

Sparky Harlan and Christine Burroughs: The forgotten homeless: youth and families

By Sparky Harlan and Christine Burroughs Special to the Mercury News San Jose Mercury News

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Much has been done in the past few years to develop a plan to end chronic homelessness in Santa Clara County. Even during a time of scarce resources, Santa Clara County has found money and created housing vouchers to serve this high-need population. San Jose has also allocated new funds for housing the chronically homeless.

The Housing 1000 Campaign is a communitywide plan that aligns with the Opening Doors Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness, which aims to end chronic homelessness by 2015. The plan is straightforward: Place the top 1,000 chronically homeless individuals in housing, and the health care costs the county spends on them will go down.

We fully support this. However, there is another part of the federal plan: to end youth and family homelessness by 2020 by focusing on access to affordable housing, jobs, mainstream services and collaboration between agencies and the community. It is time to broaden the scope of ending homelessness to include youth and families.

Between 2007 and 2010, there was a 20 percent increase in family homelessness, thought to be largely the result of job loss and home foreclosures. The homeless families identified in this count do not include families living doubled or tripled up in households. Many have been forced to move in with relatives, sleep in cars or resort to overflowing shelters. Many older youth left home in hopes of supporting themselves, but instead ended up on the streets with little hope. Youth are among the most undercounted of the homeless population because they are difficult to find and often "couch surf," moving from place to place. Many homeless youth steal, sell drugs or trade sex for a place to stay.

In the past three years, the number of youth coming from homeless families to Bill Wilson Center's shelter has doubled. Helping families connect to resources before they slip into homelessness is the first step toward ending the cycle. This is why Bill Wilson Center is teaming up with InnVision to develop a plan to end family and youth homelessness. Both agencies are leaders in this field with experience and capacity to address this critical issue.

We can prevent chronic homelessness by looking at the root causes of youth and family homelessness such as poverty, substance abuse by parents and parental incarceration. Domestic violence is also a factor, as it is among the leading causes of family homelessness. Helping youth and families stabilize their lives prevents family homelessness and lessens the probability that the children will be homeless as adults. Homeless children have higher incidences of physical and mental health issues and poor educational outcomes. Family stability enables youth to stay in school.

Bill Wilson Center and InnVision are leading an effort to bring Silicon Valley's best and brightest thought leaders together to develop solutions. Let's add youth and families to our efforts to end chronic and veteran homelessness. We need a comprehensive plan. We are also reaching out to Step Up Silicon Valley, which is focused on reducing poverty through creating awareness and advocating policy changes.

We are casting a wide net, hoping to attract community, corporate, academic and public leaders to join us in this quest.

Sparky Harlan is CEO of Bill Wilson Center in Santa Clara, and Christine Burroughs is CEO of InnVision in San Jose. They wrote this for this newspaper.