fines.

As the unhoused population grew, keeping unhoused individuals incarcerated became an unsustainable solution. Jails became overcrowded, and the unhoused, once released with nowhere to shelter safely or resources for change, drifted back into the community, cycling back into custody. A recent survey of the Santa Barbara County jail population showed that 242 of the 767 (32%) incarcerated people were inmates without homes.

McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act

The McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 provided states with funding for homeless shelter programs. This first step, though ambitious, did not address the diversity of the needs for services from basic housing to medical/mental health services among the unhoused population. Shelters were built but soon became overcrowded. Many unhoused remained without shelter, with communities' only resource to address this problem too often leading to incarceration without consideration of the civil and human rights of the unhoused.

Martin v. Boise

In 2009, six unhoused people sued the city of Boise, Idaho, stating that incarcerating the unhoused violated their constitutional rights when the city had nowhere else to house them. The group won

the lawsuit, which wound its way through the appeals courts, with a final upholding decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in 2019 (*Martin v. City of Boise*, 920 F.3d 584 (9th Cir. 2019)). The Ninth Circuit ruled that criminalizing a person for sleeping in public when no sleeping space is available in a shelter is prohibited by the Eighth Amendment's Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause.

Johnson v. City of Grants Pass

A similar lawsuit originating from Grants Pass, Oregon included statements that the anti-camping ordinance exclude items needed for keeping safe and warm such as blankets, tents, pillows, sleeping bags, backpacks by those unhoused who must sleep in public places when no acceptable alternative forms of shelters are available. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit upheld the lawsuit reiterating that not allowing such items by the unhoused is a violation of the Eighth Amendment as cited in the *Martin v Boise* case in 2022. These Court rulings stated that cities' anti-camping ordinances cannot be enforced if cities do not have sufficient shelter beds available for their unhoused population. However, the rulings reiterated that a city or jurisdiction could enforce other types of restrictions of camping on public property specific to its community. This ruling applies to all nine western states over which the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit has jurisdiction, including California, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Montana, and Washington.

This ruling allows local jurisdictions to decide what to enforce or restrict in terms of where, when, and how the unhoused can camp. In the past year, there have been several challenges to the 9th Circuit Court's rulings of 2019 and 2023. Though pending review by the Ninth Circuit, the most recent filing of the *City of Grants Pass, Oregon v Gloria Johnson, et al*, was heard by the United States Supreme Court on April 22, 2024. The issue once again is whether state, county, and city anti-camping ordinances violate an individual's Eighth Amendment rights. As of the writing of this report, the Supreme Court is set to rule sometime in June 2024.

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals' decisions notwithstanding, cities across the country have put in place ordinances/laws to "curtail" the unhoused population and skirt around the ruling. Most are considered nuisance laws:

- Panhandling (Multiple Cities). It is a crime or a citable offense if visibly panhandling on streets, in front of businesses, and by on/off ramps.

- Camping Ban (Solvang). Bans can be loosely interpreted as prohibiting camping in parks and requiring the removal of tents, sleeping bags, and personal property from encampments. In November 2023, Solvang passed an ordinance defining the time and location where the unhoused can set up encampments or park their vehicles. Encampments or parked vehicles can only occur on city-owned property for 24 hours. After the 24 hours, they must be moved.
- Sit/Lie Ban (Santa Barbara). Individuals cannot sit or lie on the streets directly or on their backpack on the streets from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Recently, a federal judge ruled the sit/lie ban for State and Milpas streets was constitutionally insupportable. The ordinance did not distinguish sit/lie from those eating outside, sitting for a parade or other street event, or just resting for a period of time. This ruling, at the time of this report, is being reviewed for further discussion or action.
- Food Sharing Limits (Multiple Cities). It is a violation if either an unhoused person shares food or an individual attempts to provide or share food with a person without housing.
- RV Ban (Goleta). One cannot park between set hours in designated areas, which may result in fines, citations, or loss of the RV for non-compliance. The City of Goleta imposed a code for large vehicles in early 2024. It states that no person(s) may park or leave any large vehicle on any residential or commercial areas between the hours of 7:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Goleta does offer safe overnight parking areas that can be accessed after applying for a permit.
- Bench Removal (Multiple Cities). Benches in public parks have been removed to discourage congregation, vagrancy, sleeping, or panhandling.

These ordinances and more have appeared in the cities of Santa Barbara County. Some have since been retracted.

Other laws are often used against unhoused individuals, such as those involving public intoxication, trespassing, public urination/defecation, disruptive behavior, aggressive panhandling, blocking sidewalks, and littering. Ordinances against camping in public parks have been passed locally. City governments in Santa Barbara County have enlarged the scope of code enforcement for cases such as these, notifying police departments where codes are being broken. Law enforcement officers informed the Jury that citations are complaint driven mostly by private

citizens or businesses. Homeless advocates say citations or arrests in these cases are harassment and that law officers treat everyone as criminals. Civic leaders, as well as law enforcement officers, are caught between the two points of view.

