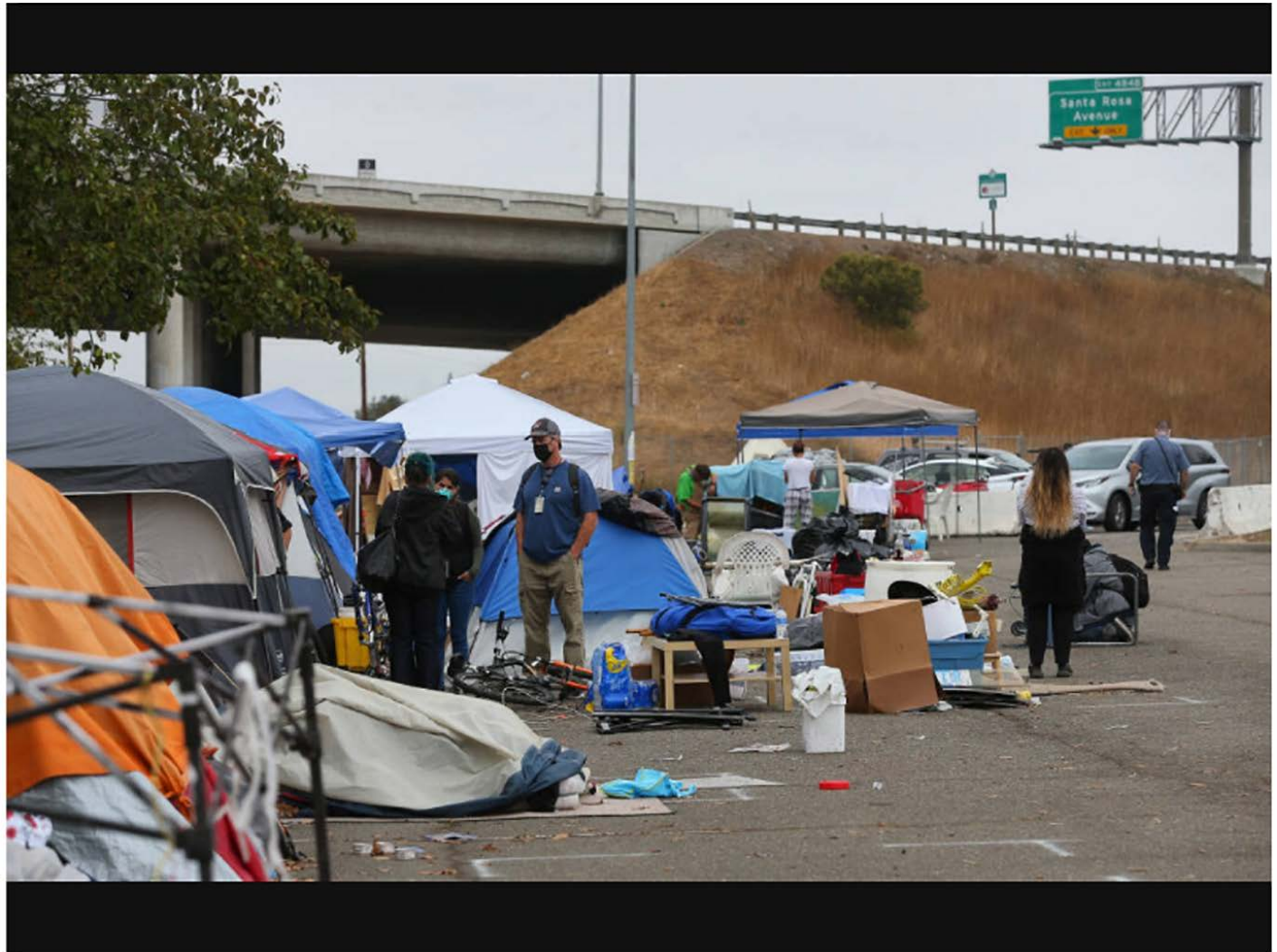


PD Editorial: Smaller cities step up to address homelessness



Rohnert Park personnel clear a homeless encampment at the Roberts Lake park and ride lot on Sept. 10. (CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat)

Sonoma County might finally turn a corner when it comes to delivering assistance to homeless residents. There's still a long way to go, but the fact that smaller cities are stepping up to help is a welcome sign.

For a long time, many housed people were able to dismiss homelessness as a distant concern. "It's a huge problem in San Francisco, maybe even in Santa Rosa, but not in our town," they'd tell themselves. Then one day they see some tents in a park. Maybe an RV and a couple of vans park on a street for months. Those dismissive residents find that California's housing crisis touches all corners of the state.

Homelessness can seem like an insurmountable challenge, and people clamor for quick solutions. They want to provide shelter to those in need and behavioral health care to people with substance use disorders. They also want the crime, litter, drugs, violence and other things that diminish quality of life near homeless camps to stop.

Yet there are no quick solutions. The homelessness crisis has been years in the making. It will take years and many steps along the way to end it. Every community must do its part. Sonoma County and Santa Rosa might have the most local homeless residents, but they cannot fix things alone.

It's heartening, then, that three smaller communities recently have taken action other than just sweeping camps and hoping they go away.

Most recently, the Sebastopol City Council unanimously voted to create a safe parking program that will set aside space near the city's community center for people living in RVs. Currently, RVs with people living in them park on city streets, especially Morris Street, which has more than a dozen.

The city will work with the nonprofit Sonoma Applied Village Services on the new safe parking program. Crucially, the nonprofit will coordinate mental health and social services on site as well as security. This won't just be someplace to put RVs but a place for people to get help.

Last month, the Petaluma and Rohnert Park city councils separately voted to pursue millions of dollars from the state through Project Homekey. That program helps communities convert underused hotels, motels and commercial buildings into supportive housing for the homeless during the pandemic. The county has used Project Homekey funding to purchase and convert hotels in Santa Rosa and Sebastopol.

None of these projects will provide enough space for every homeless resident. None will clear every RV and tent visible in a public space. But three dozen people in a safe RV parking space and a few dozen in Project Homekey sites, and all of a sudden those cities start to make a dent in the much bigger problem.

With any luck these projects will demonstrate that smaller-scale efforts to engage and help homeless residents can make a real difference in lives and address the safety and other concerns of housed residents. Success will open the way for more such projects down the road.

Homelessness and its impacts touch everyone. Finally, more communities are stepping up to address it rather than demanding someone else figure out a solution.

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