

# HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

A Report for the Contra Costa County Flood  
Control and Water Conservation District

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	3
BACKGROUND	4
HISTORY	4
DEMOGRAPHICS	5
ENCAMPMENTS	5
CONTRA COSTA	6
RESEARCH METHODS	8
FINDINGS	9
IMPEDIMENTS TO HOUSING	9
TYPES	11
OLD-TIMERS	11
NEWCOMERS	12
VETERANS	12
GARBAGE AND TYPES	13
LANDSCAPE OF ENCAMPMENTS	14
RECOMMENDATIONS	17
COLLABORATION	17
DATA COLLECTION	20
TACTICS	21
ABATEMENTS	21
PLANTING AND WEED CONTROL	23
GARBAGE COLLECTION	22
SHELTER REFORMS	23
SANCTIONED CAMPS AND HOUSING	24
CONCLUSION	25
ENDNOTES	26
APPENDIX A: POLICY RECOMMENDATION ANALYSIS	28
APPENDIX B: MAPS OF CAMPS AND SERVICES	30
APPENDIX C: SURVEY	31

## RECENT CONCERN ABOUT THE QUALITY OF RIVERS AND CREEKS HAS FUELED AN INCREASED INTEREST IN PRESERVING WATER QUALITY.

At the same time, rising housing costs, decreased funding for social services and the economic recession have led to a growing number of homeless. Many of the homeless in rural suburban and peri-urban areas end up living by creeks and rivers and contributing to water pollution.

Like many counties in the Bay Area and throughout the nation, Contra Costa County is grappling with how to deal with these homeless encampments. These encampments are often in areas that are obscured from public view, at the periphery of cities and towns, and near waterways. These camps are increasingly drawing flood control districts into the social services realm as they contend with water pollution caused by these camps.

Under the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES), Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (CCCFCD) is compelled to reduce water pollution in its creeks. New requirements for NPDES permits set higher water quality standards at the same time that the incidence of homelessness encampments has increased, along with the concomitant pollution caused by these encampments. CCCFCD sees the existence of homeless encampments as both the source of trash and pollutants in county waterways and an impediment to reaching its goals of reducing pollution.

The research that this report is based on focuses on the populations living in the camps because addressing the pollution caused by homeless encampments requires understanding how and why an increasing number of people are living informal shelters or homeless encampments. This report summarizes findings based on ten months of research into the camps and their residents and offers recommendations that can be adopted by the Contra Costa County Flood Control District to reduce pollution caused by encampments in and near creeks that are simultaneously humane, effective and practical in the long term.

## HISTORY

### Reduced to its essentials, homelessness is an expression and extension of poverty in the United States

—Wolch, Dear 1993.

Homelessness has existed in a variety of landscapes throughout the history of the United States.

Prior to the recent rise in homeless populations living in camps, there were two periods in the past century where the numbers of homeless grew large enough to elicit national concern. The first period, which included the Great Depression, was in the early part of the twentieth century where many of the homeless lived outdoors, often on the outskirts of major cities. The second period began in the 1970s and was largely characterized as an urban, inner city phenomenon that coincided with a rise in urban poverty concentration. This second period has been linked to federal failures to address poverty and the inability or incapacity of state and city governments to supply affordable housing or address increased costs of living. Although the literature on homelessness in this period may emphasize different causes, the primary policies attributed to the rise in homelessness are: reduced federal anti-poverty programs, destruction of low-income housing and SROs (single residency occupancy hotels), deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, and a decline in the provision of low-income housing. During the 1970s and 1980s for “every three units lost through demolition, conversion or rental increases” only one affordable housing unit was produced.<sup>1</sup> The national loss of affordable housing coincided with changing demographics and policies aimed at redeveloping urban centers, all of which led to increased housing costs for a population increasingly less capable of paying these costs. The federal disinvestment in affordable housing, mental health services, social welfare or poverty alleviation programs has, for the most part, continued to this day.<sup>2</sup>

These historical events converged to develop a wholly new social structure for dealing with

the impoverished and mentally ill. By the end of the twentieth century, responsibility for dealing with the homeless was largely in the hands of local government and private or charitable organizations that expanded their role in the provision of homeless shelters and services in the wake of federal cutbacks. Despite the recent move toward ‘continuum of care’ programs, (which focus on service provisions) the issue of long-term affordable housing was ignored. Today, short-term shelter provision, which had initially been advocated as one element of a three-part strategy for reducing homelessness, remains the primary policy of local government and non-profits.<sup>3</sup> The federal retreat from social investments has led to the proliferation of “private, quasi-public voluntary and commercial agencies providing services hitherto supplied by government.”<sup>4</sup> This trend is not unique to the provision of homeless services, as many social services from education, health and food supply have moved in this direction. The current homeless crisis can therefore be understood through an analysis of federal poverty programs where “small scale interventions are intended to revive depressed communities while large scale public policies undermine their very ability to survive.”<sup>5</sup> The result is a complicated and “uncoordinated system of public, private, local, state and federal funding arrangements for communities in need.”<sup>6</sup>

The most recent period of an increase in homeless populations began in the early part of this century and was notable for including large numbers of families with children as well as veterans. The growth in the homeless population has been exacerbated by the housing crisis and economic downturn and has been accompanied by a national proliferation of laws and regulations that make homelessness a de facto status offence, through criminalization of the necessary acts associated with living in public.<sup>7</sup> In part because of these new laws and the concurrent ‘urban renewal’ in major city centers, today’s homeless are less visible in both the urban landscape and the national imagination than they were 30 years ago, even though, in absolute terms, the number of homeless today is greater than the 1980s.

*By the end of the twentieth century, responsibility for dealing with the homeless was largely in the hands of local government and private or charitable organizations*

## DEMOGRAPHICS

According to estimates from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in the 1980s there were 200,000 to 500,000 homeless individuals (although this obviously broad range was, and continues to be, contested as an undercount). In 2012 the national estimate provided by HUD was 633,782.<sup>8</sup> Almost 20% of homeless adults are veterans.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that although federal and state policies and the economy itself may have made housing more difficult to sustain for many segments of the population, not all of those who cannot afford housing end up on the streets. Among the homeless today, there are a disproportionate number of people with a history of mental illness as well as histories of institutionalization in some capacity, be it foster care, group homes, or incarceration.<sup>10</sup> About one-third of homeless single adults are suffering from severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or manic-depressive disorder.<sup>11</sup>

## ENCAMPMENTS

Populations living in encampments are not a recent phenomenon in the United States and were well documented during the Great Depression. However, until recently, they were not seen as a significant part of the modern homeless problem. Part of this is the result of laws, ordinances and public attention displacing homeless people from urban centers to the periphery. At the same time increased concern about the environmental conditions of urban and peri-urban waterways and greenbelts have made landscapes that were previously ignored or overlooked more visible.<sup>12</sup> To date, the academic literature on encampments is slim, but there are mass media reports on encampments, many of which focus on camps located on waterways. A 2009 *New York Times* article noted that although encampments have long existed in big cities, new tent cities or “modern day Hoovervilles” are springing up in smaller cities and towns throughout the US.<sup>13</sup> An article in *The Nation* the same year states that tent cities are becoming an increasing part of American urban life, noting that while Seattle’s first tent city sprang up in 1990, it

now hosts three. The author writes that these “reborn Hoovervilles ... are what connects us to São Paulo, Lagos and Mumbai, physical manifestations of our growing inequality and societal neglect.”<sup>14</sup> In 2012 the Oprah Winfrey Network premiered a documentary entitled *Tent City, USA* that followed the lives of homeless residents in Nashville, Tennessee whose encampment was destroyed by a flood. In 2010 the Department of Justice published a report on homeless encampments, noting that approximately 44% of the homeless are unsheltered and that 12% are unsheltered and chronically homeless. The report does not offer any estimates of the encampment population except to say that some of the chronically homeless live in encampments.<sup>15</sup>

California is at the forefront of the recent encampment development, with encampments in Fresno, Sacramento and San Jose garnering a lot of media and legal attention.<sup>16</sup> Much of what has been written about encampments focuses on “tent cities.” Although tent cities tend to be larger in scale and more entrenched than many of the encampments in Contra Costa, many of these tent cities started as encampments. Tent cities have gained national attention because they are large enough to be noticeable to the public. A 2010 report from the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) defines a tent city as a “variety of temporary housing facilities that often use tents” noting that “authorized and unauthorized tent cities, created by and for homeless individuals and families, are now found across the country.”<sup>17</sup> Of the nine sites they survey, five are in California (camps include two sites in Fresno and others in Ventura, Sacramento and Ontario). Five of the six non-mobile sites are on public lands and two are along the water.<sup>18</sup>

Nationally, the most pressing environmental issues associated with these modern Hoovervilles are inadequate waste disposal in waterways and outbreaks of fires. For jurisdictions in the Western United States, waterway pollution has become the most cited problem associated with encampments.<sup>19</sup> According to the 2012 NCH and the Department of Justice reports, the residents of tent cities tend to be older and whiter

*Given recent economic trends and the shrinking role of federal government it is likely that the need for local agencies to address complex issues that involve working with landscapes and populations who reside within and outside of local political jurisdictions with severe financial constraints will continue to grow.*

than the general homeless population, with a higher number of veterans. The NCH report includes a survey of 97 residents and found that 75% of residents were male, 19% were veterans, 46% were 45 or older and 65% had been homeless for more than a year. Although the tent cities described in the media and reports are generally larger in scale than the encampments encountered in Contra Costa, the demographics found in Contra Costa are very similar.

