

Proposal: Solving Chronic Homelessness with Small Dorm Rooms, Density, Community, and Services

Despite a strong economy and a substantial amount of interest, money, charity, and volunteer activity directed towards it, homelessness in San Diego and many other cities is at a record high. It is at crisis levels for many cities.

The county of San Diego has 3 million people, of which about 9,000 are homeless, including 5,000 who are unsheltered and living on the streets. These 5,000 are the hardest and most visible cases. They represent approximately 0.17% of the population, or 1.7 people per 1,000. In a region as affluent and large as San Diego, this is a very addressable number. Beyond the humanitarian crisis, there are substantial unintended economic costs that come from the unsheltered homeless, including neighborhood blight, disease, environmental hazards, policing costs, and emergency medical care. From a public policy perspective, this is highly inefficient. However, because living on the streets is the path of least resistance, it is what virtually every city in the world defaults to.

The answer is “housing first”—provide permanent housing for all chronically homeless, with no conditions. If requirements such as no drugs or alcohol are imposed, many will simply stay on or revert to the streets.

Small Dorm Rooms, Great Design, Clean Aesthetics

The type of housing that could potentially solve global homelessness is one of small, secure single rooms in large apartment complexes combined with robust social services on the ground floor. The size of the rooms would be approximately 10 feet long by 7 feet wide (70 square feet), large enough to hold a bed, small desk, chair, and mini-fridge. The image is one of great design and aesthetics, but compact in size, akin to a college dorm room. If a quarter of a city block (25,000 square feet) is used to create a building of these small 70 square feet rooms, it is estimated that 125+ of these rooms could be built on each floor (9,000 feet of rooms, 4,000 feet of hallways, 2,000 feet of bathrooms and communal space, 2,000 feet of elevators/stairs, 8,000 of airspace (as every room will require a window). A 20-story building could house 2,500 people. Two such buildings could solve San Diego’s unsheltered homeless problem.

The rooms have to be simple, sturdy, easy to clean, and consistent with the philosophy of minimalism, which is ascendant in today’s tech and design culture. Why? First, this will keep the per unit construction costs low. Second, if the rooms are made larger, the demand for such housing would likely expand well beyond the 5,000 unsheltered homeless individuals. It could expand to 100,000 people which creates an unsolvable problem. The rooms must be kept simple, but endowed with great design and an ethos that promotes human dignity and hope.

Resident Engagement, Community, and Cleanliness – Preventing Slums and Slum Mentality

While many of the residents will be unable to care for themselves or ever get a job due to psychological and addiction issues (estimated 50% of residents), many of the residents will be motivated and thankful to have a clean and safe place to stay and call home. These residents that are capable (25-50%) will be asked to support in the maintenance and cleanliness of their floors. Communal bathrooms, hallways, public spaces, and surrounding streets will have to be cleaned multiple times per day. This neighborhood will become the cleanest in all of San Diego. Each resident will also be asked to provide “good neighbor checks” and knock on the doors of at least 10 neighbors once per day. All residents will be asked/required to clean their rooms and make their beds every single day. Daily meal packets will also be provided. Cleanliness and resident engagement are of absolute importance. The project will fail otherwise.

To prevent entrenchment and the creation of ghettos/slums, residents will also be required to move approximately every month, to a different floor (but there should be experimentation with this). Some floors should be dedicated to specific populations such as women, families, and residents with pets (although pets should be generally discouraged).

An intensive amount of social services and volunteers will be provided on the ground floor. A medical clinic, dental clinic, addiction counseling, psychological treatment, spiritual services, job placement services, legal services, job training, and skills development will be provided. Because of the concentration of social services at a single location, there will be substantial economies of scale and dynamic benefits that occur with the social services and volunteer efforts. This building will be one that fosters community and promotes the dignity and hope of every single resident.

Cost to build: \$100 million (\$40,000 per unit), with annual servicing operating costs of \$10 million (\$4,000/resident). The savings in reduced blight, policing costs, and emergency medical care will be many multiples of this amount. An experimental mindset should be embraced, and successful results should be shared and copied across the world.