METHODOLOGY

The 2023-24 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) encompassed a variety of resources in researching encampment issues. Jury members reviewed County documents, watched Board of Supervisors meetings, and read numerous news articles on local encampments and research papers on the effects of homelessness.

Committee members interviewed 22 individuals representing:

- Santa Barbara County Community Services Department
- Santa Barbara County Department of Behavioral Wellness
- Santa Barbara County Public Defender's Office
- Santa Barbara County Supervisors
- The Santa Barbara County Fire Department
- The Continuum of Care, Santa Barbara County
- Mayors of Cities in Santa Barbara County
- Homeless Services Coordinators and Shelter Managers
- Local non-profit organizations with outreach workers
- Municipal Police Chiefs in Santa Barbara County
- Santa Barbara Sheriff's Office
- Goleta Neighborhood Services Division

Committee members toured encampments in the Santa Maria area, accompanied by members of the Santa Maria Police Department and Rangers from the Parks and Recreation Department. The committee also interviewed a former resident of encampments.



Santa Maria Riverbed encampments

DISCUSSION

Homeless programs have always incorporated various agencies. The unhoused represent a microcosm of economic and social shortcomings, which they likely suffer from more than other segments of the population. The Community Services Department, in devising the Encampment Resolution Strategy, created working partnerships with many County and city departments and non-profit organizations to provide services more directly and effectively. This report will briefly analyze each area and its challenges and successes.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Fire Department

In the time span of 2020 – 2023, the Santa Barbara County Fire Department responded to 1392 fires, of which 113 (8%) were identified as transient-related. Separately, in 2023, transient-related fires accounted for 18 (5.5%) of the 329 total county fire responses. The figures for 2024 are not yet available.

In this time frame, five encampments were destroyed by fire, and two were abandoned due to significant fire hazards. Similar to rules in public campgrounds, any illegal fire that generates an incident response can lead to citations or arrests. There have been rare arrests made for fires originating in or adjacent to encampments where arson was suspected. The persons in

encampments don't wish to draw attention to themselves, so they are careful to conceal flames and limit smoke plumes for their cooking and warming fires as much as possible.

Particularly in the dry season, serious damage could result with rapid fire spread —endangering vegetation, structures, roadways, and even lives. The local fire departments do not actively patrol encampments, but they keep a vigilant eye on them.

When smoke or fires are reported at encampment sites, the Fire Department responds with fire abatement procedures. They can request backup with patrol officers if they perceive any threat, but generally they respond to the fire alone. If law enforcement is called in or is requested by the fire responders, confiscations of hazardous materials may occur to prevent recurrence.

The Fire Department realizes that warmth is a seasonal prerequisite for coping in encampments. Firemen offer alternative sources for staying warm (blankets, clothing) and encourage inhabitants to take advantage of temporary warming shelters offered throughout the community.

Because encampment residents are more receptive to firefighters than police officers, the Behavioral Wellness Department has approached the County Fire Department about forming co-response teams in 2024. At the time of this report, it is not known if Behavioral Wellness will be ready to staff these new co-response teams. The Community Services Department will continue to partner with County Fire for encampment clearing.

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement plays a pivotal role in monitoring encampments. Santa Maria, Lompoc, and Santa Barbara have dedicated patrol divisions with assigned officers in charge of the nearby encampments. In Santa Maria, the Parks and Recreation Department City Rangers are also involved in monitoring encampments within city limits, and this now amounts to 70% of their workload. In South County, Santa Barbara has five police officers in a Community Action Team who regularly check on encampment areas.

The illegality of encampment locations can bring the presence of law enforcement officers due to encroachment on public lands, thoroughfares, private lands, and private corridors (railways). Complaints from residents and businesses affected by the unsheltered can also initiate visits and

corrective actions, if indicated, for violations of city codes or criminal acts such as theft, property damage, littering, aggressive panhandling, blocking entrances, cutting fences for access routes, excessive open alcohol and drug use and abuse, prostitution, and environmental damage. Even nearby public walking trails might be impacted. A local high school in Santa Maria has worked out a time schedule with the City Rangers to lessen concerns about the danger of students walking along the levees where encampments are located.

Drug dealers regularly visit encampments, the Jury was told, to sell illegal substances, sometimes resulting in arrests. Law enforcement can make arrests for drug paraphernalia and evidence of drug use inside the encampment, but these only result in misdemeanors. There can be felony arrests for drug sales.

One Police Chief told the Jury that you do not solve homelessness by sending the unhoused people to jail. In fact, homeless advocates say that those living in encampments are more often victims of crime, not the perpetrators.