## CONTRA COSTA

As with most of the Bay Area, there is a serious deficiency in affordable housing in Contra Costa County, where more than 7% of the population lives below the poverty line and the income needed to afford a two bedroom unit is \$27.31 an hour (\$54,000/year), more than 4 times the minimum wage and almost \$20,000 higher than the per capita income.<sup>20</sup> Although counting the homeless is notoriously difficult, there are some figures available that, while obtained through various methods, nevertheless offer a general picture of the landscape in Contra Costa County. According to the “2004 Plan to End Homelessness in Ten Years”, Contra Costa County had an estimated homeless population of 15,000, 4,800 of whom were estimated to be on the street on any given night and 2,000 of whom were identified as chronically homeless. Three years later, the 2007 County homeless count identified 2,408 homeless people in shelters and 1,749 unsheltered for a total of 4,155. According to a 2012 Grand Jury Report, there were 4,274 homeless on any given night, 1,490 of which were unsheltered, and over 1,000 who lived in encampments. These numbers are likely to be underestimates given that Project HOPE made contact with 1,175 individual residents of encampments alone in the same year (796 men and 379 women).<sup>21</sup>

Given recent economic trends and the shrinking role of the Federal government, it is likely that the need for local agencies to address complex issues that involve working with landscapes and populations who reside within and outside of local political jurisdictions with severe financial constraints will continue to grow. Unfortunately there

is resistance to recognizing that existence of homelessness may be part of the landscape of American cities and suburbs, leading many municipalities and cities to implement short term interventions that are more costly and ineffective in the long term. Addressing both social and environmental goals associated with homeless encampments effectively requires thinking creatively about policies and interventions that can have long-term impacts.

The CCCFCD is the agency tasked with providing flood control protection throughout the county. As part of their work, CCCFCD owns land and easements on waterways throughout the county and is responsible for maintaining the drainage facilities and complying with NPDES requirements set by the San Francisco Bay and Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Boards. The NPDES program is a federal permit program that establishes standards for discharge into waters, including storm drain systems. Because Contra Costa’s waters drain into both the Delta and the San Francisco Bay, they have permits for both regions. One of the new requirements for the East County permit is that CCCFCD focus on trash reduction, setting goals of reducing trash in County creeks to 40% by 2014, 70% by 2017 and 100% by 2022. In conjunction with Federal policies aimed at improving water quality and protecting water habitat, increased interest in urban waterways and green spaces have made water landscapes that had long been ignored a site of social concern and ecological interventions.<sup>22</sup>

The most visible sources of trash in county creeks stem from illegal dumping and from daily activities of homeless encampments. Because the CCCFCD has seen an increase in the frequency, size and intractability of encampments on property for which it is responsible, it has to grapple with how to deal with this situation. In an attempt to reduce the problem of water pollution, CCCFCD, in conjunction with other agencies, developed a protocol (updated in 2012) for dealing with homeless encampments in unincorporated areas and right of ways within incorporated jurisdictions throughout the county. This protocol requires notifying the County



Health Services Department as soon as the CCCFCD is made aware of encampments. The Health Services team is then responsible for sending the HOPE outreach team to contact the residents within 24 hours. As soon as contact has been made, the responsible police jurisdiction will post notices to vacate, giving residents 72 hours to vacate the premises. The county then initiates and documents a cleanup, and any non-hazardous materials left behind by residents will be held for 30 days (during which property can be claimed by residents) prior to disposal.<sup>23</sup> In the past year CCCFCD has engaged in 78 abatements, many of which involved (re) clearing sites that were reestablished within days of being cleared. For example, three sites constituted 62 of the abatements in the past year.

While the CCCFCD, staffed primarily by engineers, is very well equipped to deal with the environmental and structural challenges of maintaining water quality, it is arguably less equipped to deal with the social challenges posed by the encampments set by the creeks. Further complicating the issue of encampments is that the camps near waterways are often sited adjacent to areas outside of the CCCFCDs jurisdiction.

Therefore, despite efforts to collaborate with other county agencies (particularly public works and public health), efforts to reduce or eliminate camps are thwarted by encampment inhabitants utilizing the limits of jurisdictional boundaries to their advantage. Many properties owned/managed by the district are adjacent to property managed by CALTRANS, parks and recreation districts, utilities, railroads and cities. Unfortunately, these jurisdictions do not have any coordinated policies in place and tend to focus on moving people off their property, a strategy that is costly and ineffective.



## RESEARCH METHODS

In order to design a service delivery system for homeless populations, the social structures and help seeking behaviors of these individuals must first be understood.

—Pippert 2007

In order to craft effective policies for addressing homeless encampments, an understanding of who is living in these areas is needed. The methodologies employed in this project were primarily informed by the questions set by CCCFCD: Who is living on creek beds? What are the needs and behaviors of this population and what is their relationship with the creek? What are the various solutions local agencies can and have attempted in dealing with homeless encampments? What are the problems and benefits associated with homeless encampments and what issues are associated with various response mechanisms?

The literature on homelessness and the quantitative data provided by the county was useful in developing questions and in helping to triangulate information gathered from field observations, but the process of data collection was iterative. As an understanding of the landscape shifted, so did the scope of the research. This project relied on a variety of literature, including the work on informal settlements in international contexts, homeless ethnographies, interagency collabora-

tion and watershed management with the goal of developing a theoretical framework that would enrich the data gathered. In addition to qualitative data provided by field observations and interviews with residents of encampments, individuals from various California agencies that work with homeless encampments were interviewed about the strategies they have implemented and their assessment of their efficacy. The field work, interviews and research done on policies throughout California provided a basis for the policy recommendations made at the end of this report.

This research focused on the central part of Contra Costa County, although encampments throughout the county were visited with members of Project HOPE, a homeless outreach team. After a few months, the faces and names of residents in the camps became familiar, and patterns in the movement and behavior of the residents began to emerge. During the outreach visits with Project HOPE, over 50 encampments were visited and more than 90 people who reside in the encampments were contacted. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted. According to data provided by Project HOPE and field observations, most of these encampment residents are white men, who are native to the region, and have family members in the area. The majority of the encampment residents are over 45 and many of them struggle with a wide range of social, physical, and mental health issues.





## IMPEDIMENTS TO HOUSING FOR ENCAMPMENT RESIDENTS

Most people who live in public spaces share life experiences that create particular perceptions and relationships to social structures and institutions. Many of the realities of life on the streets necessitate a specific way of being in the world that is distinct from “mainstream” society. Agencies and individuals who interact with encampment residents will struggle without recognizing these differences. These inherently different practices by encampment residents and mainstream society institutions/agencies highlights some of the difficulties embedded in their interactions, such as in the case of promoting moving from encampments to proper housing.

For example, setting up appointments and meetings between agencies and the homeless to enter shelters or getting services is difficult because of the profoundly different nature of the two groups. While the agencies are uniformly bureaucratized and systematized, the homeless populations have different mechanisms for organization. Throughout the camps was the distinct relationship to time held by camp residents. In one interview, as I tried to get a sense of mobility patterns over time, I kept running into a wall. Finally the respondent told me “It’s hard for me to judge time, you know, a month or a day. But last summer we were in Idaho.” Similarly, asked how long they had been somewhere, camp residents would often respond in terms of seasons or events (e.g.: ‘Thanksgiving,’ ‘after CALTRANS came,’ ‘before the fire,’) as opposed to specific dates. One informant, when asked what he was going to do when the rains came said “I’m not future tripping,” a phrase that offered a great deal of insight into how homelessness impacts and shift a persons relationship to time, a basic organizing principle of our society. While almost every

homeless person has a daily routine, regardless of employment status, that routine is continually broken by irregular catastrophes (hospital visits, tents catching on fire) and influenced by seasonal changes. Therefore, while people could recount their daily ritual and where they were last summer with ease, very few could remember if they had been at their current location a few weeks or a few months. The sense of time for the residents seems to center around the immediate or the urgent. Case managers that work with the homeless would often express frustration with a client who had not shown up for a meeting, one that might have led to housing, health care or benefits. Part of this is a function of different time structures and part of it is an expression of the fact that so much energy goes into survival, leaving little energy for the future.

There are also many logistical impediments to housing experienced by most of the encampment residents. First, there is a lack of temporary and long-term affordable housing. There are two county-run shelters for adults in Contra Costa, one in Concord and one in Richmond. Each has a capacity of 75 and residents are allowed to stay for up to 120 days if they agree to case management. Although many residents of encampments are wary of shelters, there were moments, beginning in November as winter approached and throughout the rainy months, when clients would ask for help getting into the shelters. Unfortunately, about two-thirds of the time such requests were made, the HOPE team was unable to offer the client a bed because the shelters were at capacity. However, requests are not the norm, and most camp residents have a strong dislike of the shelter and refuse to go into the shelter system altogether.

