

Supervisors propose investing \$3 million to reduce homelessness
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Two county supervisors want to kick-start three stalled initiatives to end homelessness with an investment of \$3.1 million in public money.

Supervisors Steve Bennett and Kathy Long are proposing using higher-than-expected revenues in the county's reserves to invest in year-round emergency shelters, provide seed funding for an affordable housing trust fund and open a detoxification center. The programs would serve the estimated 6,000 homeless people in Ventura County.

"Significantly reducing homelessness in Ventura County is within our reach," the two supervisors said in the proposal going to the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday.

They are proposing to spend:

n \$2 million to help cities develop year-round emergency shelters. The money would be offered as a match, with the county paying \$2 for every \$1 each city and its housing partners invest. Ventura County now has two shelters offering 70 beds, all of them in Oxnard, but organizers are working to open others in Thousand Oaks, Ventura and Santa Paula.

n \$600,000 to develop a three-year pilot program allowing substance abusers to go through detoxification within the county. Ventura County has few if any such programs, housing advocates say.

n \$500,000 for the Ventura County Housing Trust Fund, which would allow the county to qualify for matching state money. Assemblywoman Audra Strickland, R-Thousand Oaks, has introduced a bill lowering the match to qualify for a state housing bond to \$500,000 for counties with populations in Ventura County's range. Other matches also may be available, Long said.

The three goals are part of the county's 10-year plan to end homelessness, but advocates have not been able to identify the money and property to make them real.

"There has been a lot of time and energy invested, but we're kind of in a stuck spot," said Cathy Brudnicki, executive director of the Ventura County Homeless and Housing Coalition. "We need a push to get over."

Few if any emergency beds have been added to the county's stock, the housing trust fund lacks the cash to leverage millions more and at least three drug treatment programs have closed.

Rick Schroeder, a nonprofit housing developer in Thousand Oaks, welcomed the proposal. He said he would be supporting it when it is discussed at 10:30 a.m. at the supervisors' meeting in Ventura.

"Two million isn't going to go that far, but it's something," he said.

The money comes from unspent operating money in the county's budget for 2008-09, an amount originally targeted at \$11.4 million, but that turned out to be closer

to \$20 million. Chief Financial Officer Paul Derse said the difference came from redevelopment funding and a state payment to the Human Services Agency.

The unspent cash is part of the county's \$85 million in reserves, which is close to 10 percent of the general fund budget of \$863 million. Bennett, who considers himself a fiscal conservative, said it makes sense to use some of that money to deal with homelessness. The Board of Supervisors has raised county reserves from zero to 9 percent of the general fund and is making progress in reaching its goal of 15 percent, he said.

"Should it all go to growth in reserves? Not when we've got this problem we've not been able to solve. We've got three holes in the 10-year plan we've not been able to solve at all."

The other three supervisors on the board – Peter Foy, Linda Parks and John Zaragoza – could not be reached for their comments on the proposal.