The Jury learned of concerns by encampment residents over aggressive police patrols and a negative undertone, if not open disregard, for the plight of those without housing. When law enforcement is called to an encampment, they often are met with resistance due to fear of evictions, citations, and possible arrests. Social service personnel and non-profit volunteers often co-respond with law enforcement to provide non-threatening explanations, protections, and referrals to ensure the rights of unhoused persons are fully protected. However, when accompanied by law officers, distrust, even resentment, is often the reaction among the unsheltered.

Sweeps

Many consider the encampments visually displeasing with tarps, tents, shopping carts, bikes, pets, personal belongings, and pallets. There are many encampments sequestered underneath road overpasses and bridges, railway corridors, along riverbeds, creeks, and in the hills behind thick vegetation. When close to transportation corridors, those who pass by and those who occupy the encampment are at risk of injury. Caltrans has determined that encampments next to the highway are a danger to the public. This concern often leads to clearing encampments or “sweeps.” The

County, in conjunction with cities, Caltrans, and Union Pacific, has cleared 700 encampments since 2021.

Inhabitants from encampments can also negatively affect tourism and businesses if there is excessive loitering, use of private restrooms or trash bins, and aggressive panhandling. Farmers too have legitimate concerns about possible contamination due to human waste and unsanitary conditions near crops raised for human consumption. Farmers and business owners have been known to file complaints and initiate evictions.

Cities can enforce illegal camping rules, but currently they can only be applied if there is shelter for them, and the people in encampments refuse shelter. Then local jurisdictions can evict the residents and initiate a sweep. Jury members heard how some encampment residents will say they want shelter, knowing that none is available, so they cannot be cited for illegal camping or trespassing.

A number of people living in encampments have more than one place of settlement. If their current camp is swept, they transfer to their other location. Eventually, many return to the first site. Community frustrations rise when an encampment re-establishes at the same location. The large Santa Ynez River encampment near Lompoc is one key example. The City of Lompoc spent nearly a half million dollars cleaning up 472 tons of trash from 60-70 encampments with over 100 residents in 2019, only to do a similar clean up two years later.

When a sweep is performed and the proper notifications and requirements are met, a police presence can be assured at that time. Multiple agencies are also involved. These include Social Services, Behavioral Wellness, housing representatives such as Good Samaritan, Santa Barbara Alliance for Community Transformation (SB|ACT), City Net, and People Helping People, mental health practitioners, substance abuse disorder specialists, medical coordinators, and other community support program managers and volunteers. These participants focus on housing provisions and wraparound social services for those being displaced. No matter how much time a posted notification is given ahead of a sweep, the displaced occupants can still be upset and complain of inadequate notice. Anger can be directed at all parties, especially law enforcement. For this reason, when all participating agencies coordinate, they are prepared to present a balanced front and carry through with empathy and consideration.

For example, in January 2024 an encampment on private property had been notified of a sweep along a Santa Ynez River tributary. The owner had been cited by the Central Coast Water Authority to remove the encampment material. In spite of the one-week notification of the upcoming sweep, no one left the encampment. Good Samaritan had contacted the residents about housing alternatives, but there were no takers for housing. On the morning of the sweep, People Helping People appeared with trucks and convinced people to sign up for services, including food stamps, storage of belongings, and housing with Good Samaritan.

Flooding

A large concern along the riverbed corridors is the threat of seasonal flooding. The past two years have seen significant rainfall totals in the upper Santa Ynez and Santa Maria watersheds, causing both rivers to experience substantial flow. Small creeks can also be very dangerous, with sudden rises in water levels after heavy rainfall in the surrounding mountains. In the spring of 2024, a transient woman drowned in Santa Barbara's Mission Creek.

When large county reservoirs fill (Lake Cachuma and Twitchell Reservoir), either the gates are opened to release excess water or overflow spillage occurs, resulting in increased river volume. Inflow from multiple downstream tributaries coupled with dam overflow or release markedly escalates the risk for loss of personal property and endangers lives in the riverbed encampments.

Since 2019, riverbed encampments have been mapped by overhead drones equipped with GPS and cameras with the help of Heal the Ocean. However, drones cannot reach all sites because of their limited range. Warnings are then issued via foot patrols and loudspeaker announcements from the Sheriff's Office helicopters. After the heavy rains of 2023, the warning protocols were strengthened.

HOUSING

Point in Time Count

The Santa Barbara County Community Services Department and the CoC do a yearly Point in Time count in January. Volunteers visit shelters and also makeshift dwellings such as vehicles, abandoned buildings, bus or train stations, airports, parks, camping grounds, and known

encampments. Many encampments are too isolated for the volunteers to reach and thus are not included in the Point in Time Count. Although the Count did not reach all people without housing or all encampments, the Count for 2024 found 232 more people than the Count for 2023. In 2024, the Count for Santa Barbara County was 2,119 individuals, of which 1,332 (63%) were unsheltered and 787 (37%) were sheltered. Of the people without shelter, 46% were outside and 53% in vehicles.

