GRAND JURY REPORT SLAMS EAST COUNTY CITIES’ “LACK OF RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS”

By Miriam Raftery

June 13, 2016 (San Diego’s East County) – The San Diego County Grand Jury has issued a report critical of four cities in East County for failing to provide adequately for the needs of homeless people, including failing to apply for federal funds available for that purpose. The Grand Jury report, titled “East County Cities’ Lack of Response to Homelessness,” also made recommendations to improve the situation.

“We looked at El Cajon, La Mesa, Lemon Grove, and Santee,” Grand Jury Foreman Melinda Richards told East County Magazine. “Most of them were doing almost nothing. El Cajon did contribute about $100,000 to the East County Transitional Living Center,” she noted, “but by and large, not much else…there are some things for domestic violence and for families, but for a single homeless person, there is very little.”

Richard said the Grand Jury also looked at funding available. “It seemed to us that cities in East County weren’t getting any because they weren’t proactive in seeking the funds,” she said, adding that about $15 million came into the San Diego area for homeless issues from the federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

San Diego County guidelines state that services should be located proportional to need. The 2015/16 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that East County cities initiate common programs to address homelessness by joining the Regional Continuum of Care Council and devoting attention and resources to this under-served group.

The report follows up on a 2009-2010 report by the Grand Jury, “Homeless in San Diego,” that looked at the city of San Diego’s handling of the homeless. About 65% of the homeless countywide are in the city of San Diego.

Neither Grand Jury report addressed the County’s handling of the homeless, so unincorporated areas of East County such as Spring Valley, Lakeside, Alpine and Ramona are not covered in the report.
Yet the Regional Task Force on the Homeless, in its 2016 Point in Time homeless count in January, found that in the unincorporated areas, the county has 336 homeless people—and none of them were in shelters, since the County does not operate any places for the homeless to sleep in the entire vast unincorporated region that includes mountains, deserts and rural areas. The highest count was in Spring Valley with 134 homeless people. Ramona, an area with cold winter temperatures, had 61 homeless people during the January count, while Lakeside had 87 and Casa de Oro had 20. (See ECM's article on the 2016 count.)

The Grand Jury report relied on the 2015 count when it looked at the four incorporated East County cities. El Cajon had 721 homeless, including 520 sheltered and 191 sheltered, 711 total. Of those sheltered, 202 were in an emergency shelter and 318 in transitional housing.

The other three cities’ homeless people were all living without any shelter. Santee had 30 unsheltered homeless people, La Mesa 19, and Lemon Grove 11.

That situation has only gotten worse in the 2016 count, which found a 19 percent increase in unsheltered homeless countywide.

Among East County’s incorporated cities, the 2016 count found Santee had 44 homeless, La Mesa had 31, and Lemon Grove 12—all still unsheltered. El Cajon had 321 total homeless who were counted, of whom 103 were unsheltered in the 2016 count. But Dolores Diaz, executive director of the Regional Task Force on the Homeless, believes the number of sheltered homeless in El Cajon was substantially undercounted because the shelter did not keep data required by HUD. The shelter and the city have blamed lack of funding, in what seems to be a circle of finger-pointing.

El Cajon did allocate about $75,000 of Community Development Block Grant funding for 2016-17, which covers 1500 nights of lodging, mainly October through March, for about eight rooms per night. The bulk of that is for the East County Transitional Living Center’s one-year Christian discipleship programs serving 402 individuals and 54 families; for non-Christian homeless the options are far more limited.

Other shelter programs include the Center for Community Solutions Project Safehouse and Next Step-Ease, serving domestic violence clients, Crisis House, serving domestic violence clients, the disabled and families with children, a Transitional Living program serving 73 families last year, Home Start Inc., a hotel/motel voucher program serving families with children, Interfaith Shelter Network East County, that served 12 people a week for about six months, and Volunteers of America, serving those with disabilities, mentally ill people and veterans.

Homelessness adds substantially to law enforcement costs, the Grand Jury investigation found. El Cajon Police estimated costs for arrests and calls dealing with homeless people are estimated at $411,000 for 2014. La Mesa Police estimates its homeless-related costs for 2014 at $269,000. The Sheriff estimates about 10% of all calls for its services in Santee relate to homeless people. The Sheriff and County Dept. of Health and Human Services did launch the East Regional Homeless Outreach Team in fall 2015 based at the Sheriff’s Santee station.

The Grand Jury study doesn’t mention firefighting costs, but in some unincorporated areas, several small brush fires have originated at homeless camps. There are also costs for sweeps by law enforcement to evict homeless people in areas such as the Sweetwater and San Diego River beds.
The Grand Jury also found that the Regional Continuum of Care Council has no East County municipal members, thus have marginal involvement in countywide homeless issues.

The Grand Jury report recommends that each city join the Regional Continuum of Care Council to participate in its work. It also recommends that the Mayors and City Councils of El Cajon, La Mesa, Lemon Grove and Santee “initiate coordinated homelessness-related efforts to increase prevention, shelter, and transitional housing services in East County.”

California's Penal Code requires each of these cities to respond to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. The deadline for East County’s four cities to respond to the Grand Jury’s homeless report is August 29, 2016. Each city must agree or disagree with the findings, and report that the Grand Jury’s recommendations have either been implemented, set a time frame for implementation, or state that the findings require further analysis, with an explanation, scope, parameters and timeframe to complete that. A city could also claim it cannot implementation a recommendation because is it not reasonable and offer an explanation. Each city is only responsible for budgetary and manpower decisions over which it has at least partial decision making authority.

East County Magazine has sent a request for comment to all four of East County’s Mayors as well as the Vice Mayors of El Cajon, La Mesa, Lemon Grove, and Santee. Thus far only one mayor and vice mayor have responded.

Lemon Grove Mayor Mary Sessom replied via e-mail, “We have just received the report and will be reviewing it thoroughly and give its recommendations careful consideration. While we believe the information in the report is not complete, partly as the only elected official consulted was Mayor Wells of El Cajon, we appreciate the look into the issue of homeless in East County. Homelessness is a serious matter and requires a careful coordinated regional strategy.”

La Mesa Vice Mayor Bill Baber wrote, “I believe our staff is working on a formal response to the grand jury report, but let me speak individually as a councilmember and as only 1 of 5 votes on the La Mesa council: Homelessness is a regional problem and we need regional solutions. I support La Mesa joining the Regional Continuum of Care Council as a municipal member.”

Colin Parent of La Mesa Conversations, a citizens group, had this to say upon learning of the Grand Jury’s findings. “I participated as a volunteer in the annual homeless count this year in La Mesa. It's disappointing that La Mesa is not contributing resources to prevent our small but real homeless situation. We should be spending at least as much preventing homelessness as we spend waiting until problems result in arrests and service calls,” he concluded.