With a few exceptions there is a perception that life in the shelters is more dangerous than life in the encampments. Because, as shown above, encampment residents self-select according to shared values and behaviors, there was a commonly expressed

*Shelters were described as “full of addicts” or “crazy people”, places where people didn’t have to be responsible, or as simply “dangerous.”*

disdain for the shelter population. Shelters were described as “full of addicts” or “crazy people”, places where people didn’t have to be responsible, or as simply “dangerous.”<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, they were also described as places where one could not have autonomy, because they were full of too many rules.<sup>25</sup> Many of the people interviewed have formed strong kinship relationships in the camps and were reluctant to leave these relationships behind to get into shelters, which are generally segregated by sex and offer housing on an individual basis. On the other hand, a number of people formally and informally interviewed were self-proclaimed loners and avoided the shelters because there were too many people. Often when working with a homeless person on prospective housing, they would lose interest if they were told they would have to share a bedroom with someone else, declaring “I don’t like being around other people.” However, with only one exception, those interviewed stated they would consider getting into a shelter if it was a transition into more permanent housing. Despite an aversion to the shelters, only one person was encountered who articulated a preference for being outside as opposed to having permanent housing.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to a disdain for shelter life and its residents, most encampment residents encounter logistical impediments to entering shelters. Recycling is one of the most common ways for homeless people to earn money and it is a full time, night job. Most recycling ‘crews’ would go out around 9 or 10 at night and would keep working until 4 or 5 in the morning. Although recycling is far from a lucrative job (respondents reported earning anywhere from \$5-45/night), it is one of the only autonomous ways to earn money, and the people who engaged in recycling were heavily invested in their identity as recyclers. Unfortunately, shelter programs require residents to check in during the evening and stay for the night, which sounds reasonable but it means that a decision to enter a shelter is often a decision to lose one’s only source of income and an important part of a

daily routine.

About a third of the people encountered in the encampments either currently had, or had in the past, owned pets and yet there are no temporary housing options in Contra Costa County where pets are allowed. Because of the tenuous social ties of the homeless population, pets are family to many. Camp residents often would say that being asked to leave a pet would be like abandoning a child. The outreach team mentioned that when resident had left a pet in order to enter housing, they often did not survive the loss and would have a mental breakdown that led them back to the streets.

Another constraint to entering the shelters is legal. Although they are a minority, I encountered at least eight people during outreach who were registered sex offenders, which is a barrier to entering the shelter system.<sup>27</sup> To my knowledge, most of the registered sex offenders I encountered had been charged with crimes associated with mental illness or with indecent exposure, a crime that may be difficult to avoid when you are living in public spaces. This status means that even those who are interested in shelters are often unable to be placed in housing.

The majority of the homeless population is coping with multiple mental health diagnoses; many suffer substance abuse problems as well as trauma, both from experiences on the street and from prior life experience. In a seemingly endless cycle, the high rate of mental illness is exacerbated by the trauma of living on the streets and the heavy substance abuse that goes with it feeds back into the apparent rate of mental illnesses. While Wolch and Dear note “substance abuse is an adaptive response as well as a risk factor in homelessness,” the high rates of addiction and mental illness make the population very unstable and a client who is totally eager to get into housing one day may react in anger at the suggestion when you visit them the next.<sup>28</sup>

# TYOLOGIES

Through fieldwork I identified three types of camps that have distinct characteristics and populations with different patterns of mobility and land use. These types of camps correlate with three major typologies that can be observed within the encampment population. These categories, although neither absolute nor discrete, speak to general behaviors that correlate with residents of the camps and how the camps are organized where they are located and the primary sources of pollution they cause. These typologies can help predict something about the behavior of camp residents, highlight the need to develop multiple strategies to address the populations and will inform the development of policy recommendations. The three typologies can be described as old-timers, newcomers and veterans.

**Old-timer camps** vary in size and location but tend to be located under freeways, bridges and overpasses or near railroad tracks. Every old-timer camp I visited was on or near the water. Many of these camps result in the transformation of the landscape and have some semi-permanent structures or are dug into the sides of hills, creating problems of erosion. Old-timer camps may be visible if you are looking for them but they do not

stand out in the landscape. They range in size from 2-20 inhabitants, but where they are larger, people tend to cluster in groups of three or less, with a line of structures along a waterway or under a bridge. The location and size of old-timer camps may change over time but there is a tendency to return to previously established campsites.

The residents of old-timer camps tend to be single white men and chronically homeless. These are men (and some women) who have lived on the streets for 5-20 years. They are often the most open to outsiders, possibly because they are the most adept at navigating social systems. This group is the only one that self identifies as homeless. They are often, but not always, older than the newcomers. They look for places where they can reside for a while and invest in making these places homes and use their knowledge of city/county/state lines to eke out spaces where they are unlikely to be disturbed. Many of these residents are on disability, have day jobs, or are part of “recycling” crews.

The old-timer camps have a strong social hierarchy, where the original settler of the camp acts as the mayor and can decide who



is allowed to join the camp and establishes rules that are generally designed to preserve the camp. The social norms of the old-timer camps vary based on the residents. Old-timers will drift towards camps where their behaviors will be viewed as socially acceptable. For example, in some camps more substance abuse is tolerated, in some camps everyone has a job, others are populated by couples, some have pets while others do not. We visited one old-timer camp that had just kicked residents out because of their refusal to intervene and protect a female resident who had been followed home. When interviewing a couple from an old-timer camp, I was told their motto was “we don’t look homeless” and this seemed to reflect the shared ethos of the camp.

**Newcomer camps** are often the most obvious and the most seasonal. A large grouping of tents and very temporary structures would be typical of a newcomer camp. These camps may pop up in an area that had never been previously inhabited by the homeless: in the alleys behind a residential or commercial area. Because many of the residents of these camps do not self-identify as homeless there is less investment in building these camps. This also means that there are fewer attempts to maintain a low profile and keep the camps clean, as the residents do not view the space they are occupying as home but as a temporary condition.

The newcomer camps are often larger and tend to have more women and ethnic diversity than the other two types of camps. Less adept at navigating the landscape and jurisdictions, these residents find security in numbers. One of the outreach workers referred to residents of the newcomer camps as ‘joyriders,’ not because what they are doing is fun, but because they often drift back into housed situations. The newcomers are those who have only been on the streets intermittently or for a short time. They generally self identify as drug users, not as homeless. In fact, many take great pains to establish that they are on the streets by choice and if they were sober, they would have somewhere

to go. Many of these residents either rely on family or hustling to make ends meet.

**Veteran camps** are the hardest to find although many of them are near old-timer camps. Veteran camps exist in areas that are well concealed and, from a distance, tend to blend into their surroundings, with tents or structures that match the landscape. These camps are very small in size and population, rarely housing more than two people. Some of them are completely isolated, in a well-camouflaged camp near the shore of the bay or hidden under a bridge that is unlikely to be trespassed. Upon entry there may be some sort of trip wire or other device rigged to alert camp residents of intrusions.<sup>29</sup> The veteran camps have a particular order to them, although it may not be immediately apparent. They are also very aware of the community of encampments around them. Some of the camps are very Spartan with only bare essentials and some are inhabited





by hoarders and will have a large quantity of a particular item. Generally these camps are fairly established meaning that effort has gone into constructing the space, whether this is in the form of a kitchen built out of scrap materials, gardens, drainage built through piping or the construction of a housing structure.

The residents of the veteran camps are either veterans or survivalists and usually live alone. Ranging in age from 23-65, this group consists primarily of white men. Most of those who are not receiving VA benefits work day labor jobs or recycle for income and most of them have dogs. These veteran camps are often located across the creek or channel or a few hundred yards away from the old-timer camps. This does not mean that they are totally socially isolated; they often have relationships with members of the old-timer encampments, however, they do not form the same sort of familial units as the other two types of encampment residents. I never encountered women in any of the veteran camps.

Although there are some similar social behaviors that run through all camps, there are also important distinctions between camps, and policies should be mindful of these distinctions. Additionally each of these typologies correlate with different types of pollution and therefore require different approaches both in terms of housing and environmental remediation.

### Garbage and Typologies

Old-timer camps tend to have a lot of stuff, but the stuff is fairly organized. Primary sources of garbage at these camps are materials that are collected for recycling or materials that are stripped for copper. Camps that have been around for a while will have a large assortment of stuff that has been accumulated. Wooden pallets and tarps, plastic buckets and plywood and shopping carts, are staples of all the camps as are canned

foodstuff, plastic bags and camping gear. One may also find a camp with car tires, old electronics, old furniture or bike parts, things scavenged from people who have dumped garbage or brought back to the camp by residents. Most of these camps have a designated toilet area but it is likely that people also use the water to dispose of waste.

Newcomer camps also have a lot of stuff but it is more likely to be random personal items. Because this population is more transitory, people may hold onto items whose use may not be clear. Shopping carts can often be seen at the edge of these camps full of books, clothes, shoes, snacks, bins, bike parts, boxes, sheets, coolers. Here human waste is often stored in plastic bags that are dumped elsewhere or thrown into the water.

Veteran camps tend to be inhabited by people who either have very minimal amounts of garbage or a collection of a particular item. For example, one camp might have a large collection of books or chairs. One veteran we were trying to get into housing was reluctant to leave behind his collection of televisions (more than 20) to enter housing. Some of the veteran camps have very functional outhouses, in others it was unclear how human waste was handled.

In almost all of the camps shopping carts, garbage bags and plastic bottles were a common occurrence.



