

EDITORIALS

# Vision to end homelessness

**SUNDAY**  
**VENTURA COUNTY**  
**STAR**  
 www.venturacountystar.com

Partly sunny  
 High of 60 inland, 58 at the coast. C12  
 Dec. 17, 2006 EC

**SPORTS**  
 Ogilvy has a one-stroke lead heading into the last round of the Target World Challenge. C1

**ARTS & LIVING**  
 Some area residents have pressed their luck on a variety of game shows. E1

**BUSINESS**  
 A world-class chili pepper breeder lives in Camarillo. D1

**SUNDAY STAR**  
**East County**  
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**IN MONDAY'S STAR**  
**12,000 pounds of holiday cheer**  
 Standing 67 feet tall and weighing 12,000 pounds, the Christmas tree at the Simi Valley Town Center features 10,000 lights and countless ornaments. The tree is a white spruce from the Mount Shasta area.

East County Editor: Mike Comeaux, 496-0803; mcomeaux@VenturaCountyStar.com

**Sunday STAR**  
**Opinion**

Section B, Page 11      Opinion Page Editor: Marianne Ratcliff, 655-5836, letters@VenturaCountyStar.com      Dec. 17, 2006      FC      The Star

**Los Angeles Times**  
**CALIFORNIA**  
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 latimes.com/california

# Vision to end homelessness

## Concrete plan will save lives

People take various routes to homelessness. Mary and Joseph's ancient story of finding shelter in a barn comes to mind this time of year as one.

Star reporter Charles Levin wrote Dec. 9 about Debra Riddell and Kindle Myers' paths to the National Guard Armory in Ventura, where they seek shelter from the cold from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.

Turn to page B13 and read the stories of Jason and Shelly, told by the county Homeless Services Program coordinator.

Some, such as Ventura native Debra Riddell, are longtime Ventura County residents, people who Ventura Councilman Neal Andrews describes in today's Opinion commentary as neighbors who "are not really homeless. This is their home. They are houseless."

We don't have to feel sorry for their plight and wish there were an answer, before closing this newspaper and going on with our busy lives.

The answer is being worked on right now by a wide range of individuals, nonprofit groups, government agencies, religious organizations and elected officials. Nearly 200 of them gathered at a public meeting in Camarillo on Monday to review the promising draft of a "10-Year Strategy to End Homelessness for Ventura County," organized by the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition. It is a draft that will be worked on until it is presented to the county Board of Supervisors for adoption in May.

Its first ambitious goal, among several, is "to reduce homelessness within the county by 50 percent during the first five years of implementation" — 2008-12.

The Star applauds this excellent plan, one county Supervisor Kathy Long rightfully describes as "very doable."

This is a concrete effort, with potential funding of \$1 million a year in Ventura County through Housing and Urban Development. The Ventura County Board of Supervisors has provided the county Homeless and Housing Coalition \$200,000 over three years to implement the strategy and pursue government funding.

The group that worked on the draft conservatively estimates that some 6,000 Ventura County residents experience

homelessness annually and that at least 1,000 are homeless on a given day here. Among the 20 recommendations included thus far in the draft strategy are:

— Implement a

countywide homeless prevention program that will prevent at least half (50 percent) or 1,000 of the 2,000 households who become homeless each year from becoming homeless.

— Encourage the creation of a county Housing Trust Fund that serves as a catalyst to develop public and private sources of funding to support the production and preservation of affordable housing.

— Enlist the support of faith-based organizations to help implement the goals and recommendations in this report.

One person in Ventura County set an example Monday. Eugenie Cansler, of Camarillo, wasn't waiting for reports or government financing. She read about Ms. Riddell in the Dec. 9 Star. The article described how Ms. Riddell sought relief at the Armory after spending a 38-degree night in an Oxnard field. Ms. Riddell said she was on the streets after breaking up with a boyfriend, and that getting a job without a car has been tough: "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to bite you. I'm not going to rub off on you. We may be homeless, but give us a chance."

Ms. Cansler read that and started looking for Karol Schulkin, the county Homeless Services Program coordinator, to find out what she could do. First, she drove to Monday's conference to find Ms. Schulkin. Then, she and a friend drove to the Armory, met Ms. Riddell and promised to help her however they could — six-packs of Ensure for nourishment and a weekly visit, to start.

