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## At Police Commission Hearing, LAPD and Critics Agree: Policing Alone Isn't the Answer to End Homelessness

**By Kate Mather**  
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The crowd that filled the chambers inside City Hall was quiet as one of L.A.'s police commissioners spoke, explaining her personal connection to one of the most pressing issues facing Los Angeles.

Shane Murphy Goldsmith said her younger brother had experienced homelessness throughout his life. She thought of him, she added, during a ride-along with some of the police officers assigned to the L.A. Police Department's homeless outreach efforts.

"As we visited encampments lining the sidewalks, I saw my baby brother behind the eyes of each person we encountered," she said. "I owe it to him and to everyone like him to do my part to ensure that we treat each person experiencing homelessness with dignity and respect."

Goldsmith's remarks opened a special hearing held Tuesday by the Police Commission, one focused on better understanding what people experience while living on the streets as well as the challenges that the LAPD and other agencies face trying to help them.

The four-hour meeting underscored the complexity of

homelessness and how to reduce it. But gradually, a common theme emerged: Policing alone isn't the answer.

"For decades, many peoples' impulse response to an unwanted homeless person in their neighborhood has been to call the police," said Greg Spiegel, who rejoined Inner City Law Center last year after working as Mayor Eric Garcetti's top homelessness policy advisor. "This hasn't worked."

It's a sentiment often expressed by police officers, who feel unfairly tasked with addressing such a complicated topic, and advocates for homeless Angelenos, many of whom accuse police of using heavy-handed tactics in those communities. People who are homeless often need permanent housing or treatment for substance abuse or mental health — solutions that stretch beyond the scope of policing, they agree.

Critics accuse officers of unfairly sweeping through homeless encampments to tear down tents, seize belongings and ticket or arrest those who don't comply with city rules. The sweeps have resulted in a series of lawsuits against the city, with courts frequently siding with homeless residents and rejecting the city's actions to clean up sidewalks.

That criticism has flared after deadly encounters between police and homeless people, including the fatal 2015 shootings of a man living on skid row and another who was staying near the Venice boardwalk. Homeless advocates also frequently cite a mentally ill homeless man who fell to his death from a downtown rooftop in 2014 after an officer used a Taser on him.

Still, others credit police tactics with reducing crime and blight in some parts of downtown L.A. — the epicenter of the city's homeless population — over the last decade. Some residents and businesses say the police need to step in to make sidewalks passable and deal with drug dealing and other crimes within the homeless community.

"There's some groups that think we do too much — they think we do too much enforcement," Cmdr. Todd Chamberlain, who leads the LAPD's homeless outreach efforts, said at Tuesday's meeting. "And then on the other side, there's other community groups, people find permanent housing. Last summer, the Police Commission approved a new policy directing officers to treat people who are homeless with "compassion and empathy." The LAPD is trying to train more officers in how to best interact with people who may be homeless

## At Police Commission Hearing, LAPD and Critics Agree:—continued

or mentally ill, Chamberlain said. To understand crime affecting the homeless community, he said, the department took steps to better document those offenses and look for trends.

Since the HOPE teams were formed last year, Chamberlain said, they have contacted more than 7,500 people who are homeless, finding housing for about 390. Some arrests were made, he said — 101 for felonies and 163 for misdemeanor crimes.

Given the number of contacts, Chamberlain said he considered the numbers a “really good balance.” The HOPE teams are designed to focus on services, he said, not enforcement.

But for some at Tuesday’s meeting, police still act too aggressively when interacting with people who are homeless.

Spiegel said his law center, which is based on skid row, was reluctant to call the police about clients. He pointed to one 2014 encounter, when a man named David came to the law clinic and told staff members he was afraid he might hurt himself. David called a crisis hotline, Spiegel said. Soon, two police officers showed up at the office.

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When David saw the officers, Spiegel said, he grew agitated. As the staff tried to get the officers to call a mental health unit or an ambulance that would take him to a hospital, more police arrived. After a tense back-and-forth, Spiegel said, one officer reached for a Taser before a staff member intervened and an ambulance arrived.

“It was a very close call,” Spiegel said.

“Things were very close to becoming a use of force.”

General Dogon, an organizer with the Los Angeles Community Action Network, a skid row advocacy group, was one of dozens of people who attended Tuesday’s meeting — another “save the homeless” meeting, he quipped. Dogon said he thought the LAPD downplayed how much of an impact enforcement has on the city’s homeless residents.

You’ve got all these other service providers, you’ve got all these other organizations, but LAPD is the main wheel in this thing,” he said. “If they don’t stop the enforcement and stop the criminalization, then nothing is going to work.”

Goldsmith, the police commissioner, said she was impressed by the LAPD’s approach to homelessness — the policy, the training, the effort to understand what people are experiencing. But she acknowledged the difficult moments that still exist between police and homeless Angelenos, and agreed that the LAPD couldn’t solve the problem alone.

The key, she said, is using additional resources to further the work of the LAPD and other agencies. Measure H, a quarter-cent sales tax increase, and Measure HHH, a \$1.2-billion bond measure — both recently passed by voters to fund housing and other support — are crucial, she added. So is investment from the community.

“It gives me hope to see a room packed full of people who want to help,” she said. “We know things aren’t perfect, but people are working so hard.”



The L.A. Police Commissioner Shane Murphy Goldsmith looks on during a special meeting at City Hall to discuss homelessness. She opened the hearing by explaining her personal connection to the issue. (Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times)