*As with the Hobo camps of the early twentieth century, most camps exist at the edge of the city limits, close enough to provide accessibility to resources but far enough from the center to avoid public scrutiny.*

## LANDSCAPE OF ENCAMPMENTS

For the most part, the urban and peri-urban spaces occupied by the homeless are peripheral and marginal spaces. As with the Hobo camps of the early twentieth century, most camps exist at the edges of cities (either within or outside its limits), close enough to provide accessibility to resources but far enough from the center to avoid public scrutiny. Most camps are under a freeway, along a creek or both. Just as residents of any area would have a definition of good and bad neighborhoods based on their needs and values, the residents of the camps provided assessments of what constituted a good camp or a bad camp. While most residents agree that shelters are undesirable places to live, there are important distinctions between communities that are expressed in what they feel makes a site a good or bad camp. Part of the assessment is environmental, and part of it is based on social structure within the camp and the way the camp interacts with the outside world.

### Good camps

Good camps are located away from urban centers, either on the edges of the city or in low density, peri-urban or suburban areas. Many camps are located near light industrial or commercial areas, where there tend to be large lots without much foot traffic. This allows people to avoid high visibility and the accompanying harassment. It also means that nighttime activities can take place undisturbed as there are few residences nearby. Camps are organized along lifestyle choices but there are strong networks connecting different camps to each other. When someone makes a life change; and gets a job, or starts using drugs, they may move from one camp and join another, but there continues to be communication and fluidity between camps. When a big event occurred that affected the homeless population, almost all camp residents knew about it right away.

Good camps are generally protected by old-timers and veterans, who will work to prevent discovery by trying to maintain

order and keep “messy campers” out. For most people what makes a good spot for encampments has to do with privacy and safety. Fences are appealing because people feel safer if they are inside enclosed areas. For women, camping near or with others was desirable as it was seen as safer. Almost every woman I spoke with had been a victim of violence, and aside from domestic violence (which was always downplayed), they attributed it to being alone, away from their camp or being alone in their camp. All the women expressed a greater sense of safety in their camps than on the streets or in shelters. Being near bridges, highways and creeks creates a sense of privacy and provides white noise, making it easier to ignore neighbors. Being able to find spots where harassment was minimal is also key, which is another reason these camps tend to be far from heavy pedestrian traffic or residential neighbors. Availability of resources for setting up camps was also key, and a few informants talked about locating near large commercial or retail centers whose garbage they would scavenge either for recycling or for materials to set up their camps. “Get cardboard from warehouses but you have to know the right ones, pallets too. Its best if you can camp near those.”

Being near services was also a benefit, and I met a few clients with serious medical needs who chose to set up camps near their health care providers. A striking example was an older man who slept in a dumpster container behind the dialysis clinic that he went to three times a week. The lives of residents center around the resources they use and daily routines involve these resources. Places that served food were anchor points for many people and they spend part of everyday visiting these sites or the MSCs (multi-service centers) that provided showers, laundry and health services to clients. Bicycling is the primary mode of transportation. All the residents use bikes although they do not all own bikes, some of them borrow bikes from other encampment inhabitants. Transportation seems to be an important constraint and

issue for the subjects. Even in ‘good camps’ there is a lot of transience and very few residents had been in a location for more than a few months, although some kept returning to the same places year after year.<sup>30</sup> There were some places that had a seasonal habitability and this played a role in the location decisions as did perceptions of law enforcement in different areas.

### Bad camps

With the exception of two loners, all the old-timers and veterans and most newcomers were aware of the risk of flooding and most had experienced camp floods. I interviewed two couples who, although recently homeless, had settled into old-timer camps and both of them had initially set up camps in areas where flooding was likely to occur.

After the flooding one couple returned to the same spot and the other couple sought permission from the camp leader to move to a recently vacated spot on higher ground. It is worth noting that the couple that returned had developed a beautiful camp and were making a calculated risk assessment based on how often the area flooded. In fact within the old-timer camps there was a distinction between types of flood risks and there were certain areas that were completely avoided during the winter months because the water was liable to rise so quickly it was viewed as too great of a hazard.

Particularly for old-timers and veterans, there was a maximum capacity that made a camp unappealing. Many people talked about how they would move when a camp got too big, and what constituted ‘too big’ was specific to the location of the camp and the type of residents. A camp could become uninhabitable if it increased above a certain numerical size or if people came to the site that did not share the lifestyle patterns or values of the other campers. I had a few old-timers describe abandoning a site because it had become populated by young ‘tweakers’ (methamphetamine users). Within all camps there was a general familiarity with the jurisdictional boundaries of the various agencies. Multiple people mentioned moving camps when it became too full of garbage as that could yield an official crackdown. An area

that was too high profile for any reason also rendered it undesirable as a campground. Among old-timers who were interested in staying put, the preferred jurisdiction was city property, because as long as the relationship with the police and property owners was positive, “they would leave you alone.” There was a general sense that the county would also leave you alone as long as you kept your camp clean. CALTRANS was generally the least favored agency to deal with after Federal Agencies (whose presence was less frequent) because they are known for not going through the protocols of retaining campers’ personal property during evictions.

Generally camps are established by one or two people who slowly set up an area they have scoped out. The set up can last weeks, although it usually is only a few days and often involves some attempts at camouflaging and cleaning in order to keep it from being noticed by agencies or the public. Once there are more than two people, the camps tend to grow quickly, especially if they are centrally located. After a while the area will become either too crowded or too dirty for the person who originally established it and that person will find it easier to move elsewhere. In the meantime, the camp will continue to grow and once it is visible, it often grows at a faster pace, especially if the site was well chosen in terms of being shielded from the elements. On multiple occasions I heard people refer to CALTRANS as the maid service because it was understood that if a camp got too large or littered, it would be cleaned. However there are some camps that have existed undisturbed for years and while I visited more than 50 camps, most of which were near creeks, the county has only interacted with 10 in the past year.

After a storm or abatement many people are ready to get off the streets, particularly newcomers. Their desire was immediate and they would often settle for situations that they would have rejected in the abstract one day before. Most of the clients in the Con-

cord/Martinez area would refuse to entertain the idea of going to Richmond, but when they were really interested in shelter, they would go to Richmond if a bed was available. The members of the outreach team often talked about how unlikely they were to get someone off the streets unless they met them during a moment of crisis and were able to provide them with resources at the instant. Thus timing is of the essence when thinking of possible agency actions to be taken in order to promote change. There are also some camps that are inherently temporary whereas others are institutionally entrenched, either because they are such good camps or because they are well established in the collective memory of encampment residents. Distinguishing among the different camps is important for understanding what policies will be most effective.

### Camps and Water

On my first day of outreach I was told by a member of the outreach team “wherever there is water there are encampments,” but when asked why, she was unsure, stating that although people do not admit to drinking the water, she thought they used it for washing and cooking. Based on the quantity of water bottles and containers at camps, it seems

likely that residents do not drink the water.

Despite the fact that most of the camps were near water, for most of the residents interviewed, being near water was not a primary factor cited in assessing what made an area good for establishing camps. The notable exception to this was among veterans. All the veterans interviewed stated that they liked being near the water because the water was ‘peaceful’ and ‘calming.’ In conversations with residents, one person mentioned fishing and a few mentioned the quiet or peacefulness of the water but no one admitted to using the water directly.

For most residents the water offered secondary benefits. For example, many cited looking for places that were cool in the summer, a few mentioned being near birds or nature and everyone mentioned the desirability of being in areas where they could avoid constant harassment and scrutiny, factors that often led people to state or county owned property. Being near creeks seemed to be appealing mostly because they often exist on publicly owned lands that have been neglected by the general public.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## YOU CAN'T GET RID OF THE HOMELESS, BUT YOU CAN SET BOUNDARIES.

Drawing from the work of Rittel and the social sciences, pollution caused by homeless camps could be described as a wicked problem, meaning it is ill-defined and eludes the notion of resolution or solvability associated with problems solving.<sup>31</sup> Although the primary concern of CCCFCD is water pollution caused by the encampments, there is no way for garbage creation and waste in the waterways to be reduced without dealing with the populations that are living in these waterways. Therefore, the county is forced to address a large social problem that agencies tasked with addressing social issue have not been able to solve. However, the environmental impacts of these camps can be mitigated through some strategic collaborations and complementary strategies. This section introduces some of the strategies (long term practices and large scale approaches) and tactics (short term interventions that further strategies) that may be employed to reduce both the number of homeless encampments and the pollution associated with them. Some policies may be implemented by the individual agency, but most will depend on the implementation of complementary actions across agencies and enhanced collaborative strategies for real effectiveness. Based in part on interviews with agencies across California, the recommendations here include potential strategies and tactics to be implemented in Contra Costa County (or by the CCCFDC). Examples where some of these strategies and tactics have been implemented successfully are also provided. Possible limitations of the proposed interventions will also be addressed. There are some recommendations that came up in interviews that are not included here either because they have been found to be ineffective (anti-homeless ordinances, enforcing anti-panhandling laws) or because

they are politically unviable and have mixed results (installing public restrooms or water sprinklers).<sup>32</sup>

## COLLABORATION

Every agency actor interviewed attributed much of the success and failure of their program to whom they collaborated with and how well the collaboration functioned. The two counties and one city that felt they were addressing the problem in an effective manner (Vallejo, Marin and Santa Clara) had begun to work more aggressively with outreach providers, and everyone cited collaboration as important in dealing with camps. Similarly, the agencies that had developed protocols that involved interagency collaboration felt that they were effective in their interventions. The biggest constraints for these interagency collaborations cited were: jurisdictional complexity, funding, capacity, lack of consistency across agencies, lack of housing and services for the population, inadequate mental health or substance abuse services and legal constraints.

