

HOMELESSNESS



FILE PHOTO BY JEFF GRITCHEN — ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/SCNG

Tents that are part of a homeless encampment sit along the grass next to the bike path near Angel Stadium in Anaheim in 2017. The river trail camp has been cleared, but officials are still struggling to address homelessness in the community.

In 2018, progress made on O.C. homelessness

By Andrew Do

It has been a year of momentous change for Orange County.

We started the year transitioning more than 1,000 people out of two major homeless encampments. Now, we end the year with plans to build 2,700 units of supportive housing for the neediest in our communities and expand the number of emergency shelters and support services. In 2018, we took significant steps to build out a system of integrated services that are designed to help people transition permanently out of homelessness.

During this season of charity, it is appropriate that we reflect on the lessons we have learned, with the hope that we can build on those lessons to be even more effective in dealing with the national crisis of homelessness.

After almost four years of leading these efforts in the county, I know the most meaningful shift for Orange County has been our approach to combating homelessness.

When the year began, many homeless advocates questioned whether enough resources were reaching those in need. For far too long Orange County had been slow, reactive and far too restrained in our response to the problem. Shortly after taking over as Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, I acknowledged the county's failures and promised a new direction.

Now, we are working together across county departments, and

with cities, breaking down bureaucratic silos that inhibit access to service. We are also welcoming support from local, state, federal, and non-profit partners.

Our new direction is backed by a substantial commitment of resources across a burgeoning system of care. Thus far, in 2018, Orange County has allocated more than \$189 million toward homeless-related programs. In March, the Board of Supervisors approved \$70.5 million in state Mental Health Services Act funds to house homeless people living with mental illness in supportive housing programs. It was "the single largest appropriation ever committed by the County to fight homelessness" and propelled 259 new mental health and special needs housing units currently in progress.

To meet our immediate shelter needs, we supplemented the county's Courtyard homeless shelter in Santa Ana by extending the emergency shelters at two National Guard Armories in Santa Ana and Fullerton and adding capacity at SAFEPlace women's shelter, American Family Housing shelter for couples, and Bridges at Kraemer Place shelter.

In addition to emergency shelter programs, we have invested \$26 million to build the first county-owned mental health facility. The 44,556-square-foot facility will allow individuals to get help in one place — accessing emergency mental health crisis stabilization, drug abuse treat-

ment, and residential psychiatric care. We also approved \$2.4 million for recovery residence service to provide safe and drug-free housing for those seeking to get clean.

To create more housing in the short term, we are piloting new projects to encourage private landlords to make units available to rent to homeless individuals by providing them with financial protection. The county contributed \$250,000 in seed funding to support the Orange County United Way's Landlord Incentive program. Over the next year, the pilot project will provide as many as 55 housing placements by removing financial barriers, such as providing application expense reimbursement, security deposits, damage claims assistance, etc., which inhibit access to stable housing.

Orange County has also recognized the importance of linking people to supportive services. More than \$5.4 million has been committed toward a multi-service center. Operated by the Mental Health Association of Orange County, the program connects homeless mentally ill adults with behavioral health assessment, counseling, hygiene kits, and provides transportation to reach necessary behavioral health and medical services.

Just as important as coordinating services, our community is embracing cooperation among local, state and federal governments to create more permanent supportive housing as part of our long-term solu-

tion. The County of Orange and the Association of California Cities-Orange County co-sponsored Assembly Bill 448, which enabled the creation of the Orange County Housing Finance Trust. Orange County Senators John Moorlach and Pat Bates with Assemblymembers Sharon Quirk-Silva and Tom Daly fast tracked the bill, which will provide hundreds of millions of dollars in public and private funding to develop affordable and supportive housing for both working families and those who are homeless. We are also working with the business community and philanthropic leaders to supplement public funds with private donations.

Cities have contributed, too. The Santa Ana City Council recently expedited the building of a new temporary 200-bed homeless shelter, called the Link Shelter. The cities of Anaheim and Orange, along with others are working on shelter and mental health facilities, which should come on line in the near future.

We haven't solved the problem. There's still more work to be done. Thousands of individuals lack a safe place to sleep every night, and tens of thousands more are a paycheck away from losing their homes. But for the first time in decades, Orange County has developed a responsible path forward and comprehensive approach to combatting this national problem.

Andrew Do is Chairman of the Orange County Board of Supervisors.

AUTOMATION

The real downside of wage mandates

By Samantha Summers

This holiday season, Santa's little helpers might come with a battery.

While retailers across the country are beefing up seasonal hires to prepare for the holiday shopping apocalypse, Amazon is taking a different tack — hiring 20,000 fewer seasonal