

## Not Just Talk

### Santa Barbara County's 10-Year Homeless Plan Begins Bearing Fruit

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By [Nick Welsh](#) ([Contact](#))

At the same time that Santa Barbara's homeless people are dying in alarming numbers—including two more in the past two weeks—a group of activists, shelter providers, politicians, business leaders, bureaucrats, and housing hustlers gathered on Wednesday afternoon in front of Transition House, where they celebrated the accomplishments of an audacious if unwieldy plan hatched three years ago to end chronic homelessness in a decade. “We’ve built a foundation and infrastructure over the past 18 months that could bear truly remarkable results,” explained Mike Foley, director of the Casa Esperanza shelter on Cacique Street, where the new organization, Bringing Our Community Home, is headquartered. “But we’re in the fifth mile of a 26-mile race.”



Paul Wellman

**LESS HOMELESS:** John Buttny said that by slowing down the revolving door between county jail, the ER, and the streets, cities and counties can save money and actually help the homeless.

Even so, Foley said the 10-Year Plan has already helped place 344 chronically homeless individuals in permanent housing. Plus, the organization's Web site ([bringsbcohome.org](http://bringsbcohome.org)) provides the most comprehensive listing of services available to people on the streets from 55 different agencies—“that never existed before,” said Foley—and shelters that used to compete for limited public and philanthropic funds are now cooperating. And affordable housing

developments are being designed to help. For instance, the Garden Street Apartments—developed on the 600 block jointly by the Mental Health Association and Jeff Bermant—set aside 10 of its 51 units for the chronically mentally ill and an upcoming Housing Authority project will set aside 28 of its 55 units for the chronically homeless. Without the plan, Foley said, it's doubtful such strides would have been made.

The county's plan began in earnest in 2005 out of political necessity and economic self-interest. Under the Bush regime, local governments were required to adopt 10-year plans targeting the chronically homeless to remain eligible for certain federal housing grants. "Someone in the Bush administration figured out that if you put homeless people in housing first and then delivered the services, it was incredibly more efficient than to have them recycling in and out of jails and emergency rooms only to wind up back on the streets again," said John Buttny, who was just appointed as the group's new executive director. That's because the chronically homeless make up a small fraction of the homeless population—about 10 percent—but account for about half the total cost of homeless care.

Former county health czar Roger Heroux was brought out of retirement to tackle the problem. He and his team discovered that in Santa Barbara County, public and private entities spent \$36 million a year dealing with the homeless, much of which Heroux believed to be tragically squandered due to lack of planning, cooperation, or coordination by agencies—some didn't even know that the others existed. The revolving door between the county jail and the emergency rooms of county hospitals alone ate up \$12.5 million a year. Better to spend less money putting this group into permanent housing, argued Heroux and allies such as Santa Barbara City Councilmember Helene Schneider, and focus the delivery of services more directly on them there. Not only was it more humanitarian, it was cost-effective. The problem, of course, was and is the prohibitive cost of housing.

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Not everyone in the homeless community did cartwheels over the 10-Year Plan. Ken Williams, a county social worker who works exclusively with people on the street, was skeptical then and remains skeptical now. "I've seen a lot of planning documents over the years," he said. "I haven't seen much change." But even Williams admits that anything that brought together the talents and energies of Heroux and Buttny was a positive development.

Health issues eventually forced Heroux to retire, but not before he created the new nonprofit and got it on quasi-stable financial footing. Buttny, a veteran of county government, was hired as Heroux's replacement, and he's spent his time acquainting the proverbial left hand with what the right hand is doing. For example, to keep people from becoming homeless in the first place, Buttny sought to prevent evictions. He discovered that 30 agencies—private and public—deal with eviction prevention. "We got these people together in the same room for the first time," he said. "That's part of our mission." On a broader scale, he discovered there are 75 agencies that provide services to the homeless. Thus far, he's interviewed representatives from about 55, visiting their place of business. This undertaking was the basis for the homeless service locator that his organization launched about six weeks ago at [bringsbcohome.org](http://bringsbcohome.org).

More recently, Bring Our Community Home secured a grant to pay for a service outreach worker at the county jail, where roughly one-seventh of the prisoners claim to be homeless or list no fixed address. The outreach worker will meet with such prisoners prior to their release to ensure they have a place to go and know where appropriate services are available. The program is slated to start in July.

In good economic times, the cost of housing—especially for the chronically homeless—is prohibitive; in bad times, there's little financing to build it. Providing the social services necessary to make the model work is often tougher still. And then, of course, there's the question of whether people who've been choking the court system, the jail, and emergency rooms for years can or will get along with neighbors.

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Councilmember Helene Schneider—who's been working with the 10-year effort since its inception—acknowledged a transition period is necessary for people accustomed to living on the streets. Mike Foley of Casa Esperanza noted that of the chronically homeless placed in El Carrillo affordable housing complex during its first year, 80 percent were still there a year later. He explained, “When you place people in housing and then provide them with some level of services, it just works.”

Since the 10-Year Plan was officially adopted—and given the blessing of the county government and most cities in the county—Bringing Our Community Home has raised about \$460,000 (during two years), most from private foundations. In that time, political impatience with street people, panhandlers, and street drunks has increased notably. As have police raids. Homeless advocates claim that violence against the homeless is on the rise, with one murdered, one possibly murdered, and another who police suspect may have been set on fire six weeks ago. In the past two weeks, a homeless veteran in his mid fifties died at the Casa Esperanza shelter; another, 23 years old, died this week in Pershing Park when he fell and hit his head on a rock. This brings the total number of homeless who've died this year to 17; by contrast, 18 died in all of 2008.

Buttny is mindful of the shifting political currents. Part of that stems from a sense of collective futility that nothing can be done, so why bother. By showing otherwise, Buttny hopes to “humanize the homeless.” Besides, said Casa Esperanza's Foley, a public reckoning and progress report was necessary. “Written plans tend to get placed up on shelves and gather dust,” he said. “We don't want that to happen.”