The interviews confirmed the need for long term planning and collaboration and highlighted the ad hoc manner in which local governments are currently addressing this issue. Although the importance of collaboration was acknowledged, all the collaborative efforts in place tended to be vertical in nature, and either involved multiple county agencies; county agencies and city police or county agencies and non-profits. Despite the intersections with state and federal agencies, no one was involved in horizontal collaboration. Because many of the creeks and channels in the region are near highways, railroads and parks, the county agencies are often dealing with areas where the residents can easily cross a channel or fence and enter an area under another agencies' jurisdiction (state or city), yet these agencies do not collaborate.

Like many counties, Contra Costa County is already engaged in interagency and com-



munity collaborations. These strategies are essential for addressing the question of homelessness in creeks as the traditional bureaucratic and disciplinary categories provide inadequate tools for resolving complex problems that engage multiples sectors and must rely on a variety of knowledge bases. Therefore, while these strategies are not new, it is worth emphasizing the need to create more robust and nuanced mechanisms for their application and to ensure their continuity.

In the case of Contra Costa County, inter-agency collaboration should include both the formation of regional coalitions (building off of coalitions that are already in place), as well as horizontal and vertical collaboration across agencies where practical. Some of this was implemented in Contra Costa through the Homelessness Inter-Jurisdictional Inter-Departmental Work Group, which involved city and county official's police, nonprofits and homeless people. But there should be collaboration with CALTRANS, REgional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) and city agencies and agency associations like the Bay Area Flood Protection Agencies Association (BAFPAA) should also make collaborating on homeless encampment approaches a key goal. Collaborations tend to be most effective when they are mandated, but where requirements are absent, it is important to encourage full engagement of parties involved. Therefore, attention should be given to who manages collaborative efforts, where meetings are held and how

involved are invested. Establishing agreed upon short and long term goals is also important to the continued effectiveness of collaborative efforts.

While formal collaborations (both horizontal and vertical) are generally resource intensive, informal collaborations are easier to implement and many agencies are already engaged in these through resource sharing and communication. These types of collaborations can be very useful where strong state leadership and collaborative mandates are absent. Informal collaborations are a good way to involve informal actors like charitable organizations or other volunteer organizations. Often these actors are providing key services to the homeless population and informal conversations and information sharing with the informal actors can prevent the efforts of informal actors from undermining county efforts. Additionally informal collaborations may help shape the public understanding of the issue and enhance the capacity of county agencies. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of engaging in formal and informal collaborations is establishing consistency. Consistent policy application and implementation is crucial and is often absent from the experience of homeless people, as they interact with a variety of agencies whose actions may not be in sync. Formal and informal collaborations help highlight where agency goals and mandates conflict and where they converge. This knowledge is key to creating consistency and can be facilitated through sharing information and data collection.

Housing	Homeless Community	Homeless advocates	Health Services: medical, mental	Substance Abuse services, programs
Community residents, Local Business	Utilities	Environmental Organizations/Volunteers	City/County Management	City/County Land use and planning
Social Justice	Family counseling	Environmental Management: trash, chemicals, waste	Politicians	Parks and Open Space Agencies
Engineering: roads, maintenance, drainage	Law: civil, civil rights, criminal, law enforcement	Environmental Regulations	Public Relations Media	Charitable Organizations Volunteers

Figure 1. Actors needed for collaboration.



**NO CAMPING  
FOR EMERGENCY SHELTER  
CALL 1-800-808-6444**

*[Faded graffiti]*

*[Large graffiti tags, including 'DINO']*

## DATA COLLECTION

Documenting collaboration and data sharing can be helpful in continuing the work of collaborations and having a broader reach. Marin County has been using a website that allows agencies and residents to share information about camps and has found this to be a helpful way to ensure efforts are coordinated. Additionally some counties have put out a call to the other agencies they work with to compile maps of known encampments. This form of data sharing is also useful and allows resources already being utilized by agencies to have an amplified affect. One of the main strategies advocated by the Department of Justice for police dealing with homeless encampments is sharing of information.

Sharing information with similar agencies in other jurisdictions is also key. Many municipal flood control districts throughout the region (and the country) share mandates and are trying to mitigate the same problems while facing similar structural constraints. However, although there is some selective information sharing, it is not systematized. Creating regional bodies to share resources and strategies would be very useful in this regard. Not only would it enhance the

capacity of the individual agencies, but also where there is consensus, it would amplify the agency voice. For example, every agency interviewed described similar locational tendencies for camps and many county officials mentioned how some of the policies they would like to implement would meet stiff resistance from the Department of Fish and Wildlife, who are concerned with species restoration. Mapping the locations of camps in various counties and comparing policies in place might provide greater insight into effective tactics. This information could lead to some regional consensus that might strengthen arguments for changes in local, state and federal policies, specifically in (re) assessing targeted vegetation replacement or ratio based approaches to habitat management.

Data Collection is also crucial to measuring the effectiveness of any tactic that is implemented. Therefore it is key that data collection be an ongoing part of implementing any strategy or tactic as it will show what is and is not working. In conjunction with meaningful collaborations, data collection can enhance the efforts of the county and offer some explanation for why and how policies are having an impact.



Throughout the agency interviews, there was a consensus that the issue of homeless encampments has grown in recent years. Interventions that were advocated included: improved mental health services, implementing sanctioned tent cities, implementing shopping cart ordinances, involving homeless in clean-up, reducing vegetation cover, and better policing. Both Marin and Santa Clara worked with homeless outreach coordinators to provide housing for encampment residents and Santa Clara stated that 33 of the 50 encampment residents accepted offers of housing vouchers provided. Many people felt that police crackdowns were forcing people out of the city centers and onto county property. At the same time many districts talked about how they did not have enforcement capacity to ensure that once camps were cleared and cleaned, they did not resurface.

The section below highlights some tactics that could be used to reduce the occurrence of encampments or of the pollution associated with the encampments. These tactics require an assessment of the camp populations and types of camps, and many of them will require complementary efforts. For example, many newcomer residents are happy to move into shelters when the weather gets cold but the shelters do not have enough space to hold them. This means that for this group, it may be more effective to do outreach in winter than the summer season. There are also some camps that are inherently temporary whereas others are institutionally entrenched, either because they are such good camps or because they are well established in the collective memory of encampment residents. Distinguishing among the different camps is important for understanding what policies will be most effective. For an assessment of what tactics are more likely to be effective at certain times of year, which populations they would impact, and what other policies might undermine or reinforce their implementation, see appendix.

## ABATEMENTS

Abatements or evictions are the most common response to homeless encampments, and although they have an immediate effect, they are also costly and cyclical, especially for well-established sites. In order for the process of eviction to have any long-term effect, both the population living in the camp and the attachment to the specific site need to be understood. There is a general sense among agency actors that abatements are only temporarily effective. In 2012, Contra Costa engaged in 78 abatements of camps, 62 of which were in 3 sites. This will continue to be true without the implementation of other strategies, however it is not equally true for all camps. The degree of attachment to a particular site and efficacy of abatements will depend on evaluating the population located at the site and the characteristics of the site itself. The targeting of camps should be based on a suitability analysis that includes both the factors that are important to the county as well as an assessment of what residents consider important in establishing the camps as these factors offer some indication of how attached residents may be to certain places, and therefore how effective an abatement will be. From the perspective of the agency there are areas where the environmental damage, safety risks, or political backlash caused by encampments is severe enough that strategic abatements are necessary. However, unless solutions are made available to people in terms of offering places to go, abatements will not work as people will just move from one site to another and the county will be engaged in an unending pattern of moving people from one site to another.

When abatements occur, they should involve coordination with outreach and any agencies that have jurisdiction over adjacent property. Outreach should be responsible for making contact prior to the abatement (5-7 days before) and the provision of shelter



*The degree of attachment to a particular site and efficacy of abatements will depend on evaluating the population located at the site and the characteristics of the site itself.*

should accompany the abatement. Following the abatement, coordinated monitoring between agencies should be in place to (1) ascertain the success in shelter provision and (2) ensure that residents do not simply move across political boundaries. From the perspective of an encampment resident the distinction between Amtrak police, the Sheriff, CALTRANS and the flood control district are not very significant but many of these agencies have nothing in common except for this issue and their policies differ. The adoption of a protocol that covers all forms of contact with encampment residents and is adopted by all agencies so that residents are able to predict how agencies will interact with them, creating consistency would be beneficial in creating predictability. Over time, this consistency will become part of the collective knowledge within the community and would make many future interventions more effective. The effectiveness of evictions will depend in part on what other policies are in place and on the specific population of the camp. Therefore strategies to reduce or evict encampments need to consider the population that is living within the camps.

