

San Jose's Jungle: It will close, but homelessness will remain a huge problem

By Frederick Ferrer, Rick Williams and Jennifer Loving
Special to the Mercury News

Posted: 09/09/2014 12:17:49 PM PDT

The Jungle—one of Silicon Valley's largest homeless encampments—has attracted much media attention this past year. Story after story articulated shock and dismay at the magnitude of our region's homeless population and the number of men, women and children living outdoors, noting the juxtaposition of such an encampment within this wealthy area.

But when the Jungle is closed, the most visible reminder of this problem will be lost.

Before it does, the city of San Jose is leading a massive cross sector effort to ensure many of the residents will be housed and employed. But the ones who can't will quietly scatter to hide in other shadows, and the thousands more like them who never lived there will still need our help. The crisis of homelessness remains.

A key contributor to this problem is the lack of a shared community responsibility—the recognition that our neighbors become homeless for a variety of reasons, most of which are not under their control: an illness, being laid off, or the ever-increasing cost of housing in the Valley. We feel relieved when these folks simply move on and no longer are visible on our way to work. Historically, we've applied Band-Aid solutions, which have only made those sleeping on our streets temporarily comfortable.

But over the last few years, Destination: Home, a public-private partnership, has brought organizations together to systematically reduce the number of people living in our streets. The work of these community partners has demonstrated the efficacy of the Housing First model and the programs designed to assist people in maintaining their housing.

And once housed, folks stop cycling through expensive medical and corrections systems—decreasing the burden on our public safety net. Housing homeless families

enables the children to progress and succeed in school, and their parents to maintain their employment.

We know housing ends homelessness, but the seemingly insurmountable cost has kept us from achieving the necessary scale. This is happening in a valley where companies are routinely bought and sold for more than the cost of the total housing we need, and the transactions often take place within 20 miles of this encampment.

Luckily for all of us, key stakeholders have come together in support of a singular solution to increase the supply of housing and services for our most vulnerable populations -- disabled chronically homeless men and women, families left homeless unexpectedly, and veterans, who deserve the help of their community. Our new Community Plan to End Homelessness will be published this fall, outlining the goals necessary to end homelessness.

But we can't do it without our broader community recognizing that our success really means our valley will be healthier overall.

We know permanent housing works, but we need deeper investments, regulatory changes and regional commitment to bring this solution to scale. We need upfront private capital dollars to accelerate housing production and creative new ways to fund services to help people maintain their housing.

The Jungle will be gone soon, but the people who need our help the most will not. The location may change, but before long, new encampments will grow. This might not affect you today, but homelessness is location agnostic. We can choose to look the other way until we find ourselves again, looking right at it. Let's use the innovation and capital of Silicon Valley to solve this crisis.

Frederick Ferrer is CEO of The Health Trust, Rick Williams is CEO of The Sobrato Philanthropies and Jennifer Loving is executive director of Destination: Home. They wrote this for this newspaper.