

Community Voice Column  
September 16, 2022  
Assistant City Manager Don Schwartz

Homelessness continues to be one of the most challenging issues facing cities and counties in California, including Rohnert Park. Many factors contribute to the challenges including the high cost of housing, insufficient affordable housing and shelter, mental health needs, drug addiction, and state laws which tolerate low-level crimes, including theft and drug use. We understand that our unsheltered individuals are experiencing hardships in their lives. We also recognize the challenging impacts of the encampments on our residents and businesses.

Rohnert Park is aggressively addressing homeless. We've provided permanent housing for 75 people and shelter for 62 people since January of 2021 (some of these are the same people). Those placed in permanent housing must pay a portion of their income for rent. We're building Labath Landing, which will provide temporary housing for 60 people at a time while we work with them to obtain permanent housing. We've substantially increased police presence and enforcement. We've cleaned up over 80 encampments in the last few years and are modifying the City's camping ordinance to allow for some enforcement consistent with court-imposed rulings.

There are no simple solutions to homelessness. Some advocate for forcing those experiencing homelessness to simply "go away" or require them to move somewhere else. However, the courts have ruled that cities cannot force people to stop camping on public property unless we provide shelter or housing. And even if we could require people to move elsewhere, other jurisdictions could push people into Rohnert Park. The best information we have suggests that 90% of those experiencing homelessness in Sonoma County lived here before becoming homeless. Although homeless individuals move around within the County, there is no evidence that people who were already experiencing homelessness are moving to Sonoma County in droves.

While Rohnert Park is doing much to address homelessness, the challenge goes well beyond the City limits. As noted above, people experiencing homelessness move throughout the County, including the corridor linking Santa Rosa, Rohnert Park, Cotati, and Petaluma. The challenge is regional and the solutions must be as well.

There is an organization responsible for addressing homelessness at the county-wide level, known as the Sonoma County Continuum of Care (or CoC). It is responsible for creating an integrated system that makes the most of services such as outreach, shelters, and permanent housing. It allocates millions of dollars to address homelessness, including funding services such as homeless encampment outreach and the operations at Labath Landing when it opens.

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Rohnert Park is very active in the CoC. We have been forceful in making improvements. Rohnert Park has pushed for improved integration of funding and services. We have supported better use of data to drive decisions. We support funding programs and organizations with a record of success, instead of simply funding what's always been done before. We support the use of proven practices – approaches which have worked elsewhere – that can be adopted here.

Other communities have made considerably more progress than Sonoma County by creating integrated systems, using data to make decisions, and holding those who offer services accountable for results. We need to do the same here. And you can help.

We encourage our residents to contact the CoC to share your concerns and suggestions. We particularly suggest asking for an integrated system that coordinates funding and services, uses data, and promotes accountability.

To contact the Sonoma County Continuum of Care, send an e-mail to Araceli Rivera and ask her to share it with the Board of Directors and staff. Her e-mail is [Araceli.Rivera@sonoma-county.org](mailto:Araceli.Rivera@sonoma-county.org).