

Orange County is making the same hapless mistakes on homelessness that L.A. did a decade ago

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Watching Orange County officials haplessly scramble to house hundreds of homeless people is like watching a rerun of everything the city and county of Los Angeles have gone through with homelessness in the last 10 years.

As in L.A. a decade ago, Orange County authorities roused homeless people from their encampments (on the Santa Ana River trail) without arranging a place for them to go — until a federal judge ordered them to stop. And as in L.A., elected officials threw together plans for housing — in this case, shelters — but then scotched them when faced with unstinting NIMBYism. Now, U.S. District Judge David O. Carter is threatening to bar Orange County cities from enforcing their anti-camping ordinances if they don't come up with shelters or other temporary housing.

If that happens, Orange County officials will find themselves where Los Angeles' leaders were in 2007: agreeing to a legal settlement that allows homeless people to camp overnight on the sidewalks until sufficient shelter beds are provided. The Jones settlement, as it is known, is still in effect in Los Angeles, and homeless encampments dot sidewalks all across the city every night.

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Orange County officials and residents should learn from L.A.'s mistakes and come to grips with the fact that their homelessness problem can no longer be ignored or disowned or shunted aside. Nor is it amenable to quick fixes.

When county supervisors proposed erecting massive shelters on county-owned land in Irvine, Huntington Beach and Laguna Niguel and state-owned land in Costa Mesa, residents arrived by the busload to protest the plans and denounce homeless people as "strangers." Said one Irvine man, "They know we are an affluent city with lots of immigrants, so they think we will automatically welcome other people." (Clearly, you won't.)

In fact, homeless people in Orange County, for the most part, are not "strangers" who migrated there from another part of the world. A 2017 UC Irvine study, commissioned by Orange County United Way, found that 68% of homeless people had lived in the county for 10 years or longer. And 90% are U.S. born. That same study concluded that Orange County could save \$42 million a year on healthcare and law enforcement, among other expenses, by moving chronically homeless people from the streets into housing.

Orange County officials need to disabuse their constituents of the myth that homeless people are intruders who can simply be ordered away. The hard reality is that homelessness is a homegrown problem, and putting a dent in it is a long, slow, expensive process — and everyone in Orange County needs to realize that.

It's not an insurmountable challenge. The homeless population of Orange County, according to the 2017 homeless count, is just under 4,800. That pales in comparison with the Los Angeles County homeless population of nearly 58,000.

Ultimately, Orange County will need more permanent housing units for its homeless people, but in the meantime it desperately needs more temporary housing. And tented mega-

shelters are hardly the best option. As advocates for homeless people point out, massive emergency shelters that severely limit what people can bring in (barring pets and excluding some possessions), then often turn them out first thing in the morning, don't offer the most stable or therapeutic environment for people with mental illness or physical disabilities.

Besides, the county already has one overcrowded shelter in a converted bus terminal that has become more of a refugee camp than housing. It doesn't need to replicate that. Officials should think instead about leasing motels to house homeless people or creating shelters where people can stay all day and store some of their belongings. Or they could set up trailers for short-term housing, as Los Angeles city officials are planning to do downtown.

Meanwhile, Orange County United Way has enlisted private and philanthropic partners as well as officials of various Orange County cities in a campaign to educate people about homelessness and build more housing. The campaign's leaders have joined a countywide effort to build 2,700 units of permanent supportive housing, with a goal of raising \$100 million from wealthy individuals to help finance the projects. That's a good start. The sooner everyone in Orange County stops treating homeless people as someone else's problem, the better off everyone will be.