

Guest Editorial: Why the city must stay committed to solving our homelessness crisis

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By Chris Ward

When I took office two years ago, San Diego's urban core neighborhoods were in the midst of a homelessness crisis with no clear strategy to tackle the issue. My top priority has been improving our response to this devastating crisis, but one council member can't do it alone. Building on successful approaches in other cities and national best practices, I outlined ideas and policies for a holistic response. My colleagues and I have made important progress to increase funding, expand life-saving supportive services and house our homeless.

In early 2017, the City Council created a Select Committee on Homelessness dedicated to reviewing and improving city approaches for reducing homelessness. The committee held its final meeting Thursday, Nov. 15, and our ongoing work now continues through standing committees. **[It's important to review our accomplishments, and identify what challenges and opportunities remain ahead to ensure all San Diegans have a safe, stable home.](#)**

Last year, the hepatitis A emergency demanded quick action. With the leadership of the council and Mayor Kevin Faulconer, we successfully implemented temporary safe camping and parking programs, additional public restrooms, hand-washing stations, targeted street sanitation, storage facilities, and bridge shelters providing safety and services for 700 homeless San Diegans.

Meanwhile, as chair of the Select Committee, I started with the basics. We updated the council's Policy on Homelessness for the first time since 1995, with a commitment to proven Housing First strategies. Collaborating with our state legislators, we streamlined housing development opportunities. The city also officially declared a Shelter Crisis, unlocking millions of dollars in new state funding for housing and services.

With the county, we've doubled the Psychiatric Emergency Response Teams providing emergency assessment and referrals to help people with mental illness. At the Regional Task Force on the Homeless, we're improving the region's underlying data systems and coordination, while paving the way to receive millions more in state homeless dollars and private investment to scale up successful programs countywide.

As we identified gaps in our system, the Select Committee acted on new approaches to house our homeless. That has included a targeted rapid housing effort, emphasizing diversion programs, and tapping state funding to lay the groundwork for a new flexible housing spending pool to support innovative rental assistance strategies. We're currently moving forward a pilot program

coupling intensive employment services with our rapid rehousing programs, and implementation of the Housing Commission's Housing 3.0 plan is providing \$79 million to boost affordable housing.

As success stories from other regions have demonstrated, real change takes years of sustained effort. We have a strong foundation — and Downtown's on-street homeless population is decreasing — but there's much more work ahead.

Last month, the council unanimously adopted my resolution setting a goal of building 140 permanent supportive housing units in each council district — enough to house every chronically homeless San Diego household. And city staff have now begun assessing city-owned properties to identify possible housing sites and ways to expedite projects.

Our committee also moved forward on creating a citywide outreach protocol, improving our proactive work meeting homeless San Diegans where they are in order to resolve encampment issues as well as connect them with the specific services and housing they need. And now the Housing Commission is underway on my request to develop a comprehensive plan to help ensure our limited homelessness dollars go to our most acute needs.

In 2019, we need a regional solution to provide recuperative care beds allowing people to fully recover from acute health issues after leaving area hospitals, and revival of the Resource Access Program (RAP) to relieve pressure on our 911 emergency services. Additionally, we need a workable strategy to convert dilapidated motels into supportive housing, which brings new units online faster and cheaper.

We've made critical progress to develop services and outreach programs aligned with clearly-defined needs, and soon we'll have the analysis for a comprehensive homelessness strategy to guide future city investments.

Ultimately, we will be judged by the most important metric of all: making housing attainable for all San Diegans. I am confident we're finally on the right track, and we have identified opportunities that will bring us closer to resolving our homelessness crisis. I remain committed to prioritizing this work throughout San Diego until every homeless individual is housed.

—Councilmember Chris Ward serves the 13 communities in District 3, which include the Uptown neighborhoods of Old Town, Mission Hills, Hillcrest, University Heights, North Park, South Park, Normal Heights, Bankers Hill and others. He is also the chair of the City Select Committee on Homelessness and vice-chair of the Regional Task Force on the Homeless.