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Citizens' Jury 2011: Combating Homelessness within the Greater Los Angeles County

Lara Arsinian

There are approximately 43,000 homeless people within the greater Los Angeles County. Of those, 10,245 are persons that are chronically homeless, 10,387 are persons with mental illness, 17,419 are persons with substance abuse problems, and 4,885 are persons belonging to families. Within these subpopulations, approximately 14,050, amounting to 33 percent, are sheltered but an overwhelming 29,000 people, amounting to 67 percent, are unsheltered in Los Angeles County as a whole. These statistics are provided by the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA) within the Los Angeles Continuum of Care (CoC), an administrative geographic local unit apart from states, cities, counties, and communities that coordinate funding and services for homeless people. All Continuum of Care systems funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) are required to perform a homeless count every two years for their respective regions. The 43,000 persons counted in 2009 represent a 38 percent decrease in the number of homeless people from the count conducted in 2007. That number is expected to stay within five percentage points for the count conducted earlier this year. Although this decrease is very encouraging, it is important to expand and create new programs implemented by the Los Angeles CoC and the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority to combat this problem.

Currently, there are various types of programs that are funded by the County and City of Los Angeles under the umbrella of the Los Angeles CoC including the County's \$100 million Homeless Prevention Initiative, the City Permanent Supportive Housing Program, and the expanded Super 8 voucher. All these programs vastly range from housing assistance to basic medical needs targeting only a specific form of homelessness or a specific, immediate need. Although these programs demonstrate an unprecedented collaborative effort among the city, the

county, and various private and public non-profit organizations resulting in a 38 percent decline of homelessness, a form of expansion is needed; the people of greater Los Angeles, the group that is directly and severely impacted by this problem, need to be involved in the policy making process. In order to have a long term, effective impact on homelessness, a public engagement effort in the form of a Citizen's Jury is needed between the citizens, public officials and various stakeholders that would allow for a reevaluation of goals and priorities, creating and targeting specific solutions to address an ever growing problem in Los Angeles. In order to understand why this proposal will be effective in the complex task to be undertaken, the background of the problem will be addressed, the form and methodology of this deliberative practice will be evaluated, the project will be specifically defined within the parameters of the "prism" model, and will be concluded with possible objections leading to the consensus that this proposed method is the best way.

HOMELESSNESS: A GROWING POLICY CHALLENGE FOR GREATER LOS ANGELES COUNTY

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), for the purpose of the yearly targeted homeless counts across America, have defined the term homeless and a homeless individual or person as "1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and 2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations, an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings." Per this definition, on any given night, there are almost 700,000 people experiencing homelessness in the United States. In Los Angeles alone, as stated above, 43,000 people are experiencing homelessness per day, making it one of the only cities in the U.S. that has the highest homeless population.

With the hundreds of programs implemented in Los Angeles, drastically decreasing the homeless population seems likely. But what is often neglected in the policy making process is the allocation of appropriate amounts of attention and action toward the many different subpopulations of homeless people. It is imperative to differentiate among the 6 subpopulations to create an effective solution for each of the parts in order to impact the problem as a whole. One of the 6 subpopulations is chronic homelessness. Chronically homeless people are individuals that have disabling conditions and have been continuously homeless for over a year

or more. In order to be categorized as an individual with a disabling condition, there needs to be evidence of substance abuse, serious mental illness, a developmental disability, or chronic physical illness. This form of homelessness is known among a majority of people to be the most common form but this is a misperception due to the permanency of the situation. It is also furthered by the generally accepted notion that chronically homeless individuals require more assistance to alleviate their condition. In Los Angeles, according to the Homeless Count of 2009, only 24 percent of the homeless population falls under this category per HUD's definition. Compared to the whole, it is just a portion.

Another subpopulation, known as family homelessness, is associated with families that are stricken with poverty. Families usually become homeless due to some unforeseen financial crisis such as an unexpected medical bill or a death in the family creating a situation where the members can no longer afford housing. Of the 43,000 homeless people in Los Angeles, almost 5,000 belong to this subpopulation which amounts to 11 percent of the total homeless population. A majority of families that become homeless are able to quickly exit this state with very little assistance and never return. Veteran homelessness is the third subpopulation; it includes veterans of different conflicts from World War II, late Vietnam and post Vietnam era, and the recent Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Most veterans that are homeless experience severe disabilities resulting from the conflicts that they were a part of, whether it is physical or psychological. Of the homeless population, 15 percent, including men and women, were in some branch of the military service, including National Guard and reserves; 23 percent of men in the homeless population in its entirety have stated to being a part of the military.

