

# Mercury News editorial: Housing California's homeless

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The California Legislature is about to make a serious run at one of the state's most difficult challenges: Creating housing for homeless people with mental health problems.

Legislators should join Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de Leon's "No Place Like Home" initiative, which without raising taxes will provide \$2 billion for housing for the mentally ill.

Despite the best efforts of some lawmakers, including San Jose Sen. Jim Beall, the state has done next to nothing about the housing crisis and the spread of homelessness. Gov. Jerry Brown has been the main impediment, even vetoing legislation that would cost the state nothing.

But Brown is publicly backing de Leon's plan. Calling it "thoughtful," he included it in his May 13 revised budget. With his signature assured, it should sail through the Legislature.

The idea is to finance the \$2 billion in bonds for housing with revenue from Proposition 63, a tax on wealthy Californians passed in 2004 to finance better mental health care. The Affordable Care Act now covers much of the treatment that Proposition 63 was meant to provide, but homelessness is one of the greatest barriers to getting people regular treatment.

De Leon also proposes that the state take \$200 million from its general fund for the next four years to provide housing subsidies for the homeless until new housing is built. But construction is critical because today even homeless individuals with vouchers can't find a place that will accept them.

The plan has the blessing of former Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, who was the driving force behind Proposition 63, and Beall, who was fighting for mental health treatment long before the housing shortage reached crisis proportions.

California's homeless population has grown by more than 10 percent in just the past three years. In Santa Clara County more than 6,500 people are homeless, most of them living on the streets, in cars or abandoned buildings or in makeshift shelters in encampments.

It's generally acknowledged that the majority of the chronically homeless have some form of mental illness. Studies have shown that when the mentally ill have stable homes and proper treatment, they not only stay in the housing but also cost taxpayers far less -- no longer ending up in emergency rooms or in jail.

California can save hundreds of millions annually by housing the homeless; recent experience in Utah has shown this.

It's also the humane and right thing to do.

We opposed Proposition 63 in 2004.

The 1 percent tax hike on households with incomes over \$1 million for mental illness has no linkage between the source and the purpose of the money, the way tobacco taxes relate directly to medical issues. But it's on the books, so shifting the money to the current needs of the mentally ill makes sense.

Treatment can't be effective unless people have a stable place to live.