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L.A. proves again that law enforcement won't solve homelessness

By Adam Muray
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Early Sunday afternoon, Los Angeles police officers shot and killed a man known to his neighbors as "Africa." Initial reports suggest that Africa had been living on the streets of skid row since being released from a mental health facility last year. Africa was one of the more than 58,000 people whom the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority estimates were homeless in Los Angeles County on Sunday.

This staggering number bears repeating — 58,000 human beings homeless every night in Los Angeles County. That's more people than live in 56 of the 88 cities in Los Angeles County. Too often, our minds become numbed by such large numbers. But if we are to eradicate homelessness, we need to remember that each person without a home is someone's son or daughter. Maybe being numb is why we treat homelessness as a law enforcement problem rather than the housing, poverty and mental health problem that it is. Maybe being numb explains why the City Council is debating whether to make it even easier to seize the possessions of homeless people. Maybe being numb is why we have been spending more city discretionary general fund revenues on policing skid row than on providing housing and mental health services. Maybe being numb is why the L.A. region is frequently called the "homeless capital of the United States."

And yet, in significant ways, we have recently become more clear-headed in our attack on homelessness. Local city

and county agencies and nonprofit organizations have developed innovative models for tackling homelessness. New systems coordinate and target the existing patchwork of services that end or avoid homelessness for many individuals and families. We have a mayor who talks about ending homelessness rather than managing it. The County Department of Health Services provides housing for people who are both homeless and high utilizers of medical services. The United Way has been leading a broad "Home for Good" coalition that tries to cut through the special interests and political agendas that too often hijack and stifle aggressive and creative public policy.

But these fledgling efforts remain woefully inadequate to meet the formidable challenge of so much homelessness. To eradicate homelessness, we must demand that our elected officials spend far more resources on housing, poverty and mental health. Only by committing to scale will we succeed.

The single most important step that could be taken to scale up our attack on homelessness would be to create 10,000 units of permanent supportive housing for people who are chronically homeless, that is people who have been homeless for at least a year or at least four times in the last three years, and who are dealing with a disabling condition. Study after study has found that it is more cost-effective to provide people who are chronically homeless with long-term housing and services than it is to have them live on the streets, cycling in and out of our emergency rooms, jails and

shelters.

In 2013, for example, an Economic Roundtable study found that every dollar spent in Los Angeles on providing permanent supportive housing for some of the most costly homeless individuals reduced public and hospital costs by \$2 in the first year and \$6 in subsequent years.

In addition to tackling chronic homelessness and mental health disabilities, we must also take more aggressive steps to stem the poverty-induced tide of new homelessness. Los Angeles has the least affordable rental market in the country. Too many families are precariously perched, just one lost job, one illness, one divorce away from being on the street.

If we look hard and do not allow ourselves to become numb, we will see that tackling homelessness and increasing affordable housing require innovation and a substantial investment of resources. Truly seeing the many thousands of homeless people on our streets should galvanize us to act boldly. The alternative — continuing to treat homelessness as primarily a public safety issue to be dealt with by harsher laws and more law enforcement — leads only to more misery, heartache and deaths like the one Sunday. Surely we can do better for all our sons and daughters.