The smallest subpopulation is comprised of homeless youths under the age of 18 typically discharged from state penitentiaries. Most of the homeless youths are locked up at an early age for minor offenses and lack of proper supervision. Without the necessary support of families or other resources, youths are released out in the streets to their own discretion. Furthermore, most youths are byproducts of the foster care system, having aged out at 18, and lacking any support systems or opportunities for work and housing. The current assistance systems for homeless individuals, largely designed for adults, rarely take into account the youth homeless population, the extent of which is relatively unknown. Within the greater Los Angeles County, it is reported that only 2 percent of the homeless population are that of the youth subpopulation. Relatively speaking, that number is quite insignificant. Because of this, programs

that allow for early prevention and assistance are rare; also lacking are the necessary resources to allow for interventions needed to alleviate homeless conditions.

Domestic violence is the direct cause of the fifth subpopulation of homeless individuals, specifically women who are isolated from familial support and financial resources by abusers. Survivors of domestic violence suffer physical and psychological damage, such as anxiety and panic disorders, as well as all the necessary resources needed to afford basic needs. They lack steady income or even employment history which limits the chances of being able to acquire and maintain simple housing needs away from the abuser. Compared to the total homeless population, victims of domestic violence that are homeless are less than 10 percent, amounting to almost 4,000 people. Of the adult women in the homeless population, 19 percent stated that they have been a victim of domestic violence. The very last subpopulation, which happens to be the largest, is that of single individual homeless person. The people in this category have either been single, divorced, separated or widowed. It is important to note that a majority of these individuals fall into the other subpopulations as well but are categorized as single because they only need care and assistance for themselves. Of the 43,000 homeless people in Los Angeles, almost 38,000 are categorized as being single individuals. That is 89 percent of the total homeless population.

Knowing the different homeless subpopulations allows for specific target policy solutions that will be more effective in solving the problem of homelessness in Los Angeles. It is also important to familiarize people with the major stakeholders that have the ability to make policy changes. In a city as vast and diverse as Los Angeles, there are hundreds of private and public sponsored non-profit organizations and city-led initiatives for the fight against homelessness, but the most important in Los Angeles, which connects all other city, county, and non-profit organizations is the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA). LAHSA, a Joint Powers Authority, is an independent agency created by the County and City of Los Angeles in 1993. It is the lead agency in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care that “coordinates and manages over \$70 million dollars annually in Federal, State, County and City funds for programs providing shelter, housing and services to homeless persons.” LAHSA governing body is a ten-member Commission including five members selected by the County Board of Supervisors and five members chose by the Mayor and the City Council. The Commission has the authority to

make policies and decisions regarding many facets of homelessness including funding, planning, and management.

Under the umbrella of Los Angeles Continuum of Care, sponsored by HUD, LAHSA essentially has a function of three primary committees: Finance, Contracts, and Grants Committee, Programs and Evaluation Committee, and Policy and Planning Committee. Working alongside the LAHSA Commission and Committees are the various local governments, state governments, hospitals, law enforcement agencies, non-profit organizations, school districts, businesses and faith based organizations that are considered major stakeholders in the problems associated with homelessness. It is obvious that there are numerous vested groups involved. Consolidating them under one authoritative power is helpful for a successful collaborative initiative as seen over the years. Nevertheless, despite the involvement of these groups and implementation of various programs in Los Angeles under LAHSA, homelessness persists because these programs do not target the specific subpopulations or assume that one form of redress will impact all forms of homelessness. For example, Project 50 Initiative, proposed by the Mayor of Los Angeles in conjunction with LAHSA, moved 50 of the most vulnerable chronically homeless individuals out of Skid Row, a heavily populated homeless community, into permanent supportive housing. Only 43 stayed for a full year. Considering there are over a 1000 people on Skid Row, allowing only 50 to have that privilege, is quite an underachievement. Furthermore, with most of these initiatives like Project 50, the public is rarely consulted.