Due to more housing available recently, there had been a 3.7 % decrease in the number of people experiencing homelessness countywide between the 2022 and 2023 Point in Time Counts. But there was a 12% increase from 2023 to 2024. Both the number of persons living in shelters or transitional housing and those living unsheltered increased, the greatest increase being in individuals sleeping in cars and families with children. The Community Services Department attributes the increase to the rise in rents, the cessation of COVID-related eviction moratoriums and emergency housing vouchers, and continuing inflation. There was no count of those specifically living in encampments, although the County Community Services Department estimated that 750 unhoused people were living in encampments at the beginning of 2024.

Housing Inventory

The biggest challenge to encampment resolution is the lack of affordable housing. Homelessness is a housing issue.

Santa Barbara County has the sixth highest rental housing costs in the U.S. These costs are contributing to the rise in homelessness. There is very limited affordable housing built in this area without large amounts of government funding or foundation grants. During the pandemic, the State provided billions of dollars to convert motels into permanent housing. One such project in Goleta will open mid-2024, and it will be the last to open with Homekey funding, a part of the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund.

Several permanent and interim housing projects have been added to the CoC inventory since 2020, resulting in an increase of 787 beds dedicated to persons who are or were experiencing homelessness. There are several established interim housing programs in the County: PATH Santa

Barbara, Willbridge of Santa Barbara, Bridge House of Lompoc, Good Samaritan Santa Maria, Partners in Housing, Transition House Santa Barbara, the Rescue Mission and the Salvation Army. Since the Strategy began, 143 people from encampments have moved into permanent housing and 146 into interim housing or shelters.

Dignity Moves, a non-profit, offers lockable and secure 8'x8' units. It first opened a tiny home center in Santa Barbara in August 2023 with 34 units. In March 2024, 94 similar units opened in Hope Village in Santa Maria. Ten of these homes were dedicated to those living in encampments in the Santa Maria area. In May 2024, Dignity Moves opened La Posada with 80 units located between Santa Barbara and Goleta, of which half are meant to house 40 individuals living in the established encampments nearby. Those in encampments have been more willing to move into these homes than to relocate to shelters because of the privacy and safety afforded by locked doors.

Housing Resistance

Many encampment residents would prefer housing where they can maintain their independence, such as in transitional housing. Over the past two years, the acceptance rate for moving into a congregate (shared space) shelter has been only 20%, and for those who do accept, approximately 35% elect to re-camp after they have been in a congregate shelter.

Many unhoused individuals, especially those in encampments, have difficulty transitioning to housing programs. Some choose not to accept shelter and prefer the freedom of encampments, along with the ability to make their own decisions. Reasons given by the encamped residents for declining housing and services include curfews, unwillingness to pare down belongings, wishing to remain with their pets, not wanting to sacrifice their independence, distance from work or medical services, and lack of privacy in some congregate shelter settings. In Santa Maria, for example, of the approximately 120 people in encampments near the strawberry fields, only two or three accepted housing. Encampment Strategy Plan staff acknowledge that without provisions for partners, property, and pets (“the three Ps”), inhabitants of encampments often return to the encampment from interim housing.

Housing Services

Dignity Moves has restrictions for entering and staying at their centers, differing from federal and state-funded projects where Housing First is practiced. This federal protocol places people in housing first, with wraparound services available, letting the formerly unhoused work out their issues at their own pace. Santa Barbara County has a good track record – 90% stay when treatment is coupled with housing. Other agencies also have positive results. At the Good Samaritan shelter, the unhoused receive services on many levels, resulting in a 96% retention rate. However, services come at a high cost to the County.

The recent increase in units for the residents in encampments has been assisted by utilizing County-owned property. The County has 18 County-owned sites with a potential for nearly 6,000 new housing units. For the newly opened Hope Village in Santa Maria, Santa Barbara County provided \$1 million toward the \$7.5 million in capital costs and pledged \$8.5 million more in services for five years. No further housing projects on County property are being discussed for the near future because of these high operational costs.

These low-cost move-in units helped house over 1,400 formerly unhoused people and resolved 700 encampments in the first two years of the Encampment Strategy. But more housing is needed. The County stated in its Year 1 Progress Report that “[t]he biggest challenge to encampment resolution has been the lack of shelter (congregate and non-congregate).” Some individuals have moved into transitional units, only to be asked to leave when there are no units available at the next level. This setback can lead to being homeless again. Moving the unhoused into affordable housing, a limited commodity in Santa Barbara County, depends on high turnover up the housing chain. When forced to move out of provisional housing, former encampment residents are at great risk of leaving one unsheltered location for another.