Santa Cruz has begun collaborating with Park Rangers to target areas of greatest environmental and health concern. The result of these targeted abatements has been to improve environmental conditions in the greenways, although in many cases this means that homeless activity has simply shifted to a new location. However this shift has improved water quality, which is a key concern. Marin has also been engaged in targeted abatements in collaboration with a homeless outreach team that provides housing. The Santa Clara pilot project of providing housing vouchers on site to residents at the time of abatements has seen positive results although the numbers are still small.

## PLANTING AND WEED CONTROL

There are two ways that landscaping could be used as a tactic for addressing camp

pollution. One would be to make sites less attractive to potential encampment residents and the other would be to try and make it harder for pollution to enter the creeks. Both tactics should be done in conjunction with strategic policing and abatements. We know that remote areas are more attractive to camps because they avoid public scrutiny and harassment. Based on the history of creek and river restoration projects, certain design features, especially those that increase recreational use of the landscape, can decrease incidence of encampments. These designs could include lifting vegetation canopy, sloping floodplains and constructing pedestrian pathways near creeks.

Another idea would be to create designs that make accessing or polluting the water less likely by creating impediments. This could mean building barriers or increasing slope on creek beds and selective vegetation/tree planting. Planting native grasses can achieve both goals simultaneously as the grasses help reduce sediment load into the waterway and are too low to provide cover for encampments while encouraging aggressive weed control in conjunction with establishing low hedgerows to discourage entry into waterways. The use of pesticides and weed control has been accompanied by the restoration of channels using native plants that are low growing and filter surface contaminants, such as wildrye (*leymus tritcoides*). Santa Clara is also considering strategies where riparian mitigation plantings emphasize plants that are more vertical than horizontal, creating better line of sight to discourage camp establishment and facilitate maintenance as well as reducing long term degradation of flow conveyance.

## GARBAGE COLLECTION

For CCCFCD the biggest problem with the encampments on the waterways is the pollution caused by these camps. The question of garbage should therefore be addressed directly through garbage collection. A multi-agency garbage collection program should be

implemented, funded in part by the agency but facilitated by an outreach or aid organization. This inter-agency program would provide specially marked garbage bags to encampment residents with one consistent pick up day per week. Homeless outreach workers could distribute the bags. Residents who used the bags to clean the encampments would be given some form of nominal compensation, for example the provision of bus tickets. Old-timers would likely participate in such a regime and some would likely clean up sites that were not their own. Even without compensation, the provision of garbage bags and garbage pick up would be embraced by some of the old-timer camps, but providing nominal compensation would encourage others to do the same. This type of program will work best in less transitory camps and could face public resistance

This type of program has been implemented in the 1970s with great success in Curitiba, a city in Brazil, that experienced massive urbanization and with it the rapid expansion of informal settlements. Although this program targeted children in the favela, the underlying need was similar. Many of the residents lived in informal settlements that did not have garbage collection. In 1971 the city of Curitiba began a program where they placed garbage bins in the favelas. Anyone who deposited a bag of sorted garbage was given a bus token and anyone who deposited recyclable materials was given tokens that could be used to buy food. Within three years, 200 tons of garbage was being collected and recycled. Similarly, in 2011 Santa Clara County started a project called Downtown Streets Team. Run by a not-for-profit, the Downtown Streets Team hires homeless people to clean streets and environmental habitats in exchange for housing vouchers, food and services. In Santa Cruz, the county environmental health department has installed disposal kiosks in key sites and hired full time garbage collectors in collaboration with the department of Parks and Recreation. These workers patrol areas, picking up garbage and also report any active encampments to park Rangers.

## SHELTER REFORMS

Using the impediments to shelter articulated by camp residents provides a list of ways in which shelters could be made more appealing to camp residents. These include the creation of a kennel for pets, run by the Humane Society or one of the multi-service centers (where many homeless people go on a regular basis and where services are made available). There are a few shelters in California that allow pets and this could be another option, although it is logistically more challenging. Allowing residents to enter the shelter system together instead of on an individual basis could have a positive impact. Many residents are reluctant to leave their partners on the streets and although these relationships may not always be healthy, loss of community is a major impediment to the healthy adaptation of formerly homeless people.<sup>33</sup> However, while some reforms can remove barriers to entering shelters, there are many homeless in encampments who will resist entering shelters unless it is a pathway to long-term housing solutions. Continued emphasis on pathways to long term housing should be part of any shelter reform.

Lark-inn House in San Francisco is a homeless shelter for youth with a capacity of 40. In addition to services, the shelter has a kennel for pets. Los Angeles, San Mateo, and San Diego animal shelters have programs where they will provide temporary shelter for residents of shelters for victims of domestic violence. Both Los Angeles and Riverside recently opened shelters that have kennels for pets (2012 and 2011). Animal service volunteers staff the kennels in Riverside and the pet owners are responsible for the care of the pet. The San Fernando Valley shelter in Los Angeles is a partnership with Petco and PAWS/LA.



## AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND TENT CITIES

Unfortunately the cost of living in the Contra Costa region is high and is likely to continue to rise. Given this, the provision of affordable housing options is key to preventing and addressing homelessness.<sup>34</sup> Most of the people interviewed would be unable to afford market rate housing in Contra Costa even with a full time job. However, as Christopher Jencks notes, “the main benefit of housing is that it gives people a place to live,” it does not deal with many of the other needs of the homeless population.<sup>35</sup> Adequate mental health and substance abuse support, life skills training and job training are also important. The federal move away from transitional housing and towards an emphasis on permanent housing has merit, but has not been adequately financed and without service provision or addressing the increasing costs of housing in many regions, the homeless population will continue to grow. At the end of *Homeless*, Jencks lays out an argument in favor of the construction of cubicles as an alternative to emergency shelters. Noting the common aversion to shelters, Jencks argues that the provision of these cubicles would be more appealing because adults would have a private space with a lock on the door. Many of his arguments for the cubicles would support the construction of tent cities or sanctioned campgrounds, an idea raised in two of the agency interviews.

One of the tent cities profiled in the NCH *Tent City Report* is called River Haven and it more closely conforms to what Jencks advocates in that all residents pay rent (\$250) and are provided with small domed structures that are private, some occupied by couples and others by individuals. The cost of maintaining the camp is covered partly by rents with the city paying the difference by contributing \$14,000/year to house 25 people. The housing is available for two years and all residents are required to work with a case manager. Sixty-eight percent stay for seven months or longer, 80% leave with stable income and more than half move into permanent housing. Interestingly River Haven was formed by the city in response to an encampment that existed on a rived bed that was prone to flooding.

The biggest problems with sanctioned or unsanctioned tent cities is that they tend to grow very rapidly unless controlled, creating strong NIMBY backlashes, and this growth usually leads to serious safety concerns. Of the tent cities profiled in both the NCH report and in *Tent City Urbanism*, most were dismantled after reaching a certain capacity or creating enough logistical problems for the non-profit or government agency managing the space. The only sites that have continued are those that provide security, services and have a cap on both the size of the site and the length of time a resident can stay. Therefore investing in long term housing options may be a more effective tactic.

In St Louis as part of the BEACH project, the city has begun to target the chronically homeless, offering case management, housing, and services to each individual.<sup>36</sup> This project is funded by a federal grant. The St. Louis project has focused on permanent housing provision in recognition that shelters are often not appropriate for the chronically homeless for a variety of reasons. They emphasize a ‘transition in place’ approach where the homeless are placed in transitional housing units that are converted into permanent housing once the resident has completed the program. The program was designed to address the loneliness many residents feel when they enter traditional housing and to be able to accommodate pets and non-traditional families. This type of approach is promising for a place like Contra Costa, where the costs incurred by the county from the chronically homeless are high and many people within the population are adverse to entering shelters. An evaluation of permanent housing projects for the chronically homeless notes that in New York City 95% of the costs of providing supportive housing for was “made up for by the reductions in public service expenditures” and that this approach has resulted in more stable housing outcomes for participants.<sup>37</sup> A few people interviewed suggested that part of the Concord Naval Weapons Station redevelopment include some form of housing project and although the BEACH project is recent, it is worth following the development to see if a similar model could be implemented in Contra Costa.

# CONCLUSION

## THE QUESTION OF HOW TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS IN WATERWAYS IS NOT A PROBLEM THAT ONE AGENCY CAN RESOLVE ALONE.

Coming up with viable resolutions will require creative thinking and a reframing of the issues. Because of a strong resistance to recognizing that the existence of homelessness is likely to be part of the landscape of American cities and suburbs, many of the strategies employed by municipalities and cities continue to emphasize short-term stop gap interventions over long term planning. Unfortunately, public housing has been federally defunded and cities today are resorting to the same strategies they employed in the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> As cities resort to stop gap measures and policing to deal with homelessness, it is likely that more homeless will end up on public lands or unincorporated areas that counties are responsible for serving.<sup>39</sup> It is tempting for agencies to engage in practices that will shift the social costs back to cities, but these practices have limited efficacy and are likely to result to be temporary. What is key is for city and county agencies to work together on this issue.

