

Homeless could get minor citations cleared if they accept services

By Gale
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Los Angeles City Atty. Mike Feuer has announced a \$270,000 program to wipe homeless people's records clean of minor citations if they accept job training, drug and alcohol treatment or other social services and perform community service.

Feuer said the county-funded program is designed to get homeless people out from under mounting fines and legal impediments that block their access to jobs and housing. His office will conduct at least six clinics a year for three years, from the Antelope Valley to Long Beach, busing homeless people in from remote locations.

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The courts are cooperating, and the tickets will be removed administratively, without any need for homeless people to appear in court, he added. The program also offers an incentive to "service resistant" individuals who don't want to come in from the streets, Feuer said.

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"We want this to be a vehicle for people who are not taking advantage of services to get services," he said. "This is a pathway to getting back on your feet."

Pete White of Los Angeles Community Action Network, which hosts ticket defense clinics for those cited on skid row, said Feuer would be "better served to instruct the Police Department to stand down or initiate a warning system."

"Rather than citing them and have them jump through hoops, you have the power to stop citing them," said John Raphling, a Venice attorney who coordinates ticket defense clinics. "This is trying to put a fig leaf on the really oppressive enforcement they're doing."

Feuer's initiative comes amid a growing recognition of the human cost of a steady increases in fines and fees that have turned minor traffic citations into debt burdens that cost individuals their driver's license, and disqualify them for jobs and housing opportunities. Homeless people accumulate strings of tickets for sleeping on the sidewalks, jaywalking and public urination.

Advocates say the tickets criminalize homeless people, while authorities say they're needed to control quality of life in the streets.

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Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill in June launching a one-time, statewide amnesty starting Oct. 1 to dismiss up to 80% of infraction-related debt and restore suspended driver's licenses. Rob Wilcox, a spokesman for Feuer, said the state program only reduces fines, not eliminate them, and only for tickets issued before January 2013.

Participants still have to go to court, they are not connected to services and the amnesty offer is a one-shot deal, he added.

Jurisdictions including Los Angeles launched homeless courts in the mid-2000s with a similar mission to help indigent

people shed debt they can never pay. Los Angeles' homeless court slowly fizzled for lack of resources, Feuer said.

He revived the concept this year, staging a clinic in April at the Midnight Mission on skid row. Before the doors opened, 100 people lined up, including one individual who had accumulated \$14,000 in fines, Feuer said.

John Maceri, executive director of Ocean Park Community Center, said his agency participates in Santa Monica homeless court, which has continued to thrive. The court offers a valuable, if limited, service, he said.

"For a very small, very specialized and targeted population, struggling with addictions, mental health issues and a lot of tickets of loitering, panhandling and urinating in public, we have found this a very effective way to get hem into house and treatment," Maceri said. "It's not perfect; sometimes they fall out. But by and large it's been a very positive experience."

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