

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Police officers are often the first responders on homelessness; they shouldn't be

OPINION – Guest Commentary



Illumination Foundation's new 150-bed Navigation Center in Fullerton, CA, on Thursday, August 13, 2020. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By [LOU CORREA](#) and [JOSH NEWMAN](#) | Orange County Register

PUBLISHED: December 11, 2021 at 10:04 a.m.

The calls come into police dispatchers at all hours. A person soliciting donations in front of a supermarket. Someone sleeping on a sidewalk. An abandoned car being used for shelter. Calls from distressed neighbors wanting to help but unsure where to turn.

Police officers aren't social workers, but we have nevertheless come to expect them to carry the same skills and expertise. The officers themselves are among the first to acknowledge that, when it comes to people experiencing homelessness, the firm hand of the law is often exactly not what this very vulnerable population needs. Being

homeless, mentally ill or addicted to drugs aren't crimes. Typically, what police officers responding to these calls find are people desperately in need of shelter, addiction or mental health counseling, or simply reconnection with family members or organizations who can help get them back on their feet.

There's a promising new approach to this vexing issue that addresses homelessness through shared responsibility. Started right here in Orange County, a unique collaborative effort between law enforcement and the community is providing the right resources to the right person at the right time. It's called the North Orange County Public Safety Collaborative and was created in 2017 through \$20 million in state funding for its first four years, with the mission of finding better approaches to homelessness, youth violence, and post-incarceration re-entry.

Now in its fifth year, the Collaborative has built partnerships among 13 cities in North OC, while better aligning the efforts in each city between local law enforcement and community-based organizations (CBOs) with demonstrated commitment and expertise in serving affected populations. In 2018, the Collaborative commissioned a first-of-its-kind, month-long census of the region's homeless population, documenting 1,837 unsheltered homeless persons and creating a by-name registry of 1,324 who affirmatively opted in to receive referrals and access services. For the first time, we had useful data about people experiencing homelessness and what led them to the streets.

This helped in developing new strategies and tools to get them the services they need. The Collaborative then engaged a software company called Outreach Grid to create a mobile platform and smartphone app which allows police and CBOs to connect individuals in need with shelters, social services, and more with a simple tap of their screens. The success and improvement of the Outreach Grid platform has massively improved the ability to provide services faster and more effectively, such as reserving one of the 400 beds at the recently opened Placentia, Buena Park and Fullerton Navigation Centers.

In northern Orange County, instead of debating defunding the police, we've invested in resources to better respond to the challenges facing our communities.

Here's how it works at the Buena Park Police Department: officers Lindsay Cruz and Cory Boudreau start their shift looking for ways to help rather than looking to make arrests. They work with schools, meet with the Orange County District Attorney's office, check in with probation officers, and help members of the homeless community connect with local social service programs that can offer long-term assistance. That includes referring people to the Navigation Center, for job counseling, mental health resources, mobile clinics, even pet clinics, while also connecting them to a daily shuttle that takes shelter residents to different parts of North Orange County.

Over in Fullerton, we'll soon open the HOPE Center. This new facility will serve as a hub for homeless liaison officers, social workers, and mental health practitioners from across the region. The HOPE Center intends to take the community partnerships to the next level, integrating mobile medical services and more.

This promising new concept is a direct outgrowth of the Collaborative's impact. The results so far are so promising that the Legislature recently renewed and increased funding for the current year. And our local Congressional leadership has also taken notice and wants to get involved.

The answer has never been defunding the police. It's about a structured, collaborative, highly leveraged approach that aligns and coordinates a multitude of efforts across the entire region. Working together—creatively and efficiently— is the answer, and the North Orange County Public Safety Collaborative is a model offering real promise for replication and expansion across the state and nation.

Lou Correa represents the 46th congressional district.

Josh Newman represents the 29th state Senate District.