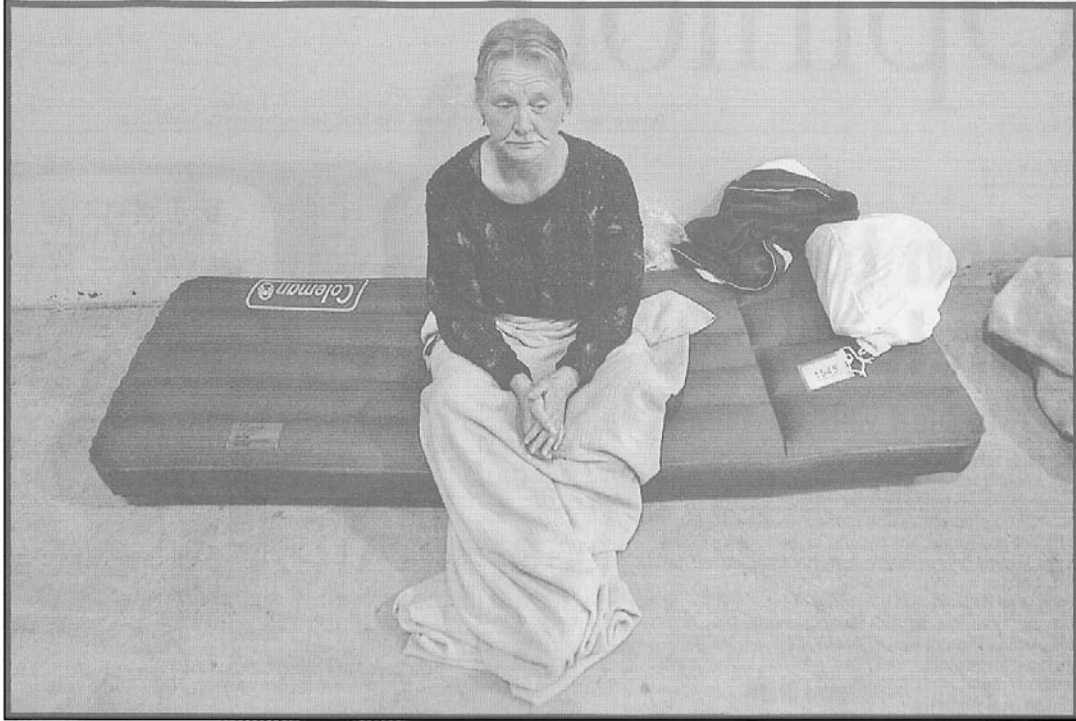
Thank you for showing us all the way, Ms. Cansler.

### Read draft

To read the "10-Year Strategy to end Homeless for Ventura County" and to learn more about the issue of homelessness in Ventura County, log on to <http://www.vchhc.org>, or call Cathy Brudnicki, executive director of the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition, at 485-6288, ext. 273; e-mail [cathy@vchhc.org](mailto:cathy@vchhc.org).



## HOMELESSNESS IN VENTURA COUNTY



Debra Riddell, 50, sits on her inflatable bed Dec. 5 at the Ventura/Oxnard winter homeless shelter at the Armory in Ventura.

Photo by James Glover II / Star staff

# Debra ‘touched my heart’

**By Eugenie Cansler**

**R**e: your Dec. 9 article, “Winter shelter ‘like heaven’ to homeless”:

I was instantly drawn to the winter shelter article. The picture of Debra Riddell, wrapped in a blanket, caught my eye. Well, she touched my heart. After reading the rest of the very well-written article, I knew I had to do something to help.

We know of this situation that goes on all the time, but is compounded when our cold or rainy season arrives. The swift response this year with adequate shelter, new air mattresses and a good busing system is to be congratulated.

Making arrangements to have personal contact with Debra took time and phone calls. Hearing that Karol Schulkin, head of the county homeless program, was going to be in Camarillo for a community meeting on this problem Monday, I hopped into my car to see if we could speak.

She graciously and generously came out of the meeting to give me some of her precious time.

The end result was that I contacted another single friend of mine, Judy Larson, in Port Hueneme. She said that she would like to join me in going to the shelter on Tuesday night after 6. Fortunately, we both have time during this busy holiday season to see to the needs of others. A face-to-face meeting is so satisfactory, and Debra is a young woman in a frightening position. She feels unsafe, having been homeless for five months and on the streets.

