

Summary of June 29, 2017

## Homelessness & Water Symposium

Members of the water and social services sectors from across the Santa Ana River Watershed convened at a symposium last month to identify connections between the challenges of homelessness and water management. The event was part of Department of Water Resources Proposition 1 grant-supported effort to identify the strengths and needs of underserved communities through the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority's Disadvantaged Communities Involvement (DCI) Program.

People who live in encampments along the Santa Ana River and its tributaries can be at risk from flooding, and they often do not have safe or affordable access to water for drinking and sanitation. Some regulators point to trash from encampments as a source of pollution, and some officials point to the high costs of cleaning them up.

After six months of talks with homeless services providers, sheriff departments, flood control districts, the ACLU, and nonprofit leaders, SAWPA held the Homelessness and Water Symposium to look for ways the water sector could ensure the human right to water is achieved for people who are homeless. SAWPA, a joint-powers authority created by five water districts, develops, plans, and undertakes common projects to address water resources needs and water quality control and protection. The agency partnered with the Inland Empire Waterkeeper to host the symposium on June 29 at Fairmount Park in Riverside. About 65 people attended.

The symposium helped establish a link between water sector members and people who cannot access water for drinking and sanitation because they do not have homes or money. While collaborative efforts exist to end homelessness in the watershed including Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties, water management is generally not part of these efforts, and it is unclear where exactly it should fit.

"A homeless person is invisible to (water sector engineers) and their services," said Mike Antos, SAWPA senior watershed manager, at the event. "Absent a connection, they are at a loss."

One homeless assistance approach with growing county support in the watershed is "Housing First." It connects homeless individuals and families with permanent supportive or affordable housing, and it differs because it does not include barriers to entry, such as treatment programs or sobriety. Housing First is based on the principle that everyone can achieve housing stability and that homelessness is



rooted in a housing crisis in the United States, and permanent supportive housing has been shown to improve outcomes and increase retention for people who are chronically homeless.

In the Housing First approach, water issues are present in the cost of water and sewer utilities at businesses and for people placed in housing, said Damien O'Farrell, the CEO of Path of Life Ministries, during the first panel on homelessness in the watershed.

Give people who are homeless a home, and you solve their needs for water for bathing, drinking, and toilets, said O'Farrell, whose organization provides housing in western Riverside County. He added that ongoing utility payments can be difficult for shelters to cover and can be difficult for formerly homeless people to afford.

To start the second panel on the Human Right to Water and its implications, Rev. Amanda Therese Ford of the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water described Assembly Bill 685, which took effect in 2012 and recognized that "every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes." The coalition is based in Sacramento and advocates for a community-based movement for the democratic allocation of water statewide.

Ford said the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water can't implement or ensure the human right to water in a meaningful way as it is currently written.

The Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board focuses on protecting the beneficial uses of water from any source of pollution, said Adam Fischer, chief of the Inland Storm Water Unit and a panelist. He added that permitting could be used to address the human right to water, however there remains significant policy work to be done before that can be made a reality. "The permittees, cities and counties, have a huge role to play," he said.

As hard scientists and regulators, Regional Board staff do not address the Human Right to Water directly, and it would take a huge public involvement effort to change the perception of what constitutes a beneficial use of the river to include living in an encampment, Fischer said.

"Who are you protecting the water for?" asked Anne Rios, a panelist and executive director of Think Dignity, a San Diego nonprofit with a mobile showers and water distribution program for people who are homeless. "When my agency thinks about dignity, it's dignity for all."

The room was silent when Angel Mayfield, a homeless advocate in Orange County and a member of the OC Poverty Alleviation Coalition, shared her experiences living in an encampment along the riverbed, buying baby wipes to stay clean, watching another homeless woman spend five hours filling up jugs of water, and moving her tent seven times in eight months because of flooding or law enforcement.

About 9,000 people are homeless on a given night within Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties, according to the 2017 point-in-time count, and many live along the Santa Ana River and its tributaries. In areas of Orange County alone, about 480 unsheltered people were counted living in the riverbed earlier this year, according to the Orange County Health Care Agency.



Mayfield said being homeless is expensive and time consuming, and many homeless people feel they're being treated like animals, having to fight day in and day out for survival. To improve water management and county programs, Mayfield emphasized how important it would be to establish trust with the people in encampments first.

"There are many people by the river who are hiding, like I first did when I was homeless," she said. "I hid from you because of the stigma."

"We need to cross this barrier of fear that I don't know you. Because I do know you, I know you went through something," Mayfield added.

For the keynote, Chris Brokate spoke about founding the Clean River Alliance, a nonprofit sponsored by the Russian Riverkeeper in Guerneville in Sonoma County. Brokate organized a trash pickup service for people who are homeless by giving them trash bags and offering a set location where they could deliver the trash they collected each week. In 18 months people living in riverbed encampments delivered 70,000 lbs. of trash that would have otherwise polluted the water, he said at the event.

As reflected by Brokate's work, the Santa Ana River Watershed is not the only region trying to tackle this issue. In Los Angeles, nonprofits have also set up mobile showers; in Contra Costa, the flood control district produced a report on encampments related to their customs and living conditions; and in Marin County, agencies and residents have used a website to share information about encampments and increase coordination.

The Inland Empire Waterkeeper and SAWPA are eager to consider another event on homelessness and water management or to contribute to a workshop held by city and county officials, who expressed interest in forming a special task force on this issue. It is clear from the attendees and communications post-event that there is a great deal of interest in the region to confront and overcome these issues.

Through the DCI Program, SAWPA will also continue to work with the ACLU and other stakeholders to incorporate the strengths and needs of homeless communities in the IRWM plan and in a watershed report by mid-2018.

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Below is a full list of the panelists:

Panel One: The State of Homelessness in the Santa Ana River Watershed

- Eve Garrow, the homelessness policy analyst and advocate for the ACLU of Southern California.
- Deputy Sheriff Michael Jones, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department Homeless Outreach and Proactive Enforcement (HOPE) team
- Damien O'Farrell, CEO of Path of Life Ministries, the largest homeless shelter and housing provider in western Riverside County
- Emilio Ramirez, deputy director for Community and Economic Development for the City of Riverside

Panel Two: Considering a Human Right to Water

- Adam Fischer, chief of the Inland Storm Water Unit at the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board
- Rev. Amanda Therese Ford, coalition coordinator at the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water
- Angel Mayfield, Orange County homeless advocate and member of the Orange County Poverty Alleviation Coalition
- Anne Rios, executive director of Think Dignity, a San Diego nonprofit with a Transitional Storage Center, Mobile Showers, and Homeless Youth Legal and Advocacy Project