Like many other counties across the country, Contra Costa County Flood Control and Water District faces a huge challenge with the water pollution created by homeless encampments that is unlikely to disappear any time soon. Perhaps the largest impediment to resolving the problem is that even where the complexity is understood and there is a willingness to address systemic issues, the local agencies that deal with the problem do not have the capacity to implement many meaningful measures on their own. This means that in addition to contending with rigorous environmental requirements, the specific characteristics of the populations within the encampments and the particular landscape of the area, competing mandates, jurisdictional complexity and political pressure, the agency must also implement strategies that involve other government agencies, non-governmental agencies and charities. All of which requires time and money, something that most county agencies today do not have in excess. While implementing effective multi-sector collaborations that rely on local knowledge of the specific environmental and human needs is difficult, it is not only needed to address this particular issue, but may serve to address many of the complex social and environmental problems that face our communities.

*Because of a strong resistance to recognizing that the existence of homelessness is likely to be part of the landscape of American cities and suburbs, many of the strategies employed by municipalities and cities continue to emphasize short-term stop gap interventions over long term planning.*



# END NOTES

- 1 Wolch, Jennifer, and Micheal Dear. 1993. *Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American City*, San Francisco at 42, 87.
- 2 Jencks, Christopher. 1994. *The Homeless*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. For a brief history of social policy and poverty see Crowther, Chris. 2000. *Policing Urban Poverty*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.
- 3 Daly, Gerald. 1996. *Homeless: Policies Strategies and Lives on the Street*. London: Routledge.
- 4 Wolch and Dear 1993 at 14. Also see Hoch, Charles and Robert Slayton, 1990. *New Homeless and Old: Community and the Skid Row Hotel*, Temple University Press.
- 5 O'Connor, Alice. 1999. "Urban Problems and Community Development." In *Urban Problems and Community Development*, ed. Ronald F Ferguson and William T Dickens. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press at 79.
- 6 Id. at 82.
- 7 For examples of policing and criminalization of homelessness see Mitchell, Don. 2003. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*; National Coalition for the Homeless and National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2010, *A Place at the Table: Prohibitions on Sharing Food with People Experiencing Homelessness*; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty and National Coalition on the Homeless, 2009, *Homes not Handcuffs: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities*.
- 8 Many think this number way too low and estimates have been as high as 3.5million. For more on the difficulty in counting the homeless and strategies employed see National Coalition for the Homeless, 2012 *Down For the Count: Overcoming The Census Bureau's Neglect of the Homeless*.
- 9 US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2012, *The 2012 Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness: Volume 1 of the 2012 Annual Homeless Assessment Report*. Diane Pub Co.
- 10 Pippert, Timothy D. 2007. *Road Dogs and Loners: Family Relationships Among Homeless Men*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- 11 Federal Task Force on Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness. 1992. *Outcasts on Main Street: A Report of the Federal Task Force on Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness*.
- 12 Since the 1970s there has been a growth in movements to 'restore' urban waterways and clean rivers and creeks that had long been ignored This new environmental imperative, stemming in part from a desire to maintain some open space within cities has led the proliferation of watershed councils and volunteer cleanup and monitoring efforts across the U.S. See, e.g., Mann, Roy B. 1988. "Ten Trends in the Continuing Renaissance of Urban Waterfronts." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 16 (1-2) (October): 177-199; Schwartz, Susan. 2000. *Creek Restoration --the waters half full and rising El Cerrito Wire*, originally published in *Sierra Club Yodeler* accessed at [http://elcerritowire.com/live/new\\_single\\_archive.shtml?oid=420&..](http://elcerritowire.com/live/new_single_archive.shtml?oid=420&..)
- 13 McKinley, Jesse. (2009, March 25). *Cities Deal with a Surge in Shantytowns*, New York Times accessed online <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/26/us/26tents.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>
- 14 Ehrenreich, Ben, (2009, June 3). *Tales of Tent City*. *The Nation* accessed online at <http://www.thenation.com/article/tales-tent-city?page=0,2>
- 15 The Federal Government defines the chronically homeless as those who have either been continuously homeless for a year or more or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.
- 16 One of the few published articles on homelessness encampments was written by a law student at Berkeley, who looks at another sanctioned tent city in Placerville, CA called Hangtown Haven. Loftus-Farren, Zoe. 2011 "Tent Cities: An Interim Solution to Homelessness and Affordable Housing Shortages in the United States." *California Law Review* 99:1037. There is also an undergraduate thesis entitled *Tent City Urbanism* that profiles a few camps across the country.
- 17 National Coalition for the Homeless. 2010. *Tent Cities in America: A Pacific Coast Report*, Washington D.C. Retrieved at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/Tent%20Cities%20Report%20FINAL%203-10-10.pdf> 8
- 18 The report distinguishes between permanent and mobile sites as a few of the camps rotate locations.
- 19 U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing. 2010. *Homeless Encampments: Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Problem-Specific Guides Series No. 56*
- 20 Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors. 2004. *Ending Homelessness in Ten Years: A County-Wide Plan for the Communities of Contra Costa County*.
- 21 Project Hope is a homeless outreach team that is part of ANKA, see findings below.
- 22 Note that the NPDES, which regulates discharge into national waters was created as part of the Clean Water Act in 1972, while the Water Quality Act was passed in 1987.
- 23 The issue of storing and or destroying personal property is one that has been raised in most eviction processes and was adjudicated in 2008 in Fresno, with the court ruling that the cities practices violated the 4th and 5th Amendment, see *Kincaid v. Fresno*.
- 24 This sentiment closely matches that expressed by the nomadic homeless living on public lands in Southard's study see Southard, P A Dee. 2008. "Uneasy Sanctuary: Homeless Campers Living on Rural Public Land." *Visual Sociology* 12:2, 37-41.
- 25 Although many camps also have a lot of rules, these rules are not seen as arbitrary and are generally understood as promoting the survival of the camp.

- 26 This is similar to NCH survey of tent city residents which found that the major impediments cited for entering the shelter system were lack of privacy, outdoor space, rules, lack of storage and inability to house their pets. While only 33% were willing to go into shelter, 65% would go if it led to permanent housing and 94% would accept permanent supportive housing. National Coalition for the Homeless 2010 at 73.
- 27 According to a report drafted after the passage of proposition 83, which prohibits registered sex offenders from residing within 2000 ft of a park or school, the number of offenders who were homeless increased 24 times within 3 years of implementation.
- 28 Wolch, Jennifer, and Micheal Dear. 1993 at 241
- 29 The veteran camps I encountered were very similar to the ‘separatist’ camps encountered by Southard on public lands. Southard, P A Dee. 2008.
- 30 The notable exceptions to this were some camps in Martinez, Walnut Creek and Antioch, where some residents had been in one camp for years, often living a very low profile life with the complicity of city officials.
- 31 The term “wicked problem” was coined by Rittel who argued that unlike some of the problems posed in science or engineering, the societal problems that planners face are inherently ill-defined and do not have clear solutions. Rittel, Webber. 1973.
- 32 For more on these strategies see U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing. 2010
- 33 Pippert notes that because many homeless survive by recreating families in pair bonds, homeless policies need to address the necessities of these units rather than focusing on the individual. Pippert. 2007.
- 34 Quigley et. al. show a 10% increase in rent correlates with a 6.5% increase in homelessness. Quigley, John M, Steven Raphael and Eugene Smolensky. 2001. Homelessness in California. San Francisco, Public Policy Institute of California.
- 35 Jencks, Christopher. 1994. The Homeless. Cambridge: Harvard University Press at 121.
- 36 City of St. Louis. 2012. Moving Forward: Policies, Plans and Strategies for Ending and Preventing Chronic Homelessness.
- 37 U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing. 2010. Homeless Encampments: Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Problem-Specific Guides Series No. 56 at 23.
- 38 See Berger, Joseph. 2013, Feb 8. For Some Landlords, Real Money in the Homeless. The New York Times. Retrieved at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/nyregion/for-some-landlords-real-money-in-the-homeless.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/09/nyregion/for-some-landlords-real-money-in-the-homeless.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)
- 39 The Community Policing Report notes that many of the strategies implemented to address homeless encampments; sidewalk ordinances, bum sweeps, safe zones are ineffective, but these continue to be favored strategies in many cities. U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing. 2010