With her social worker, Anna Chavez, in attendance, we became acquainted and Debra relaxed. She is very open and friendly. When she is able to be on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), as Anna is working on getting for her, she will begin her new life as a single woman alone.

Ideally, she would like to rent a room that she can afford, which isn't

easy in Ventura County. Looking into the possibility of a rental in a home with kitchen privileges seems to me to be the answer. Can we find a kind individual who would work with “the system”? Debra will be more than happy to take care of her financial responsibility as soon as her SSI comes through.

My help will be to make a weekly visit to her. I will bring her six-packs of Ensure to keep up her nourishment during the day when she is not at the shelter. If I can help her with clothes, I will do that as well. My friend Judy is also going to help another woman there.

Will you open your hearts and try also to make personal contact if you can? It would mean so much to them to have someone visit them. The shelter is difficult to find, so you would be wise to make contact with a social worker first at the county of Ventura. The phone number is 987-8353.

— Eugenie Cansler lives in Camarillo.

# Unique opportunity to end homelessness in V.C.

**By Joseph Colletti**

Stakeholders within the county have a unique opportunity to address homelessness unlike ever before. About five years ago, the president challenged the 100 largest cities to end chronic homelessness within their communities by developing 10-year strategies to end homelessness. A couple of years later, the U.S. Conference of Mayors extended the administration's challenge and unanimously passed a resolution that "strongly encourages cities (and related jurisdictions) to create and implement strategic plans to end homelessness in 10 years."

A couple of years ago, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development began to encourage each of the approximately 500 jurisdictions that receives HUD homeless assistance funds to implement a 10-year strategy in order to remain competitive for funding. As a result of the challenges, nearly half of these jurisdictions, including the county of Ventura, have begun or completed a 10-year strategy.

The challenges and encouragements from public entities come on the heels of two decades of homeless service provision that has produced limited results. The 1980s is known as a decade of homeless compassion. During this time, the country witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of homeless persons.

The public responded largely with emergency assistance such as food and clothing, while nonprofits increased

the number of shelter beds. The basic idea was that a good meal, clean clothing and a good night's sleep, along with other types of basic assistance, would help homeless adults obtain employment and ultimately obtain and maintain affordable housing.

By the end of the decade, the public began to experience compassion fatigue. As the number of meals served and donated clothing and shelter beds increased, so did the number of homeless adults and children.

Consequently, compassion fatigue turned to compassion frustration by the early 1990s. The public increasingly turned to enforcement to solve its homeless problems. Existing or new local anti-loitering and anti-panhandling laws were increasingly enforced. Overnight curfews for parks were also enforced and storing personal belongings in public places was prohibited.

The 1990s ended as the 1980s did with increasing numbers of homeless persons. During the 1990s, however, many public and private homeless-service providers began to realize the complexity of issues that surround homelessness and began to re-examine their approach and resources.

This re-examination has begun to make a difference. About 90 jurisdictions have completed and implemented 10-year strategies, which contain new approaches and new or reconfigured resources that have resulted in significant reductions of adults and children among their homeless population. Some have reported a decrease of

homeless persons of up to 40 percent within two to three years.

The Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition initiated a process last spring to complete a 10-year strategy by enlisting community input. One of the first tasks of the coalition was to look closely at many completed strategies with the goal of incorporating successful actions into a local 10-year strategy. The task has been completed and a draft strategy exists (on <http://www.vchhc.org/>) with 20 recommendations that focus on one initial primary goal — reduce the county's homeless population by 50 percent during the first five years of implementation.

Although this decade is more than half over, it provides local stakeholders with enough time to focus on a unique opportunity to address homelessness. During the coming months and years, we can complete, adopt and implement a strategy that could decrease the local homeless population not only by the end of this decade, but during the next decade as well.

Significantly reducing homelessness, which may have seemed out of reach during past years, is potentially within reach during the coming years.

— *Joseph Colletti, Ph.D., is executive director of The Institute for Urban Research and Development in Los Angeles and the consultant to the Ventura County Housing and Homeless Coalition.*

# Goal is to end — not manage — serious problem

**D**uring this holiday season, our communities are busy with parades, shopping, crowded parking lots and excited children awaiting the season's surprises. Amidst



**Kathy I. Long**

these joys, let us take a moment to reflect on the challenges some Ventura County residents and families face living on the brink of homelessness — in our river bottoms, in toolsheds, in cars, with children.

