

L.A.'s boldest plan ever to help the homeless

by Eitan Arom

Posted on Oct. 14, 2016 at 5:14 pm

[Facebook](#)[Twitter](#)[Print](#)[Email](#)[More](#)



Apará, a homeless woman from Mexico, photographed near the L.A. River in 2006. Photos by David Blumenkrantz

For even the most observant Jews, sleeping in the *sukkah* is a serious weeklong commitment that's not without its challenges.

And yet, across Los Angeles, tens of thousands of people sleep each night in shelters that make some *sukkahs* look like luxury condos, camping out in their cars, in tents, under tarps or simply exposed to the elements.

“Who could possibly sustain themselves living in a *sukkah* for a year or more?” asked Rabbi Morley Feinstein of University Synagogue in Brentwood. “We know for some people, a roof like a *sukkah* is more than they have.”

Feinstein is among a group of clergy lending their voices to a measure they hope will make a dent in the city's homeless population, which has been on the rise since 2009 and stands at more than 28,000, according to the latest count by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA). Representing the Board of Rabbis of Southern California, Feinstein has joined the Los Angeles Council of Religious Leaders, a group of 13 Abrahamic faith leaders, in endorsing Proposition HHH.

While promises to house the homeless surface from time to time in L.A. — Eric Garcetti made homelessness a central issue in his successful run for mayor in 2013 — the upcoming city ballot initiative distinguishes itself with its hefty price tag: \$1.2 billion.

It also takes a boldly simple approach in its search for a solution: four walls and a roof.

The measure earmarks 100 percent of the bonds it would issue to build housing and facilities, with the county picking up the tab for services. It's as yet unclear how the county would pay for the uptick or how much it would cost. Last year, the county spent \$1 billion paying for services related to the homeless, such as addiction treatment and mental health counseling.



The current proposition puts an emphasis on the most desperate cases — the chronically homeless, those on the streets repeatedly or for extended periods. Leveraged with state, federal and private sources, city officials say the money would fund 8,000 to 10,000 units of permanent supportive

housing over 10 years, more than doubling the city's current stock.

Feinstein admits he is no housing expert. But with the mayor, the City Council and the L.A. County Board of Supervisors lining up behind the measure, he sees “a rare moment in civic history.”

“When the civic leaders, who are the ones who are responsible for making the decisions, say this is our path, then it's clear to me,” he said.

That path runs through places like the La Kretz Villas, north of Koreatown.

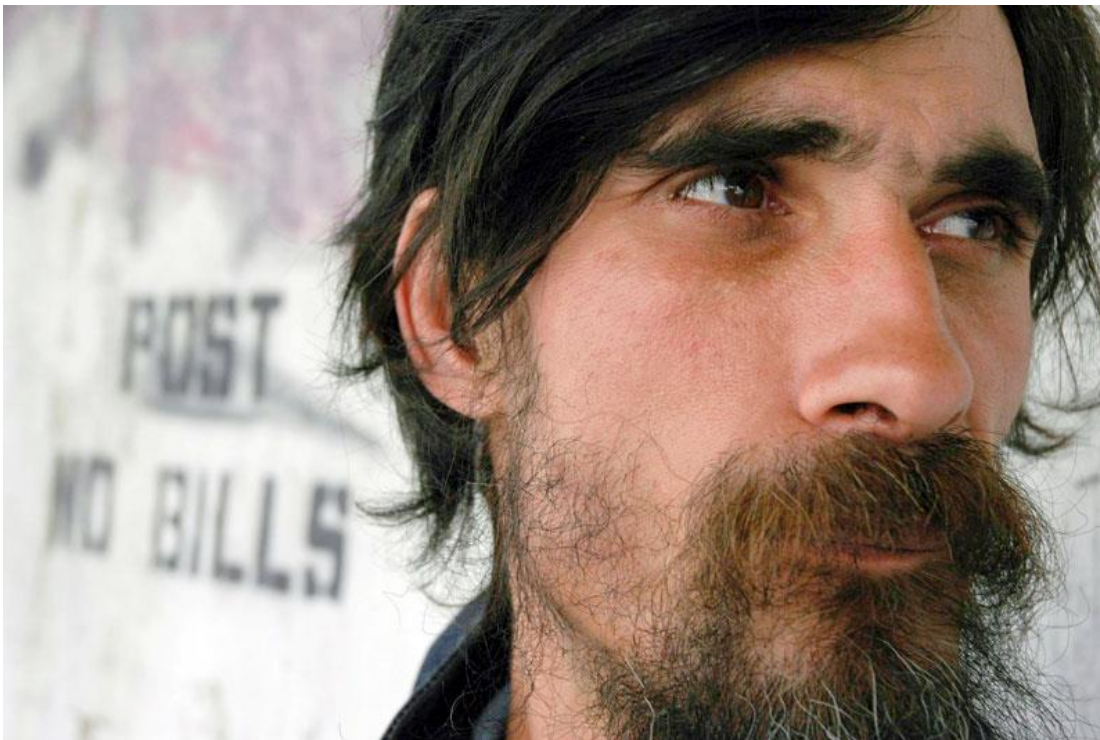
On North Juanita Avenue, a side street curving off Beverly Boulevard, a tent encampment lined one sidewalk on a recent Friday morning, and the sound of a radio tuned to a hip-hop station drifted from one of the makeshift shelters, mingling with the low roar of the 101 Freeway.