MENTAL HEALTH

Living on the streets or in encampments is a challenging experience for those who have lost the means to support themselves and cannot afford to live in a traditional residence. For people who suffer from mental illness and are forced by circumstances to live in encampments, it is devastating. Statistics show that a significant proportion of individuals experiencing homelessness

struggle with severe mental illness. The 2024 Point in Time Count estimated that 34% suffered from severe mental illness and 27% had a substance abuse disorder. The County Community Services Department estimates that drug addiction and mental health issues are even higher in encampments than in the general homeless population: 50-60% with mental health issues and 40-50% with addictions and/or substance abuse issues.

People in encampments are often victims of crime according to encampment residents and law enforcement. It is well-documented that trauma can be the result of repeated domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and other forms of violence. Compounding the problem is that unhoused individuals with mental illness may self-medicate just as other members of encampments do, and the illicit use of drugs can exacerbate their mental disorders. Individuals with mental illness may have difficulty performing regular daily tasks, caring for their hygiene, or making lasting relationships. Anti-social tendencies may cause dissension and misunderstandings, which may lead to more trauma.

Housing People with Mental Illness

There is considerable agreement in the professional community that one of the most important elements in assisting unhoused people with mental illness is to find stable housing. It must be subsidized and include wraparound services, as in Housing First. Arranging for housing involves incremental steps, beginning with a tiny home as a first haven and then segueing to more stable and permanent living arrangements. The ideal goal is to find long-term suitable housing whether it is the type of model such as Sanctuary Centers has developed where the goal is to house and attend to the needs of people with life-long mental illness, or other supportive housing solutions suitable to the nature of a person's mental illness. The bridge housing to be developed by Behavioral Wellness will also offer some units for those leaving homelessness.

Outreach is an integral step in ending homelessness. Mentally unstable individuals are less likely to contact agencies that will help them. A major roadblock occurs when assistance is offered to a mentally troubled person and the offer is refused. A nuanced introduction to the programs available is required.

Housing is a positive step because it ostensibly is meant to help stabilize individuals with mental illness feel safer, making it easier for them to receive medication and counseling. In this stable environment, symptoms could become less extreme, and they could begin to process traumatic experiences that they may have had prior to or when in encampments.

Educating the Public

Perception is everything. Residents of Santa Barbara County are impacted by the incursion of homeless encampments on or near their property. There are inherent difficulties in communicating with mentally ill members of the homeless settlements. While many residents of Santa Barbara County are empathetic and understand the circumstances that cause part of the population to be homeless, some citizens do not fully grasp the dire situations of people living apart from housed society.

Finding ways to create understanding in the public forum is necessary to decrease public misconceptions about the behaviors of people with mental illness. This becomes a critical step when county or community agencies are proposing housing for the people with mental illness in neighborhoods. In South County, public objections have stopped several supportive housing plans. However, an early meeting for the project at La Posada turned from negative to positive when one person stood up to tell her story of how supportive housing helped her find her way again. Citizens of North County, the Jury heard, are more willing to listen. Still, incidents such as those at Housing on Depot Street in Santa Maria, where too many complaints caused formerly homeless residents to lose housing, could damage a fragile acceptance.

Resources for Services

Behavioral Wellness extended its street outreach, which included:

Consistent outreach by trained personnel

- Easily accessible assistance for those seeking or in need of help
- Crisis intervention availability – crisis centers such as the Crisis
- Stabilization Unit and co-response teams
- Collaboration between or integration of the mental health agencies and outreach workers

- Intensive training for those giving direct services

One large stumbling block for building a mental health network is the lack of qualified workers. With few outreach workers and not enough clinicians for co-response teams, Behavioral Wellness cannot fully service unhoused people with mental illness in encampments.

Good Samaritan and Behavioral Wellness work side by side with a mental health contract. These shelters have their own clinicians who are trained by Behavioral Wellness. They are then able to provide services and drug and alcohol treatment at their sites.

California Advancing and Innovation Medi-Cal (CalAIM) has a five-year plan that includes a comprehensive approach addressing the needs of the unhoused and people with mental illness. The timeline for the first CalAIM reforms began in January 2022, and additional reforms will be phased in through 2027. The 2023 Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative from the University of California, San Francisco, found that *just* expanding health coverage and adding social services is not serving all those in need. The Initiative found that 83% of unhoused people surveyed said they had health insurance, mostly through Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program for low-income people. Yet more than half relied on the emergency room for care, and nearly a quarter said they couldn't access the care they needed. A majority who said they were experiencing mental health problems weren't being treated or did not receive care through emergency visits.

HEALTH

The Encampment Strategy prioritizes the health and safety of those living in encampments. In Santa Barbara County the unhoused population has faced various health challenges due to living in encampments, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated limitations within the healthcare system. Its impact on unhoused individuals in Santa Barbara County was particularly pronounced. During the pandemic, there was concern that breaking up homeless encampments would create unnecessary risks for both the displaced individuals and the broader community. In 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) advised cities and counties to leave encampments in place. CDC's directive took

effect, and people in encampments were removed only to safe bed situations, such as with Project Roomkey. Sweeps stopped. Ignoring the CDC's recommendation, a Pershing Park sweep in Santa Barbara in March 2021 forced campers back onto the streets, potentially exposing them and others to COVID-19.