The draft "10 Year Strategy to End Homelessness" was the topic of a community workshop sponsored by the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition on Monday. I have the honor of chairing the Regional Steering Committee that worked with the coalition and our consultant to produce the draft strategic plan.

More than 165 people participated in the workshop and reviewed and discussed the 20 recommendations outlined in the plan that goes beyond just managing homelessness to developing new initiatives focused on prevention. Planning to end homelessness — not to manage the problem — is new. The initial goal illustrated in the plan is to reduce homelessness within the county by 50 percent during the first five years of implementation.

The breakout sessions of the forum provided time to hear from the advocates, administrators and general public as to what are the "best practices," the barriers and the areas of

agreement. We heard issues that called for the shared responsibility to end this societal condition in our county. To ensure the recommendations and activities highlighted in the plan are accomplished, regional collaboration must be a basic tenet. So, a key recommendation calls for the establishment of an Interagency Council on Homelessness for Ventura County. This doesn't have to be a new governing body, but it should be a council composed of elected members from county, city, school and recreation/park districts, reflective of those bodies that already interact with the homeless population. The council would be charged with oversight of the implementation, coordination and evaluation of all the recommendations and related activities with the 10-year plan.

We also had a "call to action" for volunteers to help with the street count taking place Jan. 23, a requirement by our federal funding partners at Housing and Urban Development, to secure our funding stream. We estimate that 6,000 people experience homelessness in Ventura County every year and have a wide range of service needs that require coordinated case management. We know the face of homelessness includes children, emancipated foster youth, veterans, the mentally ill, a single parent living from one paycheck to the next, the child living in a car, a family evicted from their home, the mother escaping an abusive relationship, and the grandson caught in a downward spiral of drug addiction and mounting debts. Band-Aid strategies, such as winter warming shelters, do

not end the cycle, nor meet the needs of people who experience homelessness year-round.

We heard that housing is a major issue. I helped to develop the RAIN Transitional Living Center, a year-round housing facility, whose mission is to provide case management services to people experiencing homelessness in Ventura County. RAIN offers the necessary tools to assist clients with life skills that enable them to become employed and back on their feet. Transitional programs are examples of successful solutions to ending homelessness. But there aren't enough RAIN facilities, and we've learned through this planning process, that to help someone before they enter homelessness is much more cost-effective than to bring them out of homelessness.

The 10-year strategic plan unveiled at the forum invites community engagement. The next steps are to take public input over the next couple of months, conduct the street count, finalize the plan and take it to the Board of Supervisors for adoption in May. So, this time next year, we can be under way with implementing the strategies and celebrate making a difference in the lives of many in our community. For more information and to engage in the solutions, contact Cathy Brudnicki, executive director, Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition, at 485-6283, ext. 273, or <http://www.vchhc.org/>.

— *Kathy I. Long, of Camarillo, is supervisor of the 3rd Supervisorial District.*

# Lives can be mended and safety nets repaired

I often am asked how people become homeless. There is not a simple answer. Here are some glimpses into that world.

"It's so hard to ask for help," said the man on the other end of the line, his voice hesitant and soft-spoken. The space between words grew longer until there was only silence on the other end.

"How can we help you?" I asked.

"They tell me I have a mental illness," he blurted out. "My utilities are past due and my rent is unpaid." A long pause followed. "You may not believe this, but I used to be a professional person."



Karol  
**Schulkin**

I believed him.

The two of us struggled through a conversation for the next half hour: Jason looking for words to wrap his needs in, and me trying to create a safe space for him to share them. We hung up once. He asked that I call him back on my nickel. The minutes on his calling card were dwindling and that is his lifeline to the outside world. I needed to know what he had left and where he had already looked for help. I probed his personal story as gently as I could, praying there would be a resource somewhere to meet his needs. This much I knew: This man would not fair well on the street

## Fragile thread of hope

I learned that Jason is 60 years old, divorced and struggles now with depression. He has two graduate degrees. His small place rents for \$500 a month. He is two months behind. He might qualify for disability, but that is months away at best. He holds on to a fragile thread of hope.

