

What we think

Housing homeless is cost effective

Why you should care

The cost of letting them cycle through shelters, emergency rooms and jails is huge.

President Bush's point man on homelessness was in Lafayette this week. Phillip Mangano, whose official title is executive director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, has an awesome mission. The president wants to go beyond helping homeless people. The goal is to end homelessness.

Mangano, who spoke at the 2007 State Conference on Homelessness, urged creation of a 10-year plan centered on providing housing for street people. By housing, he does not mean shelters, but an apartment or private room to which the occupant would hold a key.

Mangano is able to cite programs across the nation that prove housing the homeless is more cost-effective than letting them live on the street and cycle through shelters, hospital emergency rooms and jails.

People who are chronically homeless, Mangano points out, make more emergency visits to hospitals than the aver-

age person. They are a burden on law enforcement agencies and social service agencies. The cost to taxpayers is huge.

According to Mangano, the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program tracked 119 chronically homeless people for five years and discovered that they had more than 18,000 emergency room visits at an average cost of \$1,000 per visit.

A cost-benefit study in Atlanta, Mangano says, followed 60 people who were given housing. In one year, decreases in hospitalization, incarceration and arrests accounted for more than \$1 million in savings.

In Reno, Nev., a cost analysis shows

that the city spent \$1 million on one man who was homeless for eight years.

In San Diego, 15 homeless people tracked for 18 months cost the city and county \$3 million, or \$200,000 per person.

The program works because support services follow the homeless person who is granted housing, Mangano says.

An indication of the seriousness of the problem locally is the fact that some 600 homeless people are on Lafayette's streets each night. Far too many of them are victims of mental or emotional problems. A disproportionate number are destitute mothers desperately seeking food, shelter and safety for their

children.

Homeless parents live with crushing depression. Children suffer poor health and lag pathetically behind in education. Teenagers do what they must to survive. Lone women live with the fear of violence. In a statewide survey, 50 percent of the homeless women who responded said they had been physically assaulted. Twenty-five percent had been raped.

The commitment of the Bush administration to ending homelessness has not been widely publicized, but for the seventh straight year, the president is calling for record high funding to deal with the problem — a proposed \$4.4 billion.

A 10-year plan to end homelessness in Acadiana should be a priority of the Durel administration and other officials. It will represent a commitment to human needs as well as a cost-effective way of dealing with a major problem.