Unhoused individuals in Santa Barbara County face continual significant healthcare challenges, especially within encampments. These include:

- **Lack of Access to Basic Amenities:** Many encampments lack running water and sanitary facilities like bathrooms/porta-potties.
- **Infectious Diseases:** Close living quarters, inadequate hygiene, and limited access to medical care increase the risk of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, and skin infections.
- **Substance Abuse:** Encampments often become hubs for drug use, which can lead to overdose, infections, and other health complications.

The Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative showed that involuntary displacement of people experiencing homelessness who inject drugs could lead to significant spikes in overdoses, hospitalizations, and mortality, possibly contributing to 15-25% of deaths among the unsheltered population over ten (10) years.

The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department last reported on deaths among the unsheltered in June 2023. During the period from 2019 to 2022, there were 143 deaths of people without housing in Santa Barbara County. According to the Public Health report to the Board of Supervisors, the leading causes of death were overdoses of drugs and alcohol, cardiovascular disease, and suicide. The underlying causes were predominantly substance abuse and mental health afflictions. The 2023 report from the County noted that the average age of death of those experiencing homelessness is 54, as opposed to 76 in the general population.

In health matters, the County has turned to its Multi-Disciplinary Team, which includes Behavioral Wellness, Public Health, and the Public Defender, counting on their field experience to reach those living in encampments. Outreach workers began by handing out hygiene kits and providing safe needle drops, COVID-19 testing, and vaccinations as “temporary health and safety measures.” The

protocol for Public Health was to identify communicable diseases and treat the affected person to prevent the spread of disease. Health measures now also include clean-up of trash, human waste, and vector hazards.

Partnerships with community service agencies have provided many health services at various sites where people living in encampments can access health care. In 2020, SB|ACT began organizing representatives and nurses from various organizations in Santa Barbara to address health and psychological needs. Doctors Without Walls is one such organization. Good Samaritan in Santa Maria has a Public Health office on its site, where medications can be obtained. Its shelter has recuperative beds after hospitalization. Both organizations offer meals and showers to help attract homeless individuals and then connect them with health services. There are two other Health Care Centers located in homeless shelters and about a dozen Health Care Nurses stationed in shelters or transitional living centers. At these sites, the unsheltered can be entered into the County's databases for further health assistance and follow-up.

The health field is changing. CenCal, Medi-Cal, and CalAIM will focus on services for unhoused residents. In the year leading up to spring of 2024, over 900 individuals in the county's Homeless Management Information System had fully enrolled in Medi-Cal and over 1000 had applied for this coverage.

FUNDING

Traditionally, organizations like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army solicited donations from individuals to fund their efforts in helping unhoused individuals. Local churches took similar donations to fund their food and shelter programs, but these were limited in scope and effectiveness. These efforts basically intended to ease hunger and provide shelter during severe weather conditions or individual economic decline and were not long-term solutions for the individual suffering from homelessness. Now, the involvement of many members from different organizations in the County has become an ever more important resource in the solution for encampments.

The Encampment Strategy began during the pandemic when rapid encampment proliferation occurred. In October 2021, the Community Services Department requested funding for the initial

Encampment Strategy and Response Protocol, a three-year project. At that time, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) offered federal stimulus funds to local communities, and applications for helping the unsheltered community were encouraged. ARPA funds allowed for hiring an Encampment Response Coordinator to direct the Multi-Disciplinary Team primarily made up of Behavioral Wellness, Public Health, the Public Defender, and Good Samaritan outreach workers. The County also allocated increased funding for shelter beds and housing from the general fund. Additional monies from ARPA funds went to software, debris removal, and some outreach.

In 2021, the State announced competitive grant funding to resolve encampments. Santa Barbara County's Encampment Strategy was successful in acquiring \$2,520,000 for encampment resolution along transit corridors (highways and railroad tracks). This resolved 95 encampments. In 2022, more state funding became available to assist with encampments along waterways, and the Encampment Strategy was awarded \$6,000,000. In 2024, the County won a third grant along with the City of Santa Barbara to clear 21 vehicle encampments, with the goal of housing 300 people. The award of three state grants is testimony to the efficiency of the Encampment Strategy programs and the dedication of those working tirelessly to resolve the encampments and house those living there.

The state grants are one-time allocations. The County is facing what they refer to as "funding cliffs" when the funds expire. New state funding for encampments cannot be assured. Response to reduced funding at the state level has encouraged the forging of new partnerships with other entities such as Community Correction Partnerships, Behavioral Wellness (Mental Health Services Act), CenCal Health, foundations, and non-profit organizations.

