

Fall 2019 CA GOP Convention in Indian Wells
Mayor Kevin Faulconer
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I was in the Central Valley earlier this year and saw what looked like the ruins of an ancient civilization. Pylons sticking out of the ground, construction equipment gathering dust – it looked like the land that time forgot. It turns out it was the high-speed rail project.

High-speed rail is just one example of our state's misplaced priorities. It's a boondoggle, plain and simple. Meanwhile, there's trash on our freeways, people without homes in our canyons, and we are tied for the highest poverty rate in the nation when you take into account factors like our high cost of living.

So why is Sacramento getting away with it? Three words: lack of competition. Without any real challengers for their seats, one-party rule has made politicians very comfortable in California's chambers of power. And in government, "comfortable" produces complacency, stagnation and lack of innovation.

It's time for California Republicans to provide a real alternative to the machine majority. And let's start by showing how we make a difference in places where we are in leadership – like cities. In San Diego we're doing things differently – and getting results. Nowhere is that more apparent than in how we address homelessness.

Homelessness is not merely *an* issue in California. It is *the* issue. I don't care if you're a Republican, a Democrat or an Independent: it is clear to everyone that our state's system for helping the homeless is broken.

Official reports show homeless populations spiking in cities of every size. But it doesn't take a study to see the human suffering, public health problems and financial costs associated with this tragedy: tent cities, unconscious people on the sidewalk, open drug use and overwhelmed emergency rooms.

We are in the middle of a true humanitarian crisis. It's time to be honest with ourselves about why more and more people are living on the street – and the solutions to fix it.

San Diego County was one of the only places in the state where homelessness decreased this year. It went down by six percent. Now, I'm not here to take a victory lap. Not by a longshot. We have our problems, too. The City of San Diego still has more than 5,000 people experiencing homelessness. No one should accept that as success. I know I don't. But we are making progress – after learning what works and what doesn't work the hard way.

Let me be blunt: Conventional wisdom and academic theories on how to solve homelessness have proven to be largely ineffective on the scope and scale of California's crisis.

I've seen it firsthand. Twenty people died of hepatitis A two years ago when the virus struck San Diego County – and the City of San Diego's homeless population was hit particularly hard. People were getting sick because of unsanitary outdoor living conditions and illegal drug use. It's because city, county and state leaders – myself included – had taken the same approach to homelessness for decades.

Governments commissioned study after study, plan after plan, expert after expert, to tell us what to do. We pursued universal consensus on where to put homeless services and where to build housing – all while homelessness continued to rise. We tried to please *everyone* at the risk of helping *no one*. In San Diego, those days are over.

For individuals of sound mind who choose to refuse shelter and services, and for criminals who hide among our homeless population – these are not options in our city anymore. We must punish crime, not ignore it. We must end suffering, not condone it. It's time for California to reduce homelessness, and not promote it.

But do not confuse San Diego's resolve with a lack of compassion. For those without a home trying to lift themselves out of extreme poverty, San Diego is ready to help by providing services with dignity. There's a place for you, and it's not on the streets.

And I'll tell you one thing: I am not going to tell a veteran sleeping in a park, or a family living out of their car, that they should wait for the government to do another study while they spend another night in the cold.

San Diego is taking dramatic steps to get people into safe and sanitary environments. And today I'd like to touch on a few examples that can be used across our state.

One of our most important initiatives is the bridge shelters. These shelters bridge the gap between unsafe street camps and a permanent home, with housing navigators, medical facilities, and mental health clinicians to help them work toward a better life.

We decided to put universal consensus to the side – and I directed staff to get them up and running as soon as possible. In a matter of months, the City of San Diego identified locations, constructed, and then opened three massive new sprung structures, which increased our shelter capacity by nearly 700 beds for men, women and children.

The program has housed hundreds of people – and attracted interest from agencies and cities across North America, including HUD Secretary Ben Carson. We were also very honored to welcome Mayor Karen Goh earlier this summer to tour one of the shelters.

Initially, my colleagues on the City Council were skeptical of the program. But they've come around. Not only did they just extend the bridge shelters for another year – they voted to open a fourth one.

I was at the opening of a veterans housing complex a few months back, and I had a chance to meet a guy named Brian. Brian came up to thank me for cleaning up tents underneath a freeway overpass. He said he was there doing meth – wasting his life away – when a police officer approached him and offered him access to a bridge shelter.

At first, he didn't like it. But once he got there, he found out he had veterans benefits he wasn't taking advantage of, and now he's in an apartment of his own. Today, he's a mentor for others looking to do the same.

Sometimes you have to help people make a change. Some folks say it's not compassionate to move someone off the street. I say it's not compassionate to let people die on it.

You also have to intervene before people end up on the streets. For some folks, their vehicle is a home-of-last-resort. That's why we have three sanctioned parking lots for people living out of their cars or RVs – so they can go there instead of parking in front of people's homes and businesses. Every night at 6 o'clock the lot opens, folks pull into their spot, have dinner, and get a chance to meet with their case managers. It's a gated, safe space where they can access services, find a job and eventually get back into a home of their own.

More housing is key. But building a permanent supportive housing unit can be an expensive and time-consuming way to move a homeless individual into a home. In some cases, it costs \$500,000 per unit to build affordable housing. So we have to get creative, and find faster ways to put a roof over someone's head in addition to building affordable units.

