

OPINION

JEFF RAIMUNDO | Special to The Bee

Area shouldn't be afraid to put aid for homeless in private hands

Sacramento County's budgetary dilemma presents our elected leaders with difficult choices, but in any crisis we can also find opportunity. Transferring management of homeless services from government to the private sector is a case in point.

Recent coverage in The Bee describes this proposed shift in responsibility as a scary situation leaving homeless services in a state of flux. But many view it as the next logical step toward a homeless strategy that balances all community interests in this seemingly intractable issue.

Some observers are concerned that this proposed change is only months away. That's a short time for government perhaps, but it's a lifetime in the private sector.

It's an especially forgiving time frame when we understand that the "new" management entity already exists - a statewide policy board that has engaged top leaders from business and government, as well as philanthropic, provider and religious groups. Its five active working committees chart regional policy strategies that are implemented through an adjunct inter-agency council involving dozens of very successful, deeply committed provider organizations.

This policy board has already increased the system's efficiency and effectiveness to generate significant savings. The cost of county homeless services at Mather Community Campus dropped by a third when its administration was moved into the capable, nonprofit hands of the Volunteers of America. Area churches rallied last winter to offset closure of the overflow shelter at Cal Expo, where costly public sector facilities required a \$140,000 monthly budget - enough to pay



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apartment rent for each shelter resident. Similarly high facility costs absorb half the \$1 million-plus budget for our county's existing homeless contract oversight system, a much higher proportion than any private sector venture.

Contrary to claims that the proposed transfer of responsibility to a new management structure lacks sufficient funding, federal support for homeless programs includes nearly a half-million dollars for administration - a lot of money in any economic climate.

The proposed approach is not unique. Public and private sectors pooled their resources in Franklin County, Ohio, for example, to create an exemplary private sector-based homeless services management structure. Their local United Way contributes more than \$1 million annually to this consolidated effort in a community that includes Columbus, the state capital, and which is about the same size as Sacramento County. If our local United Way invested half that to match available federal funds, we'd have a formidable support base for this new management operation.

The innovation of local homeless programs has never been greater.

■ The Gathering Inn, Family Promise and Faith-and-Families programs creatively utilize church facilities to augment needed emergency shelters throughout our re-

gion, freeing up resources better invested in the most effective remedy to homelessness: additional low-cost housing.

■ California Foodlink and Sacramento Food Bank forge new ways to direct farmers' plenty to homeless programs' dining tables, reducing operating costs while improving residents' nutrition.

■ St. John's Shelter and other agencies are launching business enterprises that provide their residents with earning opportunities while raising support for these agencies' programs.

We see proof of Tocqueville's observation nearly two centuries ago that Americans' charitable response is never more generous than in tough times. In addition to Capital Christian Center and Sacramento Regional Foundation's leadership on a homeless prevention initiative, the Salvation Army is successfully advancing a multimillion-dollar capital campaign to upgrade its facilities.

The upcoming 40th anniversary of Francis House rightly celebrates its decades of immediate response to our most needy residents. Loaves & Fishes and its associated programs have served the community nearly 30 years. Honoring Bishop Francis Quinn's lifetime of civility and compassion, Cottage Housing's inaugural Beacon of Hope event recently generated \$100,000 for its Home Run Campaign to triple the number of homeless parents and children it serves.

Sacramento is blessed with home-grown solutions to one of society's greatest challenges. The current homeless policy board's track record shows we can trust its leadership to continue making improvements that deliver the best results at the lowest possible cost.