



Project Dignity to Change Stigmatic Perceptions

Band-aids into Developed Solutions

PRESS RELEASE - Sept. 7th 2022

Long Beach, CA - Project Dignity is a collaboration between AOC7, Peer Education Community Center, Beacon for Him, Care Closet, and Eaststake LDS to bring dignity to neighbors who are experiencing homelessness and meet them where they are. Plus, community partners, Councilwoman Suely Saro, LB Green Room and Hot Java and various community groups including TCC Family Health and Long Beach Rescue Mission bring support, donations, and supplies. Project Dignity began Monday, February 14, 2022 as a way to build a sense of community between the neighborhood's housed and unhoused community members in MacArthur Park in central Long Beach by sharing food, resources, and conversations.

Over the past 7 months, Project Dignity's weekly efforts have become a reliant source of mutual aid, connections to city-led resources, system navigation, and neighbor-to-neighbor connections with community volunteers who also simply listen. The common thread of stories is unhealed trauma without resources or navigation of a broken system that cycles people through without any real outcomes or choice in treatments that may or may not work. Homelessness is traumatic within itself without the trauma of navigating a broken system without resources.

Since the first "Mondays Matter," where cookies and hot chocolate were served to a small handful of about 30 neighbors, the event has grown: serving an average of 100+ unhoused community members at the supplies and resource table. The added WeHOPE truck in mid-June provides free showers and laundry assisting an average of 20 people per week.

Project Dignity partners funded the WeHOPE Shower and Laundry program for the first two weeks; then County Supervisor Hahn funded the WeHOPE Shower and Laundry program for 10 weeks which finishes on Monday, September 19th. County Supervisor Hahn has agreed to fund another 14 weeks, which will be spread out to two Mondays per month from October to April. (find schedule at lbpecc.org/projectdignity)

Each week, more needs are uncovered. One particular Monday, the Healthcare in Action street team was called about a community member who was very ill. While the team was there, multiple other medical issues emerged that required their attention. The medical issues these

individuals face are chronic and are exacerbated by their lives on the streets. While we are grateful for resources like Healthcare in Action, groups like theirs and Project Dignity are mere band-aids for issues that require more comprehensive solutions. Most shelters and recovery options require no underlying medical issues, which is rare for people living unsheltered, or require detox before admittance, which could be fatal.

Staff and social workers from the Multi-Service Center, Medical Outreach, and similar organizations have joined Project Dignity on varying Mondays. Although resources are limited and inconsistent, meeting people where they are has had better outcomes than telling people to go to a specific location.

While the city's Multi-Service Center on the Westside offers a path to navigate resources, the barriers to entry are many and many times the outcome is not what appears with transition locations overrun with issues that make unsheltered life on the streets the better choice. Many times, people are given housing vouchers only to be on waitlists for years. Often, transportation to services is not an option. When services are accessible to people in their neighborhoods, there are better outcomes. This is evident by the city's new program of placing city staff to navigate resources at public libraries.

WeHope's Executive Director Paul Asplund adds, "Activating communities to see themselves as a critical piece of the solution to the double-crisis of mental health and houselessness by creating mobile "incursion points" where we can deliver services and engage local residents, business people, law enforcement and government officials."

While these band-aid efforts look effective on a small scale, larger, more sustainable solutions are needed to break this cycle. Without bigger, long term solutions focused on trauma support and recovery, the need for these kinds of efforts will only continue to grow, and energy and funds are wasted. In some instances, there is a need for permanent, assisted board and care infrastructure for people who do not have the capacity for basic self care.

Consider author and educator Mariame Kaba's quote:

"We have built up the skills of being able to ask questions like: What does it mean to actually center a survivor who is harmed? What does it actually mean to support people who have caused harm? What does it mean to take responsibility for saying, "We refuse in our community to condone when this happens?" One of the things that is so important is that harm causes wounds that necessitate healing. That is what so many people are looking for---a way to begin to heal. How are we going to create, in our communities, spaces that allow people real opportunity to heal?"

While complaints have risen around the downtown resources provided on 3rd and Linden do not perceive the root of the issue nor a real solution, segregation cannot be repeated in history. The “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” and “tough love” philosophies of decades past are not working and have never worked. At the same time, providing supplies without a solution for decades does not work either.

From Stanford's Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR) May 2022 Publication
Homelessness in California: Causes and Policy Considerations

California's homeless crisis is associated with high housing costs, inadequate shelter spaces, deinstitutionalization, and changes in the criminal justice system.

- To improve housing affordability, California needs to streamline and accelerate housing production and reexamine the regulations that have hindered new housing development.
- To reduce the unsheltered homeless population, more shelter capacity and increased investment in cost-effective housing are needed.
- A large share of the chronically homeless suffers from drug addiction and mental health problems. More treatment facilities and lower barriers for treatment are needed.

It is a new era, new systems and perceptions must be examined to move forward as a society. Let Long Beach be the leader of change. It is time that we take care of our own instead of sustaining an “us versus them” mentality. The stigmatic perceptions of drug use and mental illness is archaic. An infrastructure of harm reduction-led trauma-healing centers and assisted living facilities needs to be developed. Not segregation, not unaffordable housing, and not old systems that do not work. Project Dignity is a bandaid where surgery and long-term treatment is needed.

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