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Homelessness Myths and Realities

1. MYTH: Homelessness is a choice.

REALITY: There are many reasons why people become homeless and nearly all of them are *not* by choice. Poverty, unemployment and family problems, such as domestic abuse, as well as mental or physical illnesses and substance abuse, can lead to homelessness.

2. MYTH: The homeless population largely remains the same. People who are homeless stay homeless.

REALITY: It is estimated that there are between 7,800 to 10,000 homeless in the San Diego region –1,600 of which are chronically homeless (defined as either having been continuously homeless for one full year or without shelter four or more times in the past three years). They often have one or more disabling conditions, which make it more difficult to find and sustain housing. In contrast, most people are temporarily homeless for several weeks to a few months.

3. MYTH: All homeless people are mentally ill or substance abusers.

REALITY: Over 30 percent of the homeless have a mental disability, compared to about four percent of the general public. And according to San Diego’s Regional Task Force on the Homeless, between 2,829 to 3,112 of homeless adults have substance abuse issues. So although there is a high prevalence of mental illness and substance abuse in certain homeless populations, it is not true for the group as a whole.

4. MYTH: Homeless people just don’t want to work.

REALITY: Many homeless people do work, and some even have more than one job. In San Diego County, 25 percent of the homeless are farm workers and day laborers. However, they have to choose between paying for food and paying for housing.

5. MYTH: Homeless people are criminals.

REALITY: Homeless people actually commit less crime than people that have housing. They are more likely to be the victims than the perpetrators.

6. MYTH: It’s impossible to end homelessness.

REALITY: Cities across the nation have implemented plans to end chronic homelessness and have successfully reduced homelessness by up to 75 percent, with continuing progress. Many cities are using the “Housing First” model, which advocates providing affordable housing with integrated supportive services to keep the chronically homeless off the streets and into stable living and working situations. Permanent supportive housing has been proven to help people increase their incomes, work more, make greater progress toward recovery, get arrested less and become more productive citizens.

7. MYTH: Housing the homeless costs too much.

REALITY: Not housing the homeless costs even more. The chronically homeless may only represent 15 percent of the overall homeless population, but they drain 50 percent of available resources, including legal, medical and emergency services. A local study that tracked 15 chronically homeless people found that they cost the county \$1.5 million over 1.5 years – averaging \$100,000 per person. In contrast, The United Way of Greater Los Angeles found that permanent housing solutions led to a nearly 43 percent savings for taxpayers.

8. MYTH: Most homeless people are single men.

REALITY: In San Diego, families, usually led by single mothers, are the largest growing homeless group, at 32 percent. One in four of San Diego’s street homeless are also young adults, ages 18 to 30. People without homes are also seniors, military veterans and the disabled.

9. MYTH: Homeless people are taking advantage of the system.

REALITY: Only a small percentage of the homeless receive government assistance. Studies have also shown that those who do receive some form of public assistance, such as through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the Food Stamp Program) or Medicaid, are less likely to be homeless.

10. MYTH: If our city helps the homeless, more homeless people will come. (“Magnet Theory”)

REALITY: Numerous reports have concluded that homeless people do not migrate for services. Most stay in the same city where they originally became homeless. Housing the homeless cleans up neighborhoods and increases the quality of life for the community as a whole.

About Home Again

Home Again is the homeless outreach and prevention public awareness campaign for San Diego County’s Plan to End Chronic Homelessness (PTECH), facilitated by United Way of San Diego County. For more information, visit <http://www.homeagainsd.org>.

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