



TO ENFORCE OR NOT ENFORCE

Photo: Jon Tyson

Across our city today, there is deep frustration about the homelessness crisis. What happened at Echo Park and the tragic murder of Gabriel Donnay in Beverly Grove are the recent manifestations of a dangerous tension that has been building up in Los Angeles for years. Voters thought, rightly or wrongly, that things like Proposition HHH and Measure H could solve homelessness or at least make a difference. But things have been getting worse, not better since these measures have passed.

As a result, there's a growing sense that the time is right to aggressively focus on a strategy that involves shelters and the enforcement of no-camping laws to get people off the streets. Despite the recent protests in Echo Park, across the city there seems to be a sort of hidden consensus building in favor of this strategy. Recent polling done by the architects of the Build Shelter Now movement suggest that over 70% of Angelenos believe that this is the right thing to do. Even in Sacramento, legislators are floating AB 1372, which would require every local jurisdiction in the state to provide adequate shelter to the unhoused or face penalties. Presumably the intent

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here is to give local jurisdictions the legal cover to pass and enforce anti-camping ordinances.

But is enforcement really the right thing to do?

\$1.2B on HHH. \$300M a year from Measure H. These seemed like a fortune to voters. And to have a worsening crisis despite these “interventions” has led many Angelenos to feel as though these policies have failed. But they have not—yes, progress has been slow and sometimes rocky, but these programs are delivering what they promised. HHH is on pace to deliver 10,000 units of fully funded permanent supportive housing. This will be a tremendous strategic resource for the city as we confront this growing crisis.

In my view, HHH is not so much a failure in its execution but rather in the way it was marketed and sold to Angelenos. Maybe it’s better in today’s day and age to simplify things for the sake of getting them passed. But in the case of strategies to help the unhoused—an incredibly complex social problem—we’ve done ourselves a disservice by failing to confront and discuss the complexity of the situation. Now we just have an impossible expectation—that HHH and Measure H would somehow “solve” homelessness.

I fear that we are headed down the same path when it comes to the consideration of alternative and more aggressive solutions to the crisis. While I am inclined to support aggressive action, we have to be honest with ourselves about

what this means. We’ve gotten to this moment in large part because we didn’t acknowledge that we needed to do two complex, difficult, and extremely costly things at the same time: get people off the streets and into short-term shelter AND work toward the ultimate goal, long-term solutions like permanent supportive housing.

As momentum builds for the “shelter and enforce” side of the equation, we have to be sure that our strategies, policies and politics focus on these two interlocking endeavors—shelters and hotel rooms as transition from the street and permanent supportive housing as the ultimate solution—and work to bring adequate financial resources to both efforts. The people who focus strictly on shelters (the Build Shelter Now folks and the citizens who can’t bear the growing encampments) aren’t talking about the ongoing costs of running shelters and providing social services. At the scale we’re confronted with today this piece alone could be as much as \$500M-\$1B a year.

If we want to get serious about solving this crisis, we have to get real about what needs to be done and how much it’ll actually cost. We can pursue a strategy that involves increased shelter capacity and the enforcement of anti-camping laws but to do it, to be justified in our use of such measures and to protect our humanity, we have to do this right. We need to operate with all the facts on the table and apply the same sense of urgency to getting people into permanent homes as we do to getting people off the streets. This cannot be another “pilot” program and we cannot pursue one strategy at the expense of another. □

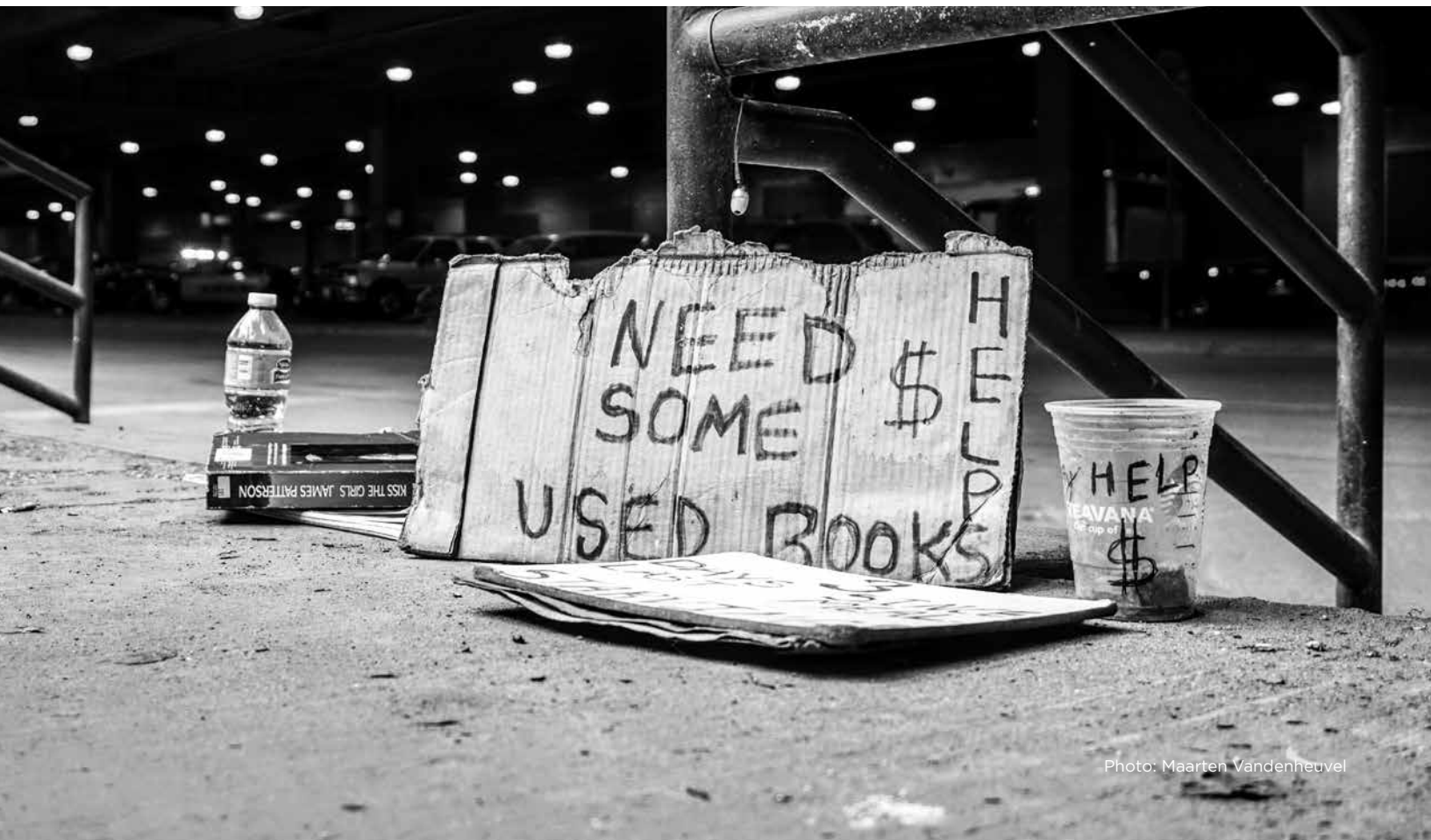


Photo: Maarten Vandenheuveel