To say that there has been a standard political process in determining solutions for homelessness is not entirely accurate. Most of the initiatives undertaken have been created, formulated and implemented by the LAHSA under the Continuum of Care without approval of the public. They are allocated a budget of \$70 million dollars annually by the Federal, State, County and City to spend at the discretion of the ten people on the Commission. Additionally, there is rarely any citywide discussion or deliberation. There is hardly any effort to involve the taxpayers enduring the largest costs. It is without a doubt that working through the LAHSA and their resources will offer the quickest short term solution to this problem. What is needed is not short term quick alleviation thought up by ten people but a better long term effective outcome that can only be achieved through a collaborative effort through a series of discussions with the greater people of Los Angeles, who live amongst the thousands of homeless people, the LAHSA,

and public officials of this city. In the end, it is the City and the public that endure the costs of homelessness in Los Angeles, not the city alone.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AT A GLANCE

The multifaceted problem of homelessness is quite complex because of the economic, political and social implications in the Los Angeles society. There are a few models of deliberative civic engagement that will be mindful of the intricacies of this issue but only one type of model would be able to work. In order to understand why the chosen model is fitting for this problem, it is important to first address the reasons as to why other models of public engagement would not be able to work.

One such model is a 21st Century Town Hall Meeting through AmericaSpeaks. AmericaSpeaks is a non-profit organization whose mission is “to reinvigorate American Democracy by engaging citizens in the public decision-making process that most impacts their lives.” AmericaSpeaks created this updated form of a New England Town Hall Meeting fitting for the technological and democratic advancements of the 21st Century. These meetings are engaging events that “articulate the group’s priorities on critical organization, local, state, or national policies.” The process for this public engagement effort involves thousands of participants convened simultaneously in one location or across multiple locations. It is usually a one day event that is open to the public as well as recruited public members as representatives of a specific demographic. Participants sit at a table of eight to ten people with a trained facilitator to discuss a series of questions that help build a set of collective priorities. This form of dialogue encourages discussion among the small group of participants about key policy issues, prioritizing the most important to the least. A form of participatory technology is used during the small table discussions that allows for all participants voices to be heard. The technology is in the form of a keypad computer that records general table agreements, identifying the strongest themes which are quickly presented to all participants. Furthermore, “using technology to gather, distill, and project themes allows a 21st Century Town Meeting to move back and forth between intimate small group dialogue and the collective work of thousands of people. This back and forth between the small scale and large scale dialogues can occur as many times as needed to develop recommendations on which decision makers can take action.”

This form of public engagement is ideal if there was a diverse menu of options that policy makers are considering in order to address the specific problem of homelessness. The problem of

homelessness can be addressed through open dialogue, not a prioritization of a list of objectives or solutions. There is not one perfect solution that can be chosen. The only way that effective long term solutions will be created if there would be a discussion and interaction with major stakeholders; the 21st Century Town Hall would not be able to offer that. Although it is a great process for events such as the redevelopment of the World Trade Center in New York, it would not work for a problem that needs constant modification and innovation to meet the needs and demands of the growing problem. If there ever could be a prioritization for homelessness in a 21st Century Town Meeting, it can only involve which form of homeless subpopulation can be deemed the most important to alleviate first. Furthermore, 21st Century Town Hall would be most effective if people from a community were to prioritize a list of policy problems that policy makers need to address as soon as possible.

Another form of public engagement effort that can be used to solve the problem of homelessness is a Deliberative Polling, created by James Fishkin. A Deliberative Poll is “a poll of citizens before and after they have had a chance to arrive at considered judgments based on information and exposure to views of their fellow citizens.” This is a distinctive process that combines two key values: “political equality and deliberation.” In order to maintain these two key values, which are apparent in every action of the dialogue process, a survey is sent out to a random representative sample of individuals about the topic at hand. Among the people that participated in the survey, invitations are sent out once again to a randomly selected group of individuals to participate in the face to face dialogue. The participants are given a packet of information regarding the policy problems. The way this dialogue works is quite similar to the small group discussions of the 21st Century Town Hall minus the technological advancements used. Discussions are facilitated and it usually lasts a few days. After the end of the dialogue, another poll is taken to see whether the results have changed, or whether people have kept the same opinion as before. In terms of the problem of homelessness in Los Angeles County, a deliberative polling might not work as effectively as other models. People in Los Angeles are quite aware of the problem and the costs associated with maintaining and creating programs that offer assistance to the needy. Whether to help the homeless out at all might be a good topic for a deliberative poll but for the purpose of this project, a form of discussion needs to be facilitated that would allow for new and creative ideas to flourish, without the use of surveys, that provide direction for policy makers.