For example, I've worked closely with apartment owners to rent out vacant units to the homeless. More than 2,000 people have been connected to an apartment through our landlord engagement and assistance program.

We also have the Downtown San Diego Partnership's Family Reunification Program, where we reconnect folks with friends and relatives who would gladly house them today. The program has helped more than 2,800 individuals reunite with their families over the years.

There was one man – a veteran named George – who had been living on our streets for more than 20 years. He fell off the grid after he was discharged from the Navy. His family in Florida had repeatedly tried to find him for years but gave up hope. After living on the streets for so long, his health was deteriorating. It was getting bleak. The thing is that George was a proud veteran. He didn't want a hand out. He wanted to fix his problems on his own.

But the Family Reunification team kept building a relationship with him. And George finally accepted their assistance in locating his loved ones. His family helped him get back on his feet. And he now lives on his own and is a teacher's advisor at his alma mater.

The lesson here is that homelessness usually doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes homelessness is the result of families falling apart. It's what happens when the support system around us crumbles.

George's story is a great example that we don't need to build a home for everyone. But we can help them find their way back home. And guess what, that's a lot cheaper and faster than building an apartment.

Government can't fix everyone's problems. Our personal challenges start at home. That's why we need families – not just government – to be part of the solution to our homeless crisis.

With most of the programs I've mentioned, we faced some community pushback. People fear the worst – more crime, more trash, more homelessness in their neighborhood. That's why I make this commitment to the community: areas that get homeless services will look better, and be safer, than they were before.

My biggest budget add the last couple of years has been sanitation crews. Teams now pick up more than a thousand tons of trash each year from our streets and canyons. San Diego has literally cleaned up its act. In fact, we just surpassed 4,000 tons of trash removed from the public right-of-way. That's enough to fill up your home's trash bin more than 61,000 times. And along the San Diego River – which once was dotted with hundreds of tents – we've decreased the number of homeless encampments by 90 percent.

I also created a Neighborhood Policing Division that responds to issues in our communities. Our officers are trained to take a compassionate approach, and always offer services or a bed when responding to calls about quality of life. But we do not allow criminal activity on our streets. I'm talking about things like illicit drug use, drug dealing and property theft.

Our officers use a step-up enforcement method. If someone who is homeless is also committing a crime, the seriousness of their citation will increase each time they turn down an open bed – potentially

resulting in them entering the criminal justice system, where we work with judges to try to get them to accept treatment.

Too often, first responders find themselves on the front line of the homeless mental health crisis. But police officers and firefighters are not doctors, they're not psychiatric experts, and they're not trained mental health professionals. Relying on them to be the safety net for people suffering from mental illness is the wrong approach.

California needs smarter strategies to help the two populations sleeping outdoors: Those without stable housing, who can get back on their feet with the right support; and those without stable judgement, like people experiencing mental illness or substance abuse disorders, who need medical intervention in addition to a home.

The first group is largely comprised of people priced out of the housing market. At a time when more housing is a key solution to our homeless problem, we must confront laws that pass on higher rents and mortgages to residents.

In California, the bureaucracy has been set up to empower anti-housing forces that delay or deny projects at every turn. California needs housing, and our state government should continue to roll back regulations that restrict home building. We need to think about homes how we think about water and streets: These aren't "nice-to-haves." They are *essentials*.

So in San Diego, we're radically overhauling our housing system. For example, projects intended to house the homeless are subject to countless hearings and appeals. So earlier this year we approved legislation to waive fees and allow developers to build permanent supportive units and transitional units with an over-the-counter permit. That means we get these units built cheaper and faster.

Unfortunately, many on the streets fall into the second and more challenging category: those who are no longer of sound mind and judgement. Our state currently allows the drug-addicted and seriously mentally ill to live, and in many cases die, on our streets. This is unacceptable and cruel beyond measure.

We can't be content with the rapidly revolving door of hospitals and arrests that dump homeless citizens back on the streets again and again and again. We need to join together at all levels of government to move people with mental illness and drug addiction indoors and under long-term supervised care. This means challenging the status quo, with actions like opening more mental health facilities, before this crisis gets worse.

This is our chance to be the party that says "Yes!" to solving this crisis. "Yes!" to mental health services to get the sick off the sidewalks. "Yes!" to common-sense projects like bridge shelters, so people have a safe and clean place to sleep at night. And "Yes!" to building the housing our state needs. My fellow Republicans, we need to be the party of "Yes!"

I'll conclude by saying that addressing this crisis requires each of us to look in the mirror and acknowledge reality. San Diego no longer accepts the use of a sidewalk, a riverbed or a tarp as a home – because we got a glimpse of how bad things could get. And it concerns me to see other places in California grappling with similar health scares.

Hepatitis, typhus or tuberculosis outbreaks should be unheard of in a state as great as ours. So as a state, we need to decide that it's not OK to condone living outdoors in urban areas. It's not compassionate to enable the brutal life found in tent cities. It's not responsible to turn a blind eye to drug abuse. And it's not humane to let people with severe mental illness wander the streets without effective treatment.

It's time to stop accepting living on a sidewalk as an option in 21st century California. Each person on the street is someone's son or daughter. We owe it to them to take action on this crisis. Our party is already putting forth solutions on the local level. Now let's do it statewide.

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