Each person who is homeless has a story to tell. I lift up Shelly and Jason's stories as examples of hundreds of others who live bravely among us trudging toward the light. Some are so beaten down that they have given up hope that life can again be good and safe and meaningful for them. I believe it can be. Lives can be mended and safety nets repaired. When I spoke to Jason Friday morning, he told me I have a kind voice. I do try to be kind, but kindness doesn't pay the rent.

Last month, I participated on a panel at California Lutheran University, exploring the issues of hunger and homelessness in Ventura County. The expert on the panel was Shelly, who bravely shared the story of her descent into homelessness as a single mother of three children, ages 7, 4 and 2. Raised in a middle-class family, college-educated and married, Shelly was securely part of mainstream society. All of that changed when she realized she must leave her husband and home for safety sake.

## Still a struggle

There followed several years of homelessness, shelters and counseling. She re-entered the work force. A number of local programs, including the RAIN Project, reached out to offer help. Drugs and alcohol were not a part of Shelly's story. Her faith and the values she grew up with guided her choices. It still bothers her that one day, in the depths of homelessness, she entered a store, tore open a package of diapers and took one for her baby.

She told of parking her car at night under the lights of a shopping center sign so she could feel a little safer

keeping vigil over her children as they slept in the back seat.

Thankfully, Shelly now has an apartment and a part-time job that makes use of her education. She still struggles every month to pay the bills and, at times, turns to a food pantry for groceries. She confided to me after the panel that she was unsure of the best way to get home in the dark. She doesn't get out much or drive around the county. Gas is too expensive and drives are a luxury.

## Generosity fills gap

People's lives become broken. All too often, the system in place to help them is broken as well. Most governmental funding sources require that financial help be reserved for those who are already homeless. Prevention is not a priority. That needs to change. Other key programs restrict emergency assistance to "once-in-a-lifetime help" and many food pantries limit their help to once a quarter or once a month. This happens not because those who offer the aid are uncaring, but because the cupboard is bare and the funds run out.

The reality is that people need

*Continued* ▶

to eat every day and landlords are entitled to expect their rent. This gap between urgent needs and resources can be met, in part at least, by the generosity of people who are willing to share.

Such help came through for Lu Merritt of Thousand Oaks through response of readers to Colleen Cason's column in *The Star* two months ago. More than 100 people wrote to Lu, sending encouragement, a \$5 bill, or whatever they could share. It all added up to a transformation of her circumstances. Her toilet and shower are now working, the roof repaired and her rent paid for a few months. She recently shared her delight in being able to volunteer as part of a service group that helped her. This time she will be helping others.

— *Karol Schulkin is the Homeless Services Program coordinator for the county of Ventura, Human Services Agency. She can be reached by phone at 987-6892 or by e-mail at karol.schulkin@ventura.org.*

### **How to help**

Catholic Charities, 303 N. Ventura Ave., Suite A, Ventura, CA 93003 has offered to be a linking point for anyone interested in helping Jason or Shelly, or anyone else in similar circumstances in the county, or in eviction-prevention services. Checks can be made out to Catholic Charities with a reference in the comment line about where the donor would like the money directed.

# 'They are houseless'

About 160 people gathered Monday to talk about how to end homelessness in our community within the next decade. It was an amazing turnout. The homeless, despite the attention seen during the holiday season, are frankly not



Neal  
Andrews

generally uppermost in the minds of our fellow citizens most days. Having worked for many years to find solutions to the challenges facing the poor, and particularly those impoverished by mental illness, I was impressed by the com-

munity concern.

As an elected official, I too often hear from constituents that we should not provide services to the homeless. The letters almost always start with: "I really believe we need to help the poor (or the homeless, or the mentally ill, or whomever is the group of the moment), BUT?"

The fear sometimes expressed is that aid simply encourages the homeless to abuse taxpayer-funded programs or that charitable programs will simply attract more homeless to the community. More often, the argument is that we should provide those programs only "somewhere else," certainly not in our neighborhood where our property values could be affected or our kids might be "threatened."

## **Energized by concern**

Because I see this type of reaction so often, I was doubly energized by the clear expression of concern and commitment to finding solutions that last week's gathering reflected.

When I was a child, I was sometimes told that, if I was not good, I'd be given to the "gypsies." That was what people called the hobos who wandered through our community

The fear sometimes expressed is that aid simply encourages the homeless to abuse taxpayer-funded programs or that charitable programs will simply attract more homeless to the community.

from time to time. Back then, we would often find the words "Kilroy was here" written on walls or carved in the wood slats of boxcars at the railroad siding. I didn't know where that phrase started or what it really meant, but for us kids, it was a sign that the hobos had been there. We believed then that Kilroy was the king of the hobos.

