

WHY MENTAL HEALTH, DRUG ISSUES MUST BE ADDRESSED IN DEALING WITH HOMELESSNESS

Building additional housing — by itself — is not enough to end homelessness.

In 2012, Todd Gloria told San Diegans he would “end chronic homelessness downtown in four years.”

Instead, it increased.

While Gloria served on the City Council, over 9,000 single room occupancy (SRO) units — many of them downtown — were lost. When you lose 9,000 SRO units and allow — by failing to enforce existing city zoning requirements — up to 16,000 single-family homes plus hundreds of apartments and condominiums to be turned into short-term vacation rentals, you reduce housing supply and increase housing costs. We have about 5,500 unsheltered individuals in the city of San Diego. You do the math.

We need to stop the political grandstanding, offering promises of overnight solutions, and admit this is a difficult and complex problem. Press conferences and slogans will not solve it. I have argued we need a data-driven, comprehensive and collaborative approach that addresses the real causes of homelessness.

One recent [study](#) from the Los Angeles Times showed that 46% of those living on the streets had substance abuse problems and 51% had mental health issues. Another [study](#) out of UCLA reported substance abuse and mental health concerns at 75% and 78%, respectively.

The [new plan](#) commissioned by the San Diego Housing Commission, while not perfect, finally suggests options to Gloria's unsuccessful approach. The Housing Commission plan recognizes both the legal and moral imperative that we provide safe alternative shelter. But it also recognizes that success is dependent upon dedicated teams of mental health professionals, drug rehabilitation specialists, vocational trainers, and broadly educated law enforcement officers to deal with the issues at the root of homelessness.

Over a decade, Gloria's view of homelessness as principally a housing problem has dug a deep and dangerous hole that has swallowed the homeless in a cycle of hopelessness and threatens the health and safety of our entire community.

When you are in a hole, it's usually smart to stop digging. We still have a difficult climb ahead of us. A good first step is to accept the failure of past policies and to make mental illness, drug addiction and public safety our priorities moving forward.

As mayor, here is how I will approach this issue:

- ✓ I will enforce the existing municipal code against conversion of our housing stock into short-term vacation rentals and bring these housing units back onto the market.
- ✓ I will invest in replacing the SROs lost under Gloria’s watch by building permanent supportive housing units with services.
- ✓ I will provide shelters, transitional housing and safe parking options in the interim.
- ✓ I will personally engage county officials to make sure they fulfill their responsibility to deal with individuals suffering from drug and alcohol addiction and mental health problems; the county has both the responsibility and the resources to add mental health and recuperative care beds.
- ✓ I will put trained professionals on the street — professionals who can confront the everyday problems our unsheltered population faces and connect them to the help they need.
- ✓ I will invest in programs with proven results and eliminate programs that can’t document their effectiveness.
- ✓ I will focus on children who are caught in the cycle of homelessness to make sure they are in school and get them protection from the drug culture so they can escape this vicious cycle.
- ✓ I will identify the individuals who are the most expensive to the system in terms of emergency room and other services and focus on getting them the help they need, which is cheaper in the long term.
- ✓ I will enforce our vagrancy laws after we have provided for housing alternatives and diversion programs.
- ✓ I will personally attend the meetings of the Regional Task Force on the Homeless and meet regularly with the county’s other mayors so we have a coordinated approach to homelessness and other regional issues.
- ✓ I will not waste taxpayer money setting up a new housing bureaucracy when the San Diego Housing Commission, a city agency whose budget the city controls, has already developed expertise in this area.

Promises of simplistic solutions — “just build more housing” — will not solve this difficult and complex problem. Press conferences and slogans will not solve it. We need a data-driven, comprehensive and collaborative approach that most effectively mobilizes local, state, federal and private-sector resources to address the real causes of homelessness. As your next mayor, I will implement this approach as one of my top priorities.