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DATE: October 26, 2017

TO: Frank Kim
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FROM: Richard Sanchez
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SUBJECT: Public Health Considerations for Persons Experiencing Homelessness

Homeless encampments located in uninhabitable areas of Orange County raise a number of public health concerns related to waste, sanitation and disease transmission, availability of services and potable water, mental health concerns and concerns related to violent crimes. In 2014, CalRecycle's Illegal Dumping Technical Advisory Committee (IDTAC) developed the Homeless Encampment Guide that highlighted several critical concerns regarding the homeless populations. Specifically, it noted that residents of homeless encampments have such needs as provision of social, public and mental health services, as well as stability, storage and safety. In highlighting the health and safety implications of homeless encampments, the Homeless Encampment Guide noted that homeless people generate solid waste during their daily activities of food preparation and consumption, shelter building and maintenance, storing their possessions, eliminating unwanted materials and gathering recyclable materials of value. The resulting piles of trash become harborage and food sources for vectors and related pathogens, sources of odors, fuel for fires, unattractive nuisances to the public and potential sites that can cause bodily injuries.

Accordingly, the public health risks associated with spread of communicable diseases are increased in homeless encampments lacking basic sanitation services and waste collection. Some diseases, such as flu, gastrointestinal bugs or MRSA, are more likely to occur in homeless populations. Hepatitis A is a concern in homeless encampments where there is an accumulation of human waste products because the Hepatitis A virus is usually spread when taken in by mouth through contact with objects, food or drinks that are contaminated by feces from an infected person. Homeless individuals who reside in shelters or other locations suitable for habitation are at less risk for Hepatitis A infection since Hepatitis A vaccination is regularly provided in conjunction with a vaccination clinic or event. Chronic illness and disease is exacerbated by poor nutrition and hygiene and good personal hygiene is the most important way to prevent MRSA infection and transmission. Lack of proper personal hygiene is a generally known characteristic of the homeless population, especially the homeless encampment population, given lack of basic sanitation services.

Moreover, homeless encampments raise a number of concerns regarding the mental health of the homeless population that reside there. Individuals living in unsheltered homeless encampments are likely to be exposed to violence, a key indicator of public health. Victims of crime, especially violent crime, often experience severe psychological distress and mental health problems. The overall public health of the community, including the homeless population in homeless encampments, is affected by increased exposure to violence since fear of crime, without actually being a victim, can also lead to

Public Health Considerations for Persons Experiencing Homelessness

October 26, 2017

Page 2 of 2

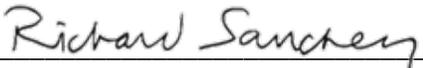
stress, depression and sleeping difficulties. Fear of crime may also contribute to becoming overweight because those who fear going out in their neighborhood may be more sedentary.

The Health Care Agency's ability to provide services to the homeless is hampered by encampments located in areas unsuitable for habitation. Providing services and emergency medical response to uninhabitable areas can be impacted by difficulties in obtaining safe access to the encampment and in locating the point of incident and the patient. Unsafe encampment conditions also pose risks to service providers in the form of unstable structures, other geographical challenges, pets/animals that are not under control, the lack of sanitation facilities and potential exposure to human, hazardous or medical waste.

Homeless encampments also impede and pose a challenge to the County's management of waste. For instance, the collection and disposal of home-generated waste, which includes products used to penetrate the skin (i.e. hypodermic needles), and pose significant threat of bodily injury, must be in compliance with the program regulated by Sections 117671, 117690, 117904, and 118147 of the California Health and Safety Code. However, the implementation of these services at homeless encampments throughout the County is difficult and poses a significant challenge. In addition, lacking proper disposal and collection of human and animal waste can contaminate ground and surface water supplies, as well as transmit diseases. Moreover, the unauthorized disposal of hazardous wastes in homeless encampments pose a significant challenge to the County's proper development and implementation of its hazardous waste management plan in connection with specifying necessary removal or remedial actions for unauthorized disposal of hazardous waste in homeless encampments as specified in Health and Safety Code, Division 20, Chapter 6.5, Article 11.5.

There are several interventions that may alleviate the foregoing health concerns at homeless encampments. Particularly, and of more importance, is persons experiencing homelessness finding places that have access to basic sanitation services, waste collection and protection from the elements noted above. Areas deemed uninhabitable lack the resources and services necessary to protect personal, mental and public health, as well as insure personal safety. Shelters and other housing options that provide access to these necessities should be a key component in any plan addressing populations experiencing homelessness.

Therefore, in order to mitigate increased exposure to communicable disease and reduce the increased experience of mental health issues in homeless encampments located in uninhabitable areas of Orange County as well as facilitating proper compliance with California law regarding the collection and disposal of waste, the Orange County Health Care Agency recommends persons should not be residing in confined locations that are not suitable for habitation and lack the resources and services necessary to protect personal, mental and public health, as well as insure personal safety and, instead, should be in suitable habitations that meet the minimum standards as specified in the IDTAC's Guide. In addition, the Health Care Agency recommends that, consistent with the Health Care Agency's Public Health Strategic Plan, local government and communities are encouraged to support health-promoting environments in their land use planning-related activities.


Richard Sanchez, Director