Whether or not there was a real person named Kilroy who carved those words in the wood, the truth is that the lifestyle homeless were among us then and are today. (I've since learned that the legend of Kilroy originated in the military and had become an honorable symbol that our fighting forces could penetrate any defense and overcome any obstacle.)

There have always been hobos and vagabonds — the American "gypsies." They are a fixture in American life. As a practical matter, we will never end homelessness for those who choose to live homeless. But let's not let that fact distract us from the real issue. Let's recognize that we really can help reduce the misery of those whom life has thrown a curveball.

## **Not a life choice**

Sure, the lifestyle homeless panhandler is still with us today, and he isn't going away. That's not the point. The



point so eloquently made in this initial report on homelessness is that the folks who have been trying to hit the curveball are not a bunch of ne'er-dowells who have chosen homelessness as a lifestyle.

The fact is that the homeless that are our primary concern are people who don't want to be homeless. It isn't their life choice. They are there because some unfortunate circumstance has driven them there, and they most desperately want to get back into the mainstream of American life.

## **People we can really help**

Today, actually most of them are families or women with children. Neither are they vagabonds wandering through our community. They have been our neighbors for years. On average, they have lived here for 10 to 15 years in fact. Most have been homeless less than a year. They are homeless because they simply were living too close to the economic edge, and the first major adversity, whether the loss of a job, an illness or just making poor choices

*Continued* ▶

with big consequences, left them without the means to keep that proverbial roof overhead. They are not really homeless. This is their home. They are houseless.

These are people we really can help. Most deserve that help — that second chance. And it is they who will be the ultimate beneficiaries of the plan to end “homelessness” within 10 years. For these people, the beginning of the solution is more housing and more affordable housing. It’s really that simple.

Yes, we need to couple that with programs that help them avoid the kinds of problems that led to their poverty. Yes, we need to educate them and give them job skills. But, you don’t do those things effectively from the street. You do that in a shelter or a group home or an apartment or a house. You provide housing first!

Let’s do that! We can do that!

And when we do that, we will finally begin to resolve many of the issues that lead people to write me letters saying: “I really believe we need to help the homeless, BUT?”

— Neal Andrews is a Ventura councilman and board member of Turning Point, a nonprofit organization to assist the mentally ill; <http://www.turningpointfoundation.org/>.

## Homeless Memorial

National Homeless Persons Memorial Day will be commemorated Dec. 21 — the first day of winter and the longest night of the year. The community is invited to observe 60 seconds of silence at 3 p.m. Faith communities with bells are asked to ring them during those 60 seconds. Ventura County Healthcare for the Homeless Coordinator Kate Mills notes in a flier: “There is no official tracking of homeless deaths in most communities, including the Ventura County community. This is an effort to honor those homeless who have passed away during the year, but will also serve to recognize those who continue to survive against great odds.”

## Homeless census

Community volunteers are being asked to help count the homeless in Ventura County from Jan. 23-29, for a biennial census required by the federal government for funding programs. Those wishing to assist should contact Cathy Brudnicki, executive director of the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition, at 485-6288, ext. 273; e-mail [cathy@vchhc.org](mailto:cathy@vchhc.org). Read the draft homeless strategy at <http://www.vchhc.org>.

# Coalition puts muscle behind plan; secures funds

**By Susan Englund**

**T**he Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition was founded in 1983 as a collaborative for housing advocates, service providers and local government representatives interested in the issues of homelessness and low-income housing in Ventura County.

The coalition incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1993. Its mission is to develop and maintain a countywide cooperative effort to address the needs of homeless individuals, those at risk of becoming homeless and those in need of low-income housing. VCHHC has functioned as the lead planning entity for homeless assistance in the county of Ventura since 1991, and since 1995 has coordinated the county's continuum of care system for homeless people.

Coordination has focused on applying for funding each year to Housing and Urban Development for "continuum of care homeless assistance." Over the past 11 years, the VCHHC has been successful in bringing in more than \$11 million in direct HUD funding for a wide variety of projects throughout the county that serve the homeless population, including funding for permanent supportive housing, transitional housing and supportive services, including case management and street outreach. These funds leverage millions of dollars in other funding, and the information in the continuum provides invaluable data for HUD entitlement grants submitted by local jurisdictions.