But inside a blocky, four-story housing complex across from a warehouse, neighboring the freeway, it's a different world. Doors in a cheerful shade of orange look out onto a courtyard with a community garden, a pair of barbecues and some cafe tables shaded by an umbrella.

“When they told me I could live here, it was kind of a trip,” said a 40-year-old resident who identified himself as Dalton.

Sitting in the facility's community lounge, a bright, high-ceilinged room decorated in soothing shades of blue, Dalton wore jeans and a crewneck white T-shirt. His hairstyle is somewhere between retro and stylish: close-shaven on the sides and well coiffed on top.

On Thanksgiving Day in 2012, Dalton learned he was HIV positive. His boyfriend hadn't disclosed his diagnosis, and the relationship “turned abusive fast.” Dalton left without looking back, but he didn't feel he could reach out to his family, and soon he found himself without a place to live.



Dalton said he was abusing drugs and alcohol, his HIV was unmedicated, and the streets were a cruel place where he was robbed at gunpoint and where it was all too easy to get mixed up with the wrong crowd.

Three years ago, after completing a small

mountain of paperwork, he was admitted to La Kretz Villas, a facility managed by the nonprofit People Assisting the Homeless (PATH). Now, a case manager helps him navigate access to supportive services and medical care.

In total, the North Juanita Avenue facility includes 48 studio units with a kitchenette and bathroom. A few are affordable housing rented at fixed prices, but most are permanent supportive housing, where residents such as

Dalton pay 30 percent of their income, whatever that is, and live without preconditions like enrollment in services or classes.

Dalton takes pride in his home. Earlier this month, he had dressed his doorframe in a combination of tinsel, Christmas baubles and Halloween decorations, which he boasted he'd purchased for a total of \$8. But more importantly, he said, he's clean and sober, on a regimen of medication and recently got a job offer at a lesbian and gay support center.

He compared the complex to living in college, with its close quarters, shared kitchen and vibrant personalities.

"There's times when you say, 'What did you get yourself into?'" he said, referring to when, for example, somebody might accidentally set off the fire alarm at 5 a.m. "But what you got yourself into is you're not homeless."

Sitting across from Dalton as he described his situation was Amy Anderson, executive director of PATH Ventures, the nonprofit's housing development arm, who wore a teal "Yes on Proposition HHH" wristband with the slogan "homes end homelessness" written across it.

"The bottom line is you can't end homelessness until someone is permanently in a home," she said.

PATH Ventures already is building more units on a lot facing the La Kretz Villas, adding a complex that triples the occupancy of the North Juanita Avenue location, she said. On average, the city estimates that it funds the construction of 300 units a year, but Anderson guessed the number would rise to 1,000 for the life of the bond measure, if it passes.

The measure is not without its opponents, though they are relatively few. Writing in the Los Angeles Times, three neighborhood activists criticized it in an August op-ed for, among other reasons, using a property tax to back up the bonds that would disproportionately burden new buyers. Over the life of the bond, the city's chief administrative officer estimates, the annual tax rate would average just under 1 percent, or \$96 on a million-dollar home. But because property taxes in California are based on the purchase price, new buyers tend to pay more than longtime owners.