The California Encampment Resolution Fund Round 1 (CERF 1) was established in 2006 to increase collaboration between the California Interagency Council on Homelessness (Cal ICH), local jurisdictions, and the County's CoC. These funds address the safety and wellness of encamped individuals, transitioning them into interim and permanent housing. CERF 2 released funding in December 2022 and contributed to the three state grants awarded to the Encampment Strategy's staff. CERF 3 funds, available in 2023, will continue to focus on the resolution of encampments.

As the County's CoC is the designated receiver of various state and federal funds, it distributes most of its funding directly to non-profits that operate within the cities and the County. In the past, this has led to competition among the various agencies and has created a wedge in cohesive and collaborative relationships. Another drawback to funding being concentrated in the hands of the County's CoC is that cities do not usually receive similar grants. Thus, local cities do not have enough funding to be able to invest in housing.

Building teams outside the sphere of CoC has fostered coordination and cooperation among partners for specific projects. Such direct proactive cooperation among County agencies can greatly reduce redundancy for specific projects and produce tangible results. The first example of the team approach at the County level was Project Homekey in 2021. In just over five months an office building was converted into homeless housing. In 2024, the County collaborated with the City of Santa Barbara, and they were awarded a grant for the New Beginnings Safe Parking program which allows RV's and private vehicles to park overnight.

More robust state funding for health services began in 2022. Organizations will now be reimbursed for health and mental health expenditures for people experiencing homelessness. Medi-Cal, CalAIM, and CenCal will pay for wraparound services, which may free up more money for outreach and housing. Good Samaritan has been the first recipient of funding from CalAIM, which will help to provide intensive support services such as substance abuse prevention and case management.

Funding for unhoused people who have mental illness is available from California state-wide taxes, as well as Federal funds. State funding for mental illness amounts to \$10-13 billion per year. About a third of the money counties receive to provide mental health services comes from the Mental Health Services Act passed in 2004, known as the "Millionaire's Tax Law" because of the taxation of 1 percentage point tax on incomes above \$1 million per year. The recently passed California Proposition 1 will take 30% of this tax to help the chronically unsheltered and those living in encampments by creating housing. The implementation will begin in July 2024.

In April 2024, for the third-year review of the three-year Encampment Strategy program, the Community Services Department requested \$500,000 from the remaining ARPA funds for

sanitation services. These funds would pay for the removal of debris and biohazards from encampments for two years. The department had previously asked for a funding allocation to support the position of the Encampment Response Coordinator for an additional two years. The Board of Supervisors extended the life of the Homeless Encampment Resolution Strategy by allocating these funding requests. The County has approximately \$8 million left in ARPA funds for future homeless projects in the next two years.

ENVIRONMENT

The impacts of encampments on the environment are most noticeable in riverbeds and open spaces near transit corridors. Encampments next to freeways and railways endanger the landscape as well as the unsheltered themselves. Encampments in riverbeds can have further negative effects on the environment such as damage to vegetation and water pollution, whether to groundwater, local creeks, or the ocean.

The Encampment Resolution Strategy of 2021 had “impacting sensitive environment/water quality” as one of its five criteria for cleaning up encampments. The Response Protocol of the Strategy included \$375,000 per year for sanitation services and \$100,000 per year for storage of personal property during the three-year plan. Since state funding did not allow paying for clean-up, the County allocated ARPA funds for this, and the money is primarily dedicated to removing debris from abandoned encampments.

In 2019, the first year of the Strategy, no clean-up took place. In January 2022, the County hired a privately owned company for sanitation purposes, removing debris and human waste. During that second year, the County reported that the company removed 70 tons of trash, 145 pounds of bio-hazard waste, 4.75 pounds of needles, and 73 propane cylinders. Finding contractors for this purpose is problematic because of the biowaste left at the site. The City of Santa Maria hired a private contractor willing to do the job. Heal the Ocean also has hired a small company, composed of trained homeless volunteers, to clean up after an encampment is removed.

Pollution is a serious threat to the environment. Garbage, propane and oil, biowaste, toxic trash such as needles, and chemical spills – all find their way into the ground. If near a water source,

this contamination can enter the groundwater or be carried downstream. For those living near waterways and depending on groundwater for safe drinking water, encampments pose a threat to public health. Communities that rely on groundwater have no recourse from contaminating encampments at this time.

Complete resolution of an encampment would include restoration of the vegetation and the cleanliness of the water. Such work is long and costly. To date, only a few sites have been restored. The environment often remains endangered, as 35% of the cleared encampments reappear in the same location within a year's time according to the Community Services Department.

The first round of State funding granted \$150,000 for environmental rehabilitation, but there has been no additional public funding for restoring the original state of the environment. Non-profit agencies have partnered with local government agencies to help monitor and clean out encampments voluntarily. Heal the Ocean has created a task force in conjunction with the Fire Department and the Sheriff's Office to coordinate clean-ups. Volunteers with the Santa Barbara Urban Creeks Council and Channel Islands Restoration have worked to restore creek beds after an encampment removal.