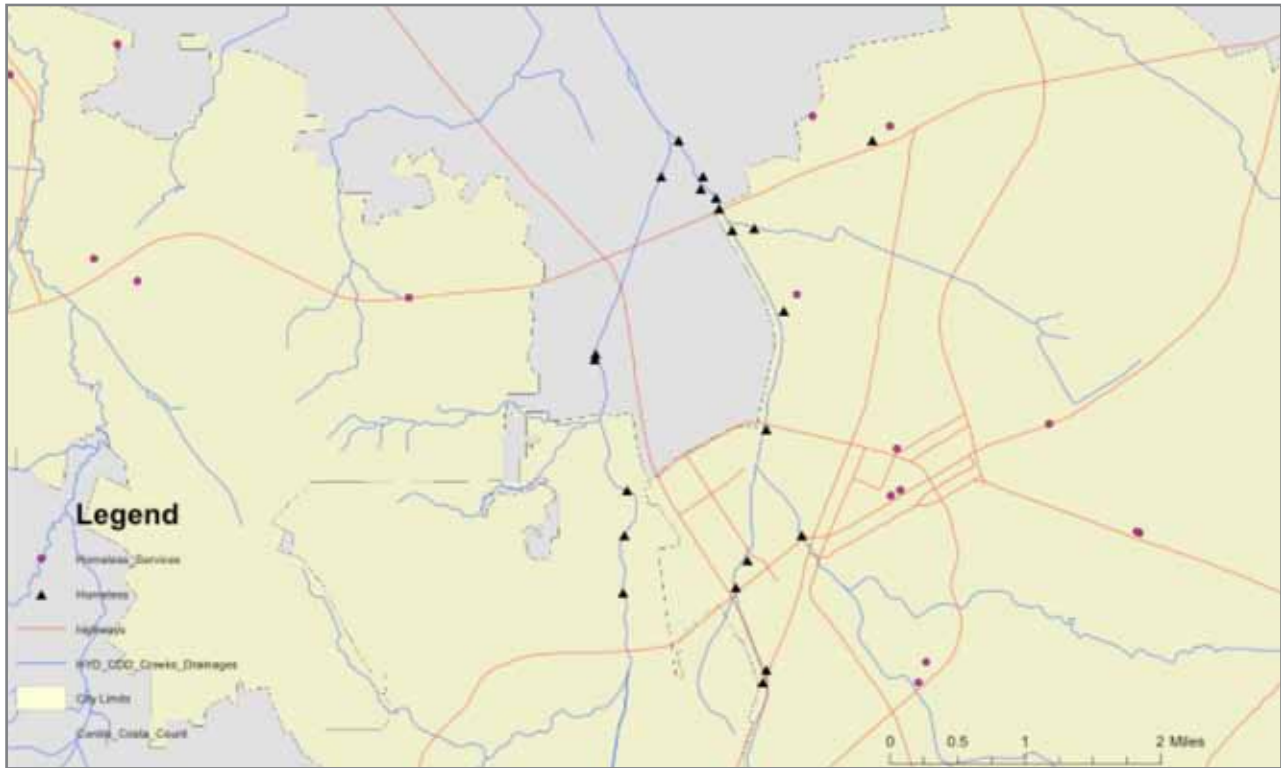


# APPENDIX A

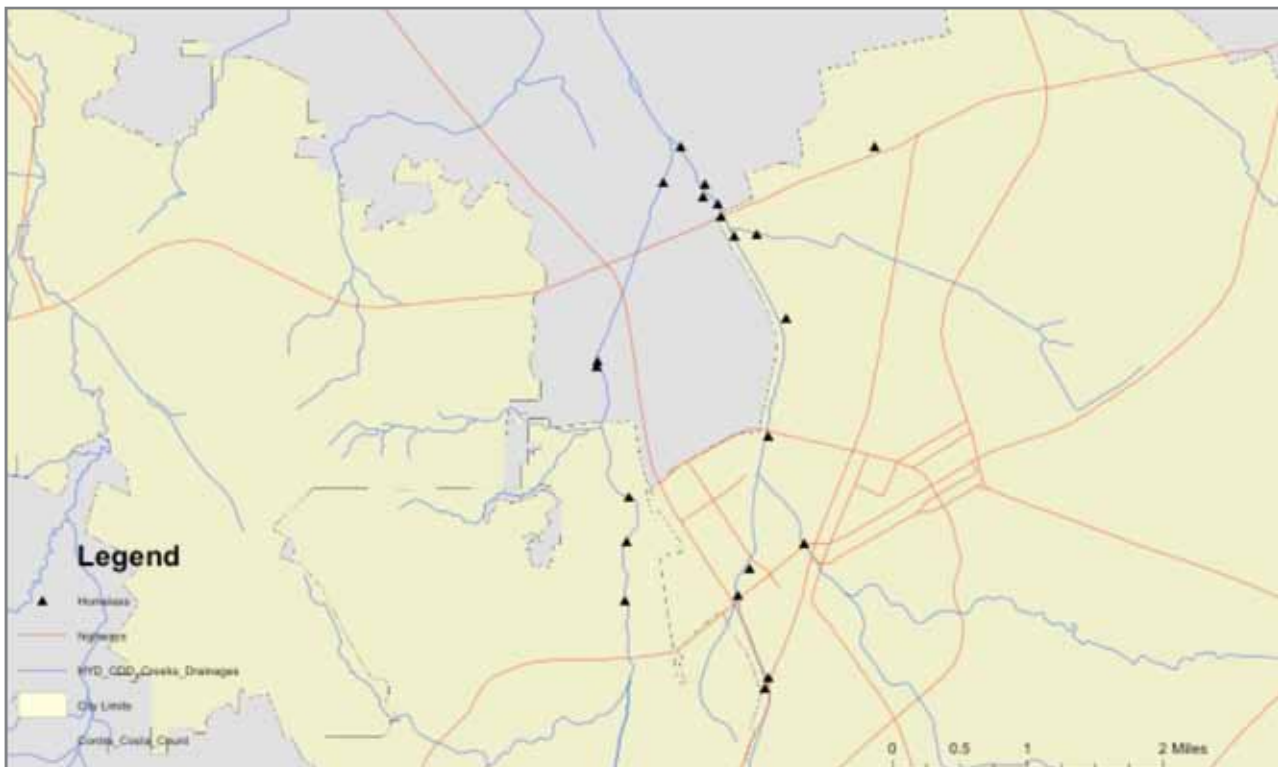
POLICY	TARGET POPULATION	AGENCY TO IMPLEMENT	SEASON FOR IMPLEMENTATION	TARGET LANDSCAPE	COMPLEMENTARY POLICY REQUIRED	ASSESSMENT
<b>Abatements</b>	Newcomers Old-Timers	CCFCD Public Works with agencies who control adjacent land	Fall/Winter	Bad Camps	Interagency collaboration And Shelter Provision	Costly and not effective in isolation. Can be very effective if targeted and done in collaboration with other agencies and if people have other places to go.
<b>Planting &amp; Weed Control</b>	All	CCFCD, Public Works	Spring/Summer	Most effective where county has large jurisdiction	Fence Removal, Policing, Abatement	Takes time to implement but if done strategically can be effective and have positive environmental impacts.v
<b>Garbage program</b>	Old-timers Veterans	CCFCD With Outreach and Transit	Spring Summer Fall	Good camps	Outreach	Untested in the US but worth trying on a small scale.
<b>Shelter Reform</b>	All	Public Health, City and Charities	All	Bad camps	Housing provision	Reduced entry to barriers may help, but many are resistant to entering shelters unless it is a pathway to long term housing
<b>Housing Provision</b>	All	CCFCD with outreach/ VA City and County government with State/ Federal Support	Fall Winter	All	Public Health/Police/ Outreach	Good housing programs have very high retentions rates and can be cost effective in the long term but are very expensive at the outset.

POLICY	TARGET POPULATION	AGENCY TO IMPLEMENT	SEASON FOR IMPLEMENTATION	TARGET LANDSCAPE	COMPLEMENTARY POLICY REQUIRED	ASSESSMENT
<b>Policing</b>	Newcomers	City Police and Sheriff Department, Park Rangers	Summer	Bad Camps	Abatements and Outreach	The presence of officials may shift populations presence and can be effective if done strategically. Enforcement of panhandling or lifestyle ordinance is not effective.
<b>Pet Shelter</b>	Newcomers	Public Health	All	Camps with Pets	Outreach	Temporary solution that may be too costly to be effective.
<b>Fence Removal</b>	Newcomers Old Timers	CALTRANS	Summer	Less hidden good camps	Interagency collaboration, Planting and Weed Control, Policing	When done in areas where recreational use of land is high, this can be effective.
<b>Sanctioned Tent City</b>	Old timers	City governments and Public Health	All	N/A	Public Health/Police/ Outreach	Only sustainable if small scale and regulated. Can create community backlash.
<b>Restroom Installations</b>	Everyone	Public works, Public Health	All	Targeted central camps near trails		Can become haven for criminal activity, may meet community resistance.

# APPENDIX B: MAPS OF CAMPS



Camps in relation to services.



Camps in relation to city limits, creeks and highways.

# APPENDIX C: SURVEY

## AGENCY INTERVIEWS

AS I MENTIONED, I AM CURRENTLY WORKING WITH CONTRA COSTA COUNTY FLOOD CONTROL AND WATER DISTRICT ON A PROJECT RESEARCHING THE ISSUE OF WATER POLLUTION CAUSED BY HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS AND PART OF MY RESEARCH IS TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND HOW VARIOUS AGENCIES IN CONTRA COSTA AND OTHER JURISDICTIONS DEAL WITH THIS ISSUE, WHICH IS WHY I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU.

1. CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT HOW AND WHEN YOU GET INVOLVED WITH HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS?
2. DOES YOUR AGENCY HAVE ANY SPECIFIC PROTOCOLS IN PLACE? IF SO, HOW WERE THEY DEVELOPED? WHAT IS YOUR ASSESSMENT OF HOW WELL THEY WORK?
3. DO YOU COLLABORATE WITH OTHER AGENCIES ON THIS ISSUE? WHY AND HOW OFTEN?
4. HAVE YOU NOTICED ANY SHIFTS OR NEW TRENDS IN THE ISSUES YOU ARE DEALING WITH?
5. HAS YOUR AGENCY RESPONSE BEEN INFLUENCED BY CHANGES IN LEGAL REQUIREMENTS OR STATE/NATIONAL POLICY?
6. WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE BIGGEST CONSTRAINTS IN DEALING WITH THIS ISSUE?
7. WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE BEST POSSIBLE OUTCOME?
8. HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT ANY PROGRAMS IN OTHER AREAS?