More common are supporters like Tanya Tull, a longtime homelessness activist and pioneer who started some of the first shelters in L.A. in the 1980s. They caution that voters shouldn't expect an end to homelessness.

"I support triple H, and I support all of the new initiatives to build permanent supportive housing," she said. "But how anybody thinks that's going to clean up the streets is beyond me to understand."

Many of Tull's philosophies on homelessness have become local and federal policy, though they have often been misunderstood or incorrectly translated, the Jewish activist said. Her idea of "Housing First" — a fringe view some three decades ago when she conceived it — holds that housing should not depend on enrollment in

services like addiction treatment or parenting classes. The policy has become a best practice in homeless services.



She approves of Prop. HHH inasmuch as it aims to use housing to break the cycle of homelessness. “The longer people are on the streets, the more dysfunctional they become,” she said in a phone call.

She called the bond an “important step to serve some of the people some of the time.” The bond would crucially assist sectors such as the severely mentally ill and disabled — those who would never be able to house themselves otherwise, she said.

To be sure, mental illness is a key factor in homelessness. The LAHSA count estimated that 31 percent of homeless people in L.A. are mentally ill. And across the country, budgets for treating those individuals are subject to political and economic whim: In the three years following the recession, 2009 to 2011, states cut \$1.8 billion from their mental health budgets, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

But by focusing on permanent housing for the most desperate cases, it fails to directly target other groups, like homeless families or people struggling to land on their feet after a stint in jail, Tull said.

Nonetheless, she repeatedly emphasized the necessity of the bond: She’s somewhat aghast when she speaks about the state of L.A.’s streets. Tull remembers when there was no such thing as “homelessness” in the 1970s, when she was a social worker on Skid Row. One might encounter transients, sure, but it was nowhere near the crisis levels of today, she said, when sprawling tracts of makeshift tent cities spring up in parks, in industrial areas, under freeways, and even on side streets near downtown.

Four decades ago, though, developers began to tear down residential hotels in downtown neighborhoods like Bunker Hill, and impoverished families began moving into studios and one-bedroom apartments previously

occupied by singles, Tull explained. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration slashed budgets at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In 1983, she said, “it finally tipped.”

“When there was housing that was affordable, people weren’t living on the street,” she said. “It’s as simple as that.”

Rabbi Noah Farkas of Valley Beth Shalom (VBS) would agree with Tull that homelessness should be addressed as part of a larger societal problem, tied up in housing prices. The clergy-turned-homeless advocate sees Prop. HHH as the next “piece in a very long jigsaw puzzle.”

Farkas became deeply involved in the issue of homelessness after striking up a friendship with a man who would sit by a freeway onramp the rabbi passed each week while walking to shul in Encino. Soon after they met, though, the man was arrested for sleeping on the streets, and the episode left a lasting impact on the rabbi.

Farkas told that story in a 2014 Rosh Hashanah sermon that crystalized the Conservative synagogue’s activism on housing, and soon, VBS was an integral partner in an interfaith, citywide coalition to press the issue in City Hall and before the county supervisors.

During a supervisors debate later that year at VBS, members of the coalition brought forward affordable housing advocates and people who had struggled for housing themselves to question the candidates.

After Sheila Kuehl was elected to the seat, she hired one of the questioners as her homelessness deputy and appointed Farkas to the vice chairmanship of LAHSA, a joint agency of the city and the county. Now, Kuehl is among the most prominent supporters of Prop. HHH.

Municipal and county officials have long known the “best antidote to homelessness is housing,” she told the Journal via phone. And while the county provides social services like hospitals and addiction services for the indigent, she said, “we don’t have any money for the housing.”

That shortfall actually hamstringing the county’s efforts to provide services, she continued.

“We are the safety net,” she said. “And the problem for us has been we provide mental health services kind of on the curb. How healthy is that? ‘We’ll meet you at your tent downtown.’ That’s not conducive to health.”

It’s also not, in general, conducive to getting a job.