CONCLUSION

Encampments are a barometer of our efforts to help our unhoused individuals. If we do nothing, the encampments only grow. Dangerous conditions such as fire, illnesses, and crime increase. If we work collaboratively, we can assist the citizens living in encampments to reintegrate back into the communities.

Solutions to homeless encampments are no longer a local issue with limited resources. There are a multitude of resources available. There can be a collective impact when there is a true team approach. The success of multi-disciplinary teams lies in coordination of all agencies, government and private, to work together to resolve the social and economic issues that encampments make visible.

The Homeless Encampment Resolution Strategy has demonstrated the clear vision of the Community Services Department. This Strategy evolved into a network committed to helping

individuals who live in encampments and keeping our public lands safe and protected. In so doing, our County departments and our cities have learned to support each other for the good of everyone in the County.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

Use of a team approach has made engagement with community services more acceptable to those who live in encampments.

Finding 2

The negative effects of encampment sweeps can be mitigated when a variety of community resources are present at the time of the clean-up.

Recommendation 2

The County and the cities shall ensure that all sweeps occur utilizing a multi-disciplinary approach.

Finding 3

Encampments lack basic sanitation services.

Recommendation 3

The County and the cities shall make trash cans, porta-potties, resources for handwashing, and sharps containers for safe disposal of needles and other hazardous waste available near encampment sites.

Finding 4

Encampment residents are reluctant to transition to housing with strict rules of conduct.

Recommendation 4

The County shall encourage the creation of more units that continue the Housing First model, providing a home first, and offering supportive services as the individual learns to cope in socially accepted ways.

Finding 5

State funding for helping people without housing is becoming less available.

Recommendation 5

The Board of Supervisors shall instruct the County Community Services Department to work with community partners in addition to Continuum of Care members to pursue funding opportunities beyond those coming from the State or the encampment resolution.

Finding 6

Most state encampment funding cannot be applied to environmental restoration.

Recommendation 6

The Board of Supervisors shall instruct the Community Services Department to invite environmental non-profits into its multi-disciplinary teams.

Finding 7

When heavy rain is forecast and materializes, the persons in encampments along creeks and riverbeds are at high risk for loss of life, personal property, and living quarters.

Recommendation 7a

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office and the Office of Emergency Management, using mapping technology, shall continue to refine and share comprehensive locations of encampment sites among all concerned agencies.

Recommendation 7b

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office and the Office of Emergency Management shall develop and formalize a multi-modal warning system to relocate persons when there are looming credible threats.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05, the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the enumerated findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit:

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree wholly
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with brief summary of implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with analysis completion date of no more than six months after the issuance of the report
- Will not be implemented, with an explanation of why

Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors - 90 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

Recommendations 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7a, 7b

City of Santa Barbara - 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 3

City of Goleta - 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 3

City of Carpinteria - 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 3

City of Solvang - 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 3

City of Buellton - 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 3

City of Lompoc - 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 3

City of Guadalupe - 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 3

City of Santa Maria - 90 days

Findings 2, 3

Recommendations 2, 3

Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office – 60 days

Finding 7

Recommendation 7a, 7b

APPENDIX

Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) partner agencies:

- 211
- Americorps Partnership United Way of Santa Barbara County
- CenCal Health
- Channel Islands YMCA
- City of Goleta
- City of Santa Barbara
- City Net
- CommUnify
- Community Action Commission
- Cottage Health
- Dignity Health
- Family Services Agency
- Fighting Back Santa Maria Valley
- Freedom Warming Centers- Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara
- Good Samaritan Shelter
- Housing Authority for the City of Santa Barbara
- Housing Authority for the County of Santa Barbara
- Independent Living Resource Center
- Jodi House Brain Injury Support Center
- LAGS Recovery Centers, Inc.
- Legal Aid Foundation of Santa Barbara County
- Outreach Grid • Mental Wellness Center
- New Beginnings Counseling Center

- Partners in Housing Solutions
- PATH Santa Barbara
- People's Self-Help Housing
- Sanctuary Psychiatric Centers of Santa Barbara
- Santa Barbara Alliance for Community Transformation (SB|ACT)
- Santa Barbara Community Housing Corporation
- Santa Barbara County Dept. of Behavioral Wellness
- Santa Barbara County Dept. of Community Services
- Santa Barbara County Office of Public Defender
- Santa Barbara County Dept. of Public Health
- Santa Barbara County Dept. of Social Services
- Santa Barbara Rescue Mission
- Santa Ynez Valley People Helping People
- Sarah House Santa Barbara
- Social Venture Partners
- St. Vincent's Santa Barbara State of California
- The Salvation Army
- United Way of Northern Santa Barbara County/Home for Good Santa Barbara County
- University of California at Santa Barbara Student Services
- Veteran's Administration
- WillBridge of Santa Barbara