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San Bernardino County first in nation with plan for homeless women

By [Ryan Hagen](#), The Sun Posted: 04/01/17, 5:00 PM PDT | Updated on 04/01/2017



A homeless woman, Misty, who lives in Upland holds her two dogs during the San Bernardino County Homeless County in January. The County plans to treat unaccompanied homeless women as a special population.
File Photo by James Carbone



In this 2016 file photo, San Bernardino County sheriff's Deputy Mike Jones, of the HOPE program, gives transient Deborah Terry, 59, a cold weather kit at her homeless camp underneath a bridge in Redlands. San Bernardino County plans to treat unaccompanied homeless women as a special population.
File Photo by Rachel Luna/Staff Photographer

SAN BERNARDINO >> The recently released [2017 homeless count](#) combined with academic research has convinced San Bernardino County to become the first county in the United States to treat unaccompanied homeless women as a special population — a focus that homelessness experts expect will dramatically decrease the number living on the streets. County officials credit their aggressive approach to homelessness with decreasing the number of homeless counted in the annual Point-in-Time count from 2,321 in 2013 to 1,866 this year, a drop of nearly 20 percent.

But what works for a homeless veteran — an area of [special focus](#) in the county the last few years — doesn't always work for women living alone, said Philip Mangano, the county's homelessness czar. In 90 percent of cases, based on research from the Downtown Los Angeles Mission, unaccompanied homeless women have experienced physical or mental abuse, and half report being attacked in the last year. So an approach that leaves them vulnerable to further attacks by men — or that is led by men — often leads them to withdraw, he said.

"It's at the hands of males that they've suffered so much in childhood and later life, so if you have male engagement workers, these women are not enamored of that," said Mangano, who is also the CEO of the American Roundtable to Abolish Homelessness and the former executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness under former President George W. Bush. "They're very wary. As a result of that wariness, that disconnectedness, that lack of social capital, lack of a family that provides lots of social interaction, these women are the most vulnerable."

If you can't measure it, you can't improve it

This January, as they do every year, volunteers scoured the county looking for homeless individuals and asking them a series of questions: whether they're a veteran, whether they're chronically homeless, demographic information like their ethnicity. (They also took the opportunity to offer them help). The 2017 preliminary Point-in-Time count showed a continued downtick in the total number of homeless — 1 percent less than in 2016 — when it was [released March 22](#), a slowdown from prior years but still a sign that programs are working, county officials say.

But one number stood out as worse. The number of unaccompanied homeless women — that is, women living alone without a fixed, regular nighttime residence — jumped to 284. The segment wasn't tracked last year, according to the count results. The reason isn't 100 percent clear, Mangano said — but to him, the consequence is completely clear. “This was a dramatic enough increase to begin the process of shifting some policies, re-looking at our policies and shifting priorities,” he said. “So we need to adjust our sights just as we prioritized homeless veterans and resolved the homelessness of nearly 1,000 homeless veterans. That's now our intent, and that's the focus.”

Research looking specifically at unaccompanied homeless women is scarce, said Sofia Herrera, Ph.D, director of the [Office for Urban Initiatives](#) at Fuller Theological Seminary. She's part of a group called 1 in 4 National Advocacy — named for the fact that about 25 percent of homeless people are unaccompanied women — that's held two conventions on the subject, but no county has yet designated them as a special population, she said. “San Bernardino County is a pioneer in this,” Herrera said. “Whatever we learn in San Bernardino County, we're going to be able to share, and San Bernardino County sits at the table.”

Still, [research](#) makes some of the first steps clear, Herrera said: Make sure women are on outreach teams, make trust and safety paramount, and provide for women's health needs. “It's not about pitting one group against another,” she said. “It's about working collaboratively in a way that helps all groups.”

One of the primary researchers, pointed to by both Mangano and Herrera, is Suzanne Wenzel, a professor at USC. Wholeheartedly endorsing the focus on unaccompanied women, Wenzel is also quick to add that any effort to help one group of homeless people helps others — and society. “The majority of people experiencing homelessness don't come from somewhere else, and they don't become homeless because of supportive strategies,” Wenzel said, pushing back against the so-called magnet effect, or the theory that offering services brings homeless people from surrounding areas. “It's absolutely to no one's benefit to allow any member of this group to remain homeless. It ends up costing society and our public purse far more to allow persons to persist in this state. And it's the humane thing to do.”

‘I thank God every day’

Around Thanksgiving, a few months before the Point in Time count, Linda Lou Mogart got a visit from workers with [Step Up on Second](#), a Los Angeles-based organization that got a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and San Bernardino County to house 212 homeless people over the course of a year. At first, she didn't believe them, said Mogart, 60, who had been homeless for about 20 years. “People would come around from the different churches and things, but nothing like that,” Mogart said of the repeated visits to check in and update her on progress to find her a permanent place to live. “I never knew anything like that existed. I didn't believe it.”

But proof came in January when Step Up provided Mogart and her dog — her one constant companion for the last 14 years — with a new home. “My dog has never lived inside, except in the van we lived in for a while,” Mogart said. “This is the first time he's lived in a house, so he's kind of jumpy.”

It's been a major adjustment for Mogart, too. She'd lived in a tent or vehicle since about 20 years ago when she lost her job and her home from stress-related disability, then left her husband and two boys after having a mental breakdown, she said. Soon, the disability checks stopped. “I just started living in the streets, like in a tent, and that's pretty much where I've been since,” she said. “Learning how to survive. It was bad and it was less bad, but it was never really good. There were a few times I didn't think I'd made it through. I had given up hope of anything ever really being better.”

The chronically homeless, those who've all but given up on being anything but homeless are the focus of Step Up in San Bernardino, said CEO Tod Lipka. A trio of individuals, with expertise in healthcare and substance abuse, seek out and then assess homeless people to find the most vulnerable. “As Linda said, they've given up and often are impressed just that we come back the next day when we say we will,” Lipka said. “Eventually, they start to believe. And as more and more people get housed, others believe there's hope.”

Since October, when it didn't yet have any infrastructure in San Bernardino County, the organization has provided permanent supportive housing to 37 people here, he said. Mogart, through tears, said she still doesn't fully believe she's one of them. “The people who come to help me, they're so great,” she said. “I thank God every day when I open the window.”