Just ask Kim and Isaac Sofer. The couple met at Marilyn Monroe’s star on Hollywood Boulevard. It would have been a picturesque way to start a romance — the pair has a habit of finishing each other’s sentences — except that they were, and remain, chronically homeless. Now they have two young sons who share Kim’s blue-green eyes.

Isaac began, explaining, “We’ve been there panhandling with a sign. We’ve gotten [from passersby] just, ‘Oh, just get a job,’ but they don’t realize —”

“— we can’t get a job until we get a place,” Kim finished.

Isaac went on, “You can’t get a job when you don’t have an address, you don’t have —”

“— a place to take a shower every day,” Kim put in.

“A place to leave your stuff,” Isaac added.

“That’s the hardest part,” Kim said. “They tell us to take a shower, to get a job, but you can’t.”

Interviewed in August for a project on homelessness in Los Angeles by Cal State Northridge journalism professor David Blumenkrantz (see accompanying story), the couple hit on a problem underlying the plight of those who live in the city’s streets: Not having a home makes it harder to get one.

The bond measure tacitly addresses that paradox, along with the idea that providing housing is the only way to overcome it.



“People are homeless because they don’t have a home,” said Dora Leong Gallo, the CEO of A Community of Friends, a nonprofit that operates permanent supportive housing from the North Valley to Anaheim. “And so the only way to address homelessness is to provide affordable housing opportunities for people who need them.”

If Prop. HHH passes, it’s organizations like Gallo’s that would be tapped to compete for the new funds and use them to build new units. She supports the measure not as a be-all end-all for addressing homelessness, but rather as “a great first start.”

For Farkas, Prop. HHH represents a medium-term step in a problem that requires long-term commitment. For instance, he said, California should set up a trust fund for affordable housing such as many other states have.

But passing the measure would show that Los Angeles is willing to “put some skin in the game to show folks in Sacramento that we care enough that we’re going to vote for it,” he said.

Farkas is one of the loudest voices from the pulpit speaking on homelessness, but by no means the only one. Each year, the haftarah read on Yom Kippur, from Isaiah 58, admonishes Jews that what God desires on fast days is not abstinence from food but rather, “the fast I desire ... is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home.”

“Your fast almost rings false if you don’t open up your eyes and see the rest of the world around you and take action,” said Rabbi Sarah Hronsky, senior rabbi of Temple Beth Hillel in Valley Village.

Hronsky was part of a group of more than 30 faith leaders, along with Feinstein, convened at an Echo Park cathedral by the Rev. J. Jon Bruno, president of the L.A. Council of Religious Leaders, last month to endorse Prop. HHH.

Caring for the weakest in society is a Jewish imperative repeated over and over in scripture, she said.

“We know exactly what it means to not have a permanent home, to be wanderers,” she said in a phone interview with the Journal. “And it doesn’t feel good to be strangers in a strange land.”

So Hronsky prepared remarks for Yom Kippur citing Isaiah, calling on congregants to act on their better impulses rather than simply pray on them. Short of telling them to go out and vote yes, she wanted to remind them of their obligation to care for the orphan and the widow, arguing that Prop. HHH is an easy way to do that.

Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, rabbi-in-residence at the social justice organization Bend the Arc in Southern California, which has lent its support to Prop. HHH, also cited Isaiah during a phone interview. But in addition to Yom Kippur, he said, Sukkot should serve as a reminder for Jews to care for the most needy.



“You don’t make a blessing when you put up a sukkah,” he said. “You make a blessing when you sit in a sukkah. There’s kind of an implication that you’re going to share a sukkah.” *Jack, at his favorite bus stop, in 2006.*

By opening our sukkahs to neighbors and friends, he said, “We’re reminding ourselves

after Rosh Hashanah and after Yom Kippur that the way forward is sharing, by coming together as a community, by not creating walls between ourselves.”

Tull, the homelessness activist, also puts community at the center of her philosophy about how to house those living on the streets. Her thinking on the issue was informed by a year spent on Beit HaShita, a kibbutz in Israel’s north, in her early 20s, she said.

In a kibbutz, as in any healthy, functioning community, each person is a valued member with something to contribute to the larger whole. That, she said, is the ideal to which Los Angeles should strive.

“Everybody had a role,” she said, “even if they were dysfunctional or incompetent or highly educated — there was a role for everybody.”