UNLEASHING THE “PRISM” MODEL ON HOMELESSNESS THROUGH A CITIZENS JURY

Although these forms of public engagement efforts can be used to address homelessness in the Los Angeles County and City, the best form that needs to be undertaken is a Citizen’s Jury. Through a Citizen’s Jury, a reasonable discussion between 12-36 people per group should be promoted creating empathy among the participants in a span of 2 to 5 days. There are “seven elements that go into the design of any successful Citizen’s Jury:” First, a microcosm of the community must be selected to participate. A randomly selected representative sample from the City and County of Los Angeles that falls under the Los Angeles Continuum of Care should be selected as the microcosm of the community. This group of people from Los Angeles needs to represent the community through age, gender, education, geographic location and race. Furthermore, to encourage participation, a form of payment can be offered to the participants that were randomly selected. Second, in order to have a good form of deliberation, each group should accommodate as large a group as possible that falls within the concept of a good deliberation. Although small groups are not very impressive for policy makers, unnecessarily large groups, impressive in numbers, might not hold true to good deliberation. Therefore, for the purposes of this process, a group size of eight twelve person juries will be selected to be a part of this deliberative process. That is a total of 96 participants involved.

Third, high quality information is needed. Although the process that has been used in the past involved expert witness presentations that allowed jurors to question at free will, the process that will be enacted for the Citizen’s Jury 2011 will also include written handbooks provided by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, the 2011 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count provided by the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority, as well as a pamphlet of all the current initiatives in place that combat homelessness in Los Angeles. This information would need to be studied and thoroughly read through in order to question the expert witnesses. These experts will be recruited with the help of the Mayor of Los Angeles and the City Council, and will include members from LAHSA and various non-profit organizations in affiliation with the LASHA and the Los Angeles Continuum of Care. Fourth, high quality deliberation must be ensured through effective facilitators and witnesses. Each facilitator, witness, and participant would be forced to adhere to strict deliberative etiquette. There needs to be a balance enforced that still encourages open discussion by allowing the jurors to freely expressing ones opinion without the domination of a single juror. Furthermore, witnesses need to

provide a good amount of time for the jurors to ask questions, providing answers that are quick and straight to the point. The facilitators would be trained to keep these tactics in mind to ensure that the quality of deliberation will be maintained.

Fifth, there needs to be a minimization of staff bias including facilitators. Facilitators and other staff need to go through an extensive training process to ensure that even the slightest movements of the body won't discourage or taint the process. Similar to previous Citizen Juries, it is essential to have the participating jurors evaluate the staff at the end of the project. Furthermore, the jurors need to give their final recommendations in their own words. This relates to the sixth component which is to have a fair agenda and hearing. All this will be ensured through extensive training of the facilitators, the jurors and the witnesses of the appropriate etiquette in the deliberative process. The seventh component is that there needs to be sufficient amount of time to study the material. With the various handbooks and pamphlets being given to the jurors that expressed purely the facts, statistics, costs and benefits of homelessness in Los Angeles County and City, there needs to be a sufficient allocation of time to ensure that each juror is prepared for discussion. Also, the deliberative process will not be a short process but will not last over a week to ensure that the participant jurors would be able to commit to a reasonable timeframe for discussion.

The strategy of the Citizen's Jury 2011 revolves around these seven elements but it is important to structure the process in a way that has the maximum impact on public policy while allowing this microcosm of the community to do their absolute best at evaluating the situation and producing a strong and logical policy recommendation. Considering the scope of the event is limited to greater Los Angeles County, having a maximum impact on public policy will be not as difficult as it seems. With various media outlets and social networking sites available for the mass promotion for anything in the 21st Century, it is not very difficult to gain awareness and the attention of the appropriate people. Although it might be difficult to get the attention of the media for an event that is considered quite small compared to the thousands of people, daylong events, if marketed in the proper way, this event will take hold. Five days is a long but ample amount of time to encourage high quality discussions. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are free and effective ways to gain awareness, promote, and market a deliberative process. However, there needs to be a balance that constantly needs to be maintained. The method of marketing is important to gain awareness but a level of integrity needs to be upheld.

The extent of an online component will end with the social networking sites strictly for marketing purposes. Online polls with the public after the final report and policy recommendations have been released can either further the results that were agreed upon or hinder it greatly. Giving the public the ability to comment and vote based on popularity of the recommendations is an uncertain risk. It would be much better off to completely eradicate an online dialogue of some sort. Releasing the information to the public is a different avenue. The final report can be released online for purposes of availability and information.

There is no doubt that the issue of homelessness is complex but that complexity does not stem from political polarization; it stems from the issue itself. In Los Angeles County and Los Angeles Continuum of Care, the main organization involved in the construction of policy regarding the homeless population is the LAHSA in coordination with the Mayor and the City Council. It is a Joint Power Authority that is an independent agency. Considering that homelessness is a form of cost for the local government of Los Angeles, the public officials and the taxpaying people, it is more likely to produce a rare collaborative front to eradicate this problem completely. Not relying completely on the taxpayers' dime and the City funds also helps with eliminating any form of politics because funding is a controversial issue right now in the State of California.

Funding for the proposed Citizen's Jury 2011 will need to come from private and public resources either through non-profit organizations or even the state government. The cost estimation of this program will be approximately \$40,000. The breakdown of the cost includes: 96 jurors each getting paid a stipend of \$150 dollars for participation will result in \$14,400, 20 staff members and facilitators working for five days, eight hours a day for minimum wage will be close to \$8000, the venue housing the actual deliberative process will cost upwards of \$10,000 to rent out for the week, and \$8000 more for additional appearance costs of witnesses and other expenses. These costs can be covered through the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority and the various governmental, non-governmental institutions apart of it. Within the \$70 million dollars received annually, the LAHSA has extra funding aside for efforts to create new policy initiatives. Considering that they are going to be the governing body, the convener, of Citizen's Jury 2011, it would be a fundamental role for them to fund and get funding through its resources. The reason that LAHSA, a Joint Power Authority within the County and City of Los Angeles, will be the convener of this public engagement effort is due its power as the main tool

of all policy making processes in regards to the problems of homelessness. The ten people apart of the Commission under the LAHSA will also be a part of the advisory board as overseers; the actual acting advisory board will include the Mayor of Los Angeles, a representative from the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development, and a member from the National Alliance to End Homelessness. With these 13 to 15 members apart of the advisory board, each educated and knowledgeable in all factors of homelessness, a high quality and effective deliberation will take place with certainty that public policy will be impacted solving the problems of homelessness for tomorrow.

This proposed public engagement effort sounds ideal. With the main institution in charge of the actual public policy program leading the whole deliberative process, the results are sure to be acknowledged. It is a naïve to assume that challenges will not arise. One challenge that can be a problem is the funding issue. Although there are vast amount of funding resources available through the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority, it is not a guarantee that this independent agency will be the convener and primary source of funding for the deliberative process. Other methods of financial assistance will be needed to provide an opportunity for this engagement to take flight. Furthermore, although the LAHSA will act as convener, there is a possibility that they may reject the opinions of the jurors on the various ways to solve the problems of homelessness in Los Angeles. They may continue on with the work they have accomplished with the success of the 38 percent decline experienced in 2009. There may even be resentment on behalf of the ten Commissioners in LAHSA because this public engagement effort may seem to highlight the flaws in their attempts to address homelessness. But this is a problem that can be addressed quickly. The only difference between the LAHSA and the deliberative democratic process constructed here is the addition of the 96 people that are representative of the people in Los Angeles. In essence, the public will have a chance to participate in a problem that affects them daily. In the end, any resentment harbored by officials will cease.

Considering that combating homelessness in Los Angeles is a major collaborative effort among the LAHSA and the various organizations, institutions and agencies apart of it and within the Los Angeles Continuum of Care, it will be an easy transition to expand and include the public in the policy making process. It will add legitimacy to the programs implemented and will foster a sense of community in helping others that are less fortunate. In the future, with the

engagement of the public, the number of homeless persons in Los Angeles will decrease more and more.

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