

‘You can’t arrest your way out of homelessness.’ County cites less than 5 panhandlers a month

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On the politically sensitive issue of panhandling, the Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department has taken the middle ground, citing offenders only “when outreach and education fails.”

The Board of Supervisors, responding to complaints from business leaders, approved restrictions on aggressive panhandling in April 2014. A legal challenge in U.S. District Court by a homeless advocate held up enforcement of the law until the following year.

During an 18-month period ending June 30 this year, the Sheriff’s Department issued 86 citations for the offense, an average of less than five violations a month, according to data provided by the department through a California Public Records Act request.

Among other things, the county ordinance prohibits asking motorists for money from medians or within 200 feet of an intersection or panhandling near banks and ATMs.

Sgt. Thomas Bland, supervisor of the north division problem-oriented policing team, said a unit dedicated to addressing problems with the homeless seeks to help panhandlers before issuing a citation. The unit works with county social workers and a nonprofit homeless services agency to direct the homeless to needed resources, such as drug and alcohol treatment.

“You can’t arrest yourself out of homelessness,” he said. “Law enforcement is often the last answer to the problem.”

Bland’s remarks echo those of Sacramento County Chief Ranger Michael Doane, who last year explained a decline in citations for illegal camping on the American River Parkway by saying that enforcement doesn’t address the underlying problem of homelessness. Sacramento city officials, who are seeking to update their panhandling ordinance, have made similar remarks.

Like in Sacramento County, the city has faced widespread support for increased enforcement from business leaders, who say panhandling is hurting commerce downtown and elsewhere. Officials have also heard opposition from homeless advocates, who say the proposal would criminalize homelessness.

Nearly all of the aggressive panhandling citations in the data provided by the Sheriff’s Department were made in the north division, which covers the suburbs north of the American River. Now-retired Capt. Matt Morgan asked supervisors to approve the ordinance when he was in charge of the division, responding to what he said was a top concern of residents.

The most common locations for the citations have been Interstate 80 offramps, including at Greenback Lane and Elkhorn Boulevard. Most of the other citations have been on sections of Watt and Howe avenues in Arden Arcade.

Grace, who didn’t want to give her last name, was recently holding a cardboard sign saying “Just need a little help” at the Watt Avenue exit off Interstate 80. She said the location is good for donations “unless the cops are out.”

“What am I supposed to do? I’m helpless and hungry,” she said.

Greg Logoteta, executive director of the Watt Avenue Partnership, said he understands the difficulties the department faces in stopping panhandling, but it remains a persistent problem.

“When you come onto Watt Avenue, you see panhandlers – it’s the norm,” he said. “It doesn’t make for an inviting area.”

The partnership was one of three business associations that asked supervisors to approve the ordinance. Another was the Florin Road Partnership, whose then-executive director, current Sacramento City Councilman Larry Carr, said the south Sacramento thoroughfare had a major problem with panhandling.

In the 18 months covered by the sheriff's data, three people were cited for aggressive panhandling on Florin Avenue. Those were the only citations not issued by the department's north division. The partnership's current executive director was out of the office last week and unavailable for comment.

Melinda Eppler, executive director of the Fulton Avenue Association, said some aspects of the panhandling problem have improved in Arden Arcade in the last two years, such as fewer regular offenders and less activity in street medians. However, the area still has a large number of panhandlers working the street corners, she said.

"Because deputies most often need to prioritize calls for service, or their activities while on regular patrol, panhandling is often logically found further down the list of priorities, which does not help to solve the problem," she said.

Sgt. Bland said the department is structured to allow problem-oriented policing teams to handle nuisance crimes because patrol units are typically responding to more serious crimes.

Last Wednesday, when many in the department were responding to a shooting at an Arden Arcade hotel that killed Deputy Robert French, Shad Morton stood at the corner of Watt Avenue and Fair Oaks Boulevard, holding a cardboard sign saying, "Need \$1. God Bless."

He said he had been cited once before for aggressive panhandling and warned other times. "I have no excuse," he said.