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March 2, 2021

Honorable Members of the Los Angeles City Council:

On November 9, 2020, the Los Angeles City Health Commission held a public hearing on homelessness per the request of the Los Angeles City Council.

National and local stakeholders, advocates and members of the unhoused community living on the streets of Los Angeles provided testimony based on observations, expertise and lived experience. As the City Council is in an on-going process of making decisions on how to address issues related to the City's unhoused community, we believe it would be of benefit to your office to delineate testimony from the hearing to inform future decisions on these issues.

The following is a synopsis of some of the observations and issues brought to the attention of the City Health Commission during the hearing:

Conditions on the Street and Shelters

- We heard from a formerly unhoused woman, who has been a practicing attorney now for 22 years. She described life on the streets as a constant terror. She lived in her car until it was towed for too many parking tickets. She delineated issues with the shelter system, including being sexually assaulted by a shelter staff member and her belongings stolen in a dormitory type shelter. She was also sexually assaulted while living on the street. She explained that she lived in survival mode asking where can I eat? Where can I sleep? Conditions on the street made her unable to attend meetings or go to doctor appointments. She explained that after a judge provided her with a motel voucher, in a place where she could lock the door and have privacy, she felt safe and was able to eventually get a job and become housing stable.
- We heard testimony from a Veteran who is unhoused and lives within 100 feet of a bridge shelter in Van Nuys. She testified that because of sweeps imposed on her area, she was working on her tent and was held up at gunpoint. When her dog bit the assailant, the dog was taken away. She testified that staff from the bridge housing near where she lives never came out to offer help, not even water. She stated that she doesn't want to live in a cubicle. The shelter

conducts searches, have cameras, will not let her bring in food and would force her to give some of her things away.

- Another member of the unhoused community testified that there are no bathrooms provided where she lives and that the little resources she has are taken away in the sweeps. She mentioned that her soap was taken from her. She stated that they took away everything she needed for her “saneness.” She stated that everything she couldn’t carry was taken.
- An advocate testified that sweeps were leaving people traumatized. That important documents have been confiscated such as birth certificates and identification taken during sweeps in Special Enforcement Cleaning Zones. She testified that Centers for Disease Control regulations state that if you cannot move someone into individual housing they should not be moved. She testified that she was with a senior who was unhoused and could not get his cooler. She asked the police officer present what would happen if the senior went across the line to get his cooler and the officer stated he would arrest the senior. She mentioned that on hot days it’s the advocates who provide water and that on cold days advocates provide blankets.
- We heard from an attorney from an advocacy group who stated that members of the unhoused community were ending up with criminal records and having licenses suspended due to sweeps. She mentioned that there is no legal requirement to have a buffer zone around bridge shelters.

SOLUTIONS:

- We heard from a Board Member at Natl. Coalition for the Homeless who expressed the need for a federal bill to end homelessness by providing grants to cities so they can build housing. The City Council should lobby congressional representatives for federal investments in housing.
- We heard testimony from Sam Tsemberis, a psychologist at the forefront of the Housing First movement. He stated the primary and most urgent service from the perspective of those living on the street is housing. He stated that being on the street, it’s difficult to think and people are in a constant fight or flight mode. Once someone gets into housing, they have time to think. He testified that while we have a few examples of Housing First, such as the County’s Housing for Health program, we don’t have it on a macro-level. He stated we have a homeless industrial complex including outreach, shelter and transitional housing – all of these programs we pay a lot of money for but that doesn’t get the unhoused community anywhere. They are about preparing people for housing that never comes. He stated that if someone can survive on the street, they can survive in housing. During COVID, the homeless industrial complex had to shift their model to Housing First. He stated that countries that have ended homelessness have a coordinated plan at the federal, state, and municipal level that are focused on ending homelessness by providing affordable housing and put the services in afterwards.

As the Council continues to explore solutions to end homelessness, we hope that you will include, in your consideration, the information provided by our unhoused community with lived experience as well as advocates, stakeholders and members of the medical community.

The City of Los Angeles Health Commission will endeavor to provide current information that can help guide the Los Angeles City Council in reducing the trauma and health related concerns of our unhoused community.

Please note, the Los Angeles City Health Commission has made concrete recommendations in its annual report delineating solutions for providing housing and alleviating the suffering of people living on the streets.

Sincerely,

Los Angeles City Health Commissioners:

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