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Column: The anatomy of homelessness on Oahu

By Ronald Lim • June 19, 2019

In summer 2002, as the special assistant for housing under Gov. Benjamin Cayetano, I attended a conference sponsored by President George W. Bush; its topic was “Ending Homelessness in 10 years through an initiative ‘Housing First.’” The primary assumption of Housing First is that to begin resolving homelessness, housing must be provided first. Following provision of housing, various services and programs then may be provided for the residents to result in permanent housing and/or gainful employment. Even if residents did not wish to participate in the various programs, at least homeless individuals and families would have shelter and not be resigned to the streets.

Nearly 20 years since the Housing First initiative, the unsheltered homeless population persists and is increasing. From the Mayor’s Office of Housing, “2019 Homeless Point-In-Time Count — Observations” shows a steady increase from 1,193 to 2,401 in the 2009-2019 period. “Housing First” has provided housing for many previously homeless individuals, but will not result in ending all unsheltered homelessness. An analysis of “why not” follows.

Unsheltered homeless persons can be broadly organized into three groups (although there certainly are intersections and nuances among the groups): “Have not,” “Can not” and “Will not.”

The “Have nots” are homeless because they lack sufficient monetary resources to rent or purchase available housing.

The “Can nots” are homeless because they are afflicted with debilitating mental illness and/or addiction to substances which prevents living independently in available market housing.

The “Will nots” are homeless because they choose to be so, regardless of availability of shelter.

Let’s analyze each group and discuss policies and programs that would reduce the amount of homeless persons.

>> “Have nots:” The housing solution requires a real increase of housing supply. Build more affordable housing and increase the income of the group. Increasing the supply of housing through construction requires huge monetary subsidies, more than the community and government can or may be willing to commit. Increasing individual income may be achieved through job training programs, increasing minimum wages, proactive job search and placement programs and other paths that would increase real earnings.

>> “Can nots:” The housing solution requires specialized services to individuals suffering from debilitating mental illness and/or substance addiction to enable living in structured living environments. These programs require a large

commitment of monetary and personnel resources.

>> “Will nots:” This is the proverbial “elephant in the room.” These are the visible homeless persons on the street parks, in the shopping centers, on the sidewalks, etc. Conventional residential programs will not work. Conventional social and intervention programs will benefit some, but this is a mobile population for whom provision of continuous services is difficult. The “will nots” will always be present and visible, short of some proactive and sometimes preventive actions — such as tent cities in remote, unpopulated locations; relocation to less-populated areas; “one way” transportation out; or incarceration.

Reducing the incidence of homelessness will necessitate the full range of programs: Provide more affordable housing. Enhance job training to improve work skills and wages. Increase the minimum wage. Increase and improve substance abuse treatment and prevention programs — proactive programs that offer alternatives to being without shelter.

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Each of the above recommendations requires substantial monetary commitments. Hence, we are faced with the issue of resource allocation and priorities. I would presume that we do not have the resources and would not allocate resources. Thus, the limited resources should be prioritized to programs that could most feasibly and effectively be implemented, namely programs for the “Have nots” and “Can nots.”

Ronald Lim is retired as city director of Housing and Community Development and as a state assistant housing director.

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