

# Henry Perea: Hope for homelessness

By Henry  
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This Thanksgiving, as we sit around dining room tables giving thanks for all of our blessings, I encourage everyone to think of those who are less fortunate – the homeless.

When you mention the homeless, sometimes what follows are angry sighs and heated discussions.

In the midst of that, what we sometimes forget is that the homeless are more than an issue. At the heart of it, they're people.

It needs to be acknowledged that homeless individuals who are seeking help should be offered resources to increase their quality of life, while also recognizing that individuals who shun help will have to create their own paths of existence.

Both sides of this issue need to be weighed. Our neighborhoods, schools and parks need to be safe and clean, while we also have to consider how to battle homelessness with a well-conceived plan that acknowledges the homeless as people.

Homeless individuals' humanity cannot be drowned out by the voices of concerned neighbors who are demanding that local government protect the quality of life in their neighborhoods.

There are some homeless people who are temporarily displaced from their homes for myriad reasons, such as losing their jobs or unresolved family issues. Then there are those who are considered chronically homeless.

For those who have become chronically homeless, we need to examine what has caused this. How do we make these people productive members of society?

Other than a lack of funds and employment, many homeless individuals have mental health and substance abuse issues that are keeping them homeless.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that 233,854 homeless people suffered from severe mental illnesses or chronic substance abuse in 2013-14 nationwide.

The Board of Supervisors recently approved an agreement with the Fresno County Department of Behavioral Health for an adult crisis treatment facility that will specialize in helping individuals with dual diagnoses of mental health issues and substance abuse problems.

The 16-bed facility will house patients for up to 45 days and is expected to open in 2017. This facility will greatly aid those who are suffering to get the help they need to be stabilized and employable.

Another item that the board recently passed that will help get the homeless off the streets is a redesigned adult drug court. Low-level, nonviolent drug offenders have the option of undergoing treatment for substance use disorder in lieu of incarceration.

This will not only help get the homeless off the streets, it will also improve their quality of life and reduce the recidivism rate.

Fresno County has tackled the homeless issue head-on in coordination with community partners, as well. For instance, the Fresno Economic Opportunity Commission's Sanctuary Outreach to the Streets offers helping hands to

homeless youths.

In 2014, due to the sanctuary's efforts, homeless youths received 212 housing placements, 4,283 meals and 90 health service referrals. This month, in honor of National Runaway Prevention Month, the Board of Supervisors recognized the sanctuary for its hard work and dedication to helping homeless youths get off the streets.

In addition, the Fresno Housing Authority provided Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program services, such as financial assistance in the form of rent, security deposits and more, to 238 households that were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

While great strides have been made, local government has much more work ahead to mitigate homelessness. I challenge our community to look at the issue of homelessness with fresh eyes and a new perspective.

We need to balance the current philosophy of working tirelessly to get homeless individuals into treatment programs and housing with the reality that there are many who will refuse assistance and be left to handle their own situations.

As we move forward, local government needs to implement and execute plans to reduce homeless individuals who refuse help from affecting neighborhoods and businesses.

First and foremost, Fresno County needs to be a safe and clean place where residents can thrive while also considering the rights of the homeless, who are people just like you and me.

I invite all to attend an upcoming community meeting to discuss long-term solutions to mitigate homelessness in Fresno County. Stay tuned for more information regarding this event on my Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/SupervisorHenryPerea/](http://www.facebook.com/SupervisorHenryPerea/) and Twitter account @HenryPerea.

Henry Perea is a Fresno County supervisor.