Coordination has also focused on implementing the annual goals and objectives that HUD requires in order to be competitive nationally for Continuum of Care homeless assistance funding. HUD required goals and objectives have included implementing homeless counts, increasing access to public assistance and coordinating a homeless management information system.

The VCHHC board of directors consists of a broad cross-section of homeless service providers, government staff and concerned private-sector individuals committed to housing

and providing services to the homeless. This all-volunteer group realized that the new HUD requirements of the development of a 10-year plan to end homelessness and a biennial street count of homeless persons taxed its financial and technical capacity.

Annually, the coalition hired a consultant to prepare the Continuum of Care and administer the "request for proposal" process from which projects are recommended for HUD funding. With the new elements required by HUD, the coalition would face a significant increase in consultant costs.

In order to strengthen the viability of the Continuum of Care process and enhance access to federal funds, while maximizing service delivery to the county's homeless population, the county was asked to take a leadership role in promoting the growth of the VCHHC. In January, the Homeless and Housing Coalition board asked Supervisor Kathy Long to carry a letter to the Board of Supervisors asking for funds to be used by VCHHC to build capacity.

The Board of Supervisors committed to a donation of \$200,000 over a period of three years to allow the VCHHC to hire an executive director not only to undertake an aggressive fundraising campaign to sustain the work of the coalition, but also to oversee preparation of the next two years' continuum-of-care applications and mandatory supplemental documents, the 10-year plan to end homelessness and street count of homeless people.

Support from the Board of Supervisors allowed the coalition to move forward with contracting with a consultant to prepare the required HUD documents. In October, after conducting a search, the board of the Homeless and Housing Coalition hired an executive director.

— *Susan Englund is president of the board of the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition and vice president of Community Impact, United Way of Ventura County.*

# Groups craft plan to end homelessness

Prevention is key part of a strategy to eradicate the problem in Ventura County within 10 years.

BY GREGORY W. GRIGGS  
*Times Staff Writer*

Providing better assistance to indigents discharged from hospitals, teens transitioning from foster care and former jail and prison inmates reentering society are among the things Ventura County agencies can do to prevent homelessness and help end the problem within a decade, advocates said Monday.

These and other recommendations were outlined in a 41-page draft report presented at a countywide conference in Camarillo by the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition, which includes 50 public and private agencies.

Other ideas in the report included taking crucial services directly to those on the street, rather than waiting for the homeless to seek help, and building hundreds of apartments for extremely low-income people — those making 30% or less of the county's median household income of \$79,500.

"If you can prevent someone from becoming homeless, it's much more cost-effective than working with them after they've become homeless," said Cathy Brudnicki, the coalition's executive director.

County Supervisor Kathy Long, who attended the conference, said she was encouraged by the standing-room-only crowd and the broad representation from the county's 10 cities, which included housing and law enforcement officials.

"There's a real interest on the part of the people who deal with homelessness year-round to get off the treadmill of thinking of it as a seasonal problem," Long said. "We need to look at

the people who are one or two paychecks away from becoming homeless."

The draft report contends that the longer a person remains homeless, the more intense his or her problems are likely to be. This is why seeking out the homeless to provide them services would be more effective, the report concluded.

The homeless population increasingly includes children, and the adult population requires a wide range of services, such as education, employment, healthcare, mental health care, veterans benefits and help in cases of domestic violence or with substance abuse, according to the report.

Continuing to allow homeless people to stay in overnight shelters indefinitely "is costly and often does not help them acquire the skills and resources necessary to obtain and maintain permanent housing and live self-sufficiently," the report states.

Instead, the coalition recommends setting up a case management system to help individuals and families navigate the various programs available to assist them.

"Some of the things we're recommending already exist," Brudnicki said, "but they may not exist countywide or there may not be enough of it."

Brudnicki emphasized that the report is only a draft and that the coalition will take at least five months to gather input, generate additional suggestions and refine its recommendations.

To review the report, go to <http://www.vchhc.org> and click on the link that reads "current draft of the 10 Year Strategy to End Homelessness in Ventura County." To reach Brudnicki, call (805) 485-6288, Ext. 273, or e-mail her at [cathy@vchhc.org](mailto:cathy@vchhc.org).