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Photo courtesy of John Gioia's office

FEET ON THE GROUND Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia talks with an RD occupant.

Safe at Home

'Why is California not seeing results despite spending so much on government anti-homelessness programs?' **BY JANIS HASHE**

BILLIONS OF DOLLARS have been poured into attempts to solve California's seemingly intractable homelessness problem. Despite this, statistics released by the nonprofit Public Policy Institute of California show the homeless/unhoused population growing from 2020-2022, increasing statewide by 6%, by 20% in Oakland and by 36% in Contra Costa County.

Demands by Gov. Gavin Newsom to cities and counties about fulfilling commitments to create affordable housing continue to be resisted: Only

6% of California cities have met their goals. In February, the Pacific Research Institute detailed information from a report by the California Interagency Council on Homelessness.

"The state spent \$9.6 billion on government anti-homeless programs between the 2018-19 and 2020-21 fiscal years," the report states. "Funding came from a mix of state funds, voter-approved state bond funds and federal dollars...the San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland and San Diego areas received between \$500 million and \$700 million each," it continues.

"But the question remains—why is California not seeing results despite spending so much on government anti-homelessness programs?" the report asks.

Recognizing that a different, coordinated approach to the multifaceted problem is crucial, Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia, Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson and Santa Clara County Supervisor Susan Ellenberg are supporting the AT HOME plan, developed after almost a year of research by the the California State Association of Counties (CSAC). All three supervisors are members of the association's executive committee.

"We have a broken system. Until we change it, we are swimming upstream," said Gioia in a phone interview. In a separate phone interview, Carson recalled a 2016 all-day retreat in which a video of homeless individuals was shared, revealing that they did not know where to go for help. "Each of the counties and cities have mandates, but they don't overlap," he said.

Until the intertwining causes of

homelessness—affordable housing (including for seniors aging out of their longtime homes), unaffordable childcare and senior care costs, mental illness and addiction (including veterans and others with PTSD), and sustainable employment—are seen as parts of what might be termed the ecology of homelessness, "California will continue to live with the shame of leading the nation with nearly 200,000 unsheltered children and adults across our state," AT HOME materials state.

AT HOME's goal, said Gioia, is to stop cities and counties blaming each other for failing to address homelessness, and instead coordinate to solve it, while ensuring money is being spent wisely and effectively.

An acronym for the plan's six pillars, AT HOME includes:

- **Accountability:** Clear responsibilities aligned to authority, resources and flexibility for all levels of government.
- **Transparency:** Integrate and expand data to improve program effectiveness.
- **Housing:** Increase and maintain housing units across the spectrum.
- **Outreach:** Develop sustainable outreach systems and increase workforce to support these systems.
- **Mitigation:** Strengthen safety net programs.
- **Economic Opportunity:** Create employment and education pathways, as well as supports for basic needs.

The strength of this approach, said Gioia and Carson, is that it addresses the complex matrix of reasons why people become and stay homeless and unhoused, as well as holding local and state agencies responsible for the funding they receive.

Accountability and transparency, as in, where funds are going and how they are being spent, would be greatly increased using the AT HOME guidelines, said Carson. "[The program] asks 'Who is accountable for what?'" he said.

Cities and counties struggle with NIMBY responses from their communities when building affordable housing is proposed, both supervisors concurred. "We

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haven't increased the super-affordable housing stock very much," said Gioia. Yet even if housing is built, individuals with mental illness, addictions and no employment will not be able to stay housed unless services are made easily available to them to address those issues.

That's where the outreach, mitigation and economic opportunity pillars of AT HOME would coordinate the needed help.

Regarding outreach, the plan states: "We know that connecting one-on-one is the most effective way of helping the unhoused... However, there is a severe shortage of health and human services workers." The AT HOME plan identifies ways to recruit, train and retain more people, including those with lived experience, to help with outreach and rapid response efforts.

Counties "are on the front lines" for mitigation, AT HOME acknowledges, since they administer or run most health and human services, including those dealing with mental health and addiction. California has been struggling with this for decades.

According to a 2019 Cal Matters article, "Gov. Reagan signed the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act in 1967, all but ending the practice of institutionalizing patients against their will.

"When deinstitutionalization began 50 years ago, California mistakenly relied on community treatment facilities, which were never built. And the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act made it virtually impossible to compel treatment," the article states.

Newsom recently proposed a 2024 ballot initiative to improve how California treats mental illness, substance abuse and homelessness that would include a bond to build state-of-the-art mental health treatment residential settings in the community to house those with mental illness and substance use disorders, to create housing for homeless veterans and modernize the Mental Health Services Act.

In September 2022, the governor signed the CARE Act, creating a "CARE Court" system designed to provide individuals with "clinically appropriate,

community-based and court-ordered CARE Plans consisting of... county mental health and substance use disorder treatment services." The bill also includes provisions for compelling some individuals into treatment, which is controversial and currently being legally challenged.

"I applaud the governor for signing [this bill]," said Carson.

AT HOME's economic opportunity pillar addresses the need for employment, education and self-sufficiency, including for formerly incarcerated people.

Gioia, Carson and Ellenberg are currently working with other CSAC executive board members, the state legislature and the governor to develop a "trailer bill" based on AT HOME, said Gioia. Trailer bills usually make changes to state law needed to implement the policies in the state budget.

Individuals wishing to support AT HOME should contact their local and state representatives to express their approval of the plan, said Gioia and Carson. They can also encourage any nonprofits working with the homeless to become part of the coalition supporting it (counties.org/californians-homelessness-accountability).

"Advocate in your own community for housing the unhoused, and help to dispel stereotypes about who they are," said Gioia. He also noted that Contra County County is seeking to hire people for its CORE program, which also accepts donations.

"We can all play a part in addressing the systemic issues," said Carson, pointing to the ways in which people reached out to help each other during the pandemic. "People started to see and acknowledge that even they could become homeless," he said. Many people have struggled with mental illness or addiction themselves, or have tried to help family members who do. Empathy, not NIMBY, is what is needed to help all become safely housed, he concluded.

For more information about the AT HOME plan, visit counties.org/home-plan.

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