

No easy answers to Tahoe's homeless issue



Cheyenne Lane with Tahoe Youth & Family Services talks about homelessness on Aug. 30. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

No one ever said they wanted to grow up to be a homeless person. And, yet, today a growing number of people are finding themselves without a traditional roof over their heads.

Twenty-six percent of the people who stayed in South Lake Tahoe's warm room last winter were employed. Eighty-seven percent of the warm room users were locals. There are 25 million housing units in California to accommodate 40 million people. Every 5 percent increase in rent in Los Angeles equates to another 2,000 homeless people. Eighty-five percent

of the homeless in the United States are not the street people the public sees. In El Dorado County, on average, \$35,000 a year is spent on each homeless person when it comes to law enforcement, hospitalization and social services. California has about 25 percent of the country's homeless population.

These were just some of the statistics presented Aug. 30 by six panelists talking about the growing homeless problem here and elsewhere. The 90-minute presentation at Tahoe Beach Retreat in South Lake Tahoe was hosted by Tahoe Regional Young Professionals.

Speakers were: Marissa Muscat, a physician with Barton Health who runs the local warm room; Cheyanne Lane with Tahoe Youth & Family Services; South Lake Tahoe police Lt. Dave Stevenson; rabbi Evon Yakar; Benjamin Henwood, a licensed clinical social worker who is a faculty member at USC; and Daniel Del Monte, El Dorado County deputy director of Community Services.

"Homeless at its core is a housing issue," Del Monte said.

In other words, there isn't enough housing for everyone.

Del Monte said that for every 100 people California has added to its population in the last 40 years, there have been 32 housing units built.

Affordable housing is one thing, lack of housing is another. The Lake Tahoe Basin is contending with both.

Mental health issues and addiction are not uncommon in the homeless world. But in many ways those are the more visible and certainly stereotypical members of this group.

One of the nearly 50 people in attendance asked whether the warm room, which opened in 2015, is bringing these people to Tahoe. The overwhelming answer was no.

As Henwood put it, "People don't identify as homeless and then look for the best place to be homeless."

Most people want to stay in the town they know.

Lane would like the South Shore to have a permanent shelter, but doesn't foresee people moving her to live in it.

Historically, the powers that be would try to get a homeless person off drugs and treated for whatever health issues they had. Housing came next. Henwood said the conventional approach is to secure housing for a person and then address the issues that led them to become homeless.

That approach, though, requires a vacancy sign somewhere, and those are hard to come by here and throughout much of California as well as Northern Nevada.

Knowing why they became homeless could provide the answers to help keep them from returning to that state.

None of the six had definitive solutions for the homeless problem. Muscat would like local regulations changed so it would be easier to build housing. Henwood said if the money saved from the mortgage write off on taxes were transferred to homeless causes, this would be a good redistribution of wealth.

Continuing to talk about homelessness, recognizing that people are on the brink of becoming homeless, erasing the stigma associated with it and working as a community were some of the baby steps suggested in order to move forward.