

OPINION > OPINION COLUMNISTS

Dick Spotswood: With realistic program, Marin has plan to eradicate homelessness

By [DICK SPOTSWOOD](#) | spotswood@comcast.net |

November 20, 2021 at 10:50 a.m.

Abolishing chronic homelessness in Marin by the end of 2022 sounds aspirational, but it's a realistic goal set by a Marin collaborative of public agencies and community-based organizations. It includes multiple County of Marin departments, the Marin Housing Authority, police departments, mental health professionals and nonprofits.

"We are already ending chronic homelessness in Marin for hundreds of people," said Christine Paquette, executive director of the Marin's St. Vincent de Paul Society. "The formula is clear: The vast majority of them are willing to get off of the streets and go into permanent, supportive housing.

"We have the landlords and units available and we have the housing vouchers to pay for rent. The only gap is not having enough professional case managers to help people get off the streets and move to permanent housing. This is the 'third leg' of the stool that will allow us to meet our goal to end chronic homelessness in Marin."

So far, the effort has permanently housed 420 chronic homeless folks, many with the double diagnosis of substance abuse and mental illness. The key to their 94% success rate is handling each "client" one-on-one with a social worker/counselor. Each case worker has 17 clients. It's notable that most of those we see on streets and in tents are homegrown, originating from Marin and Sonoma counties.

The public-private collaborative partners know the names, sleeping locations and origins of virtually all of Marin's chronic homeless. They start by assigning each client a case worker whose job one is to gain the client's confidence. They then direct them to permanent housing and finally arranging services, likely indefinitely, including psychiatric care.

Right now, the need is for more caseworkers. San Rafael and other Marin cities have contributed funding, much of it from the federal pandemic CARES Act. The ultimate goal will be accelerated if 100% of Marin jurisdictions do their part to fund more case workers who are the lynchpin of the collaborative strategy.

The number of Marin's chronic homeless is down, though hundreds remain on the streets. Despite the decline they're more visible due to efforts to move them from fire-prone hillsides and brush-covered shorelines nudging them toward spots where they can be identified and interventions scheduled.

There's a compassionate, practical and legally permitted route to follow to help those men and women who find themselves chronically homeless due to alcohol, drugs, mental illness, post-traumatic stress syndrome or a dysfunctional personality. San Diego city officials operate on the basis that every human has a right to be housed but that once permanent shelter is offered, it needs to be accepted or there will be consequences.

There is no inherent right to camp in parks and on sidewalks once housing is offered. That's also the law. In *Martin v. Boise*, a federal appellate court held municipalities can't enforce anti-camping laws unless each camper is offered alternative shelter.

Kevin Faulconer, San Diego's former mayor, past and perhaps future Republican candidate for governor, described that path. "California, as a state, needs to decide that it's not acceptable to condone living outdoors in urban areas," Faulconer said. "It's not compassionate to enable the brutal life found in tent cities. It's not responsible to turn a blind eye to drug abuse. And it's not humane to let people with severe mental illness wander the streets without effective treatment."

Marin has discovered a way forward that can be a model for small to medium-sized California counties. Its lesson is the more local governments and nonprofits work one-on-one with clients in a collaborative manner, the sooner the goal of abolishing chronic homelessness will become a reality.



Tags: [Dick Spotswood](#), [Homelessness](#), [newsletter](#)

 Author **Dick Spotswood**

Columnist Dick Spotswood of Mill Valley writes on local issues Sundays and Wednesdays. Email him at spotswood@comcast.net

spotswood@comcast.net



SPONSORED CONTENT

PBA is More Common Than You Think, Do You Have It? Take the Quiz

By [PBAInfo.org](#)



Experiencing sudden, frequent, uncontrollable laughing and/or crying episodes? It could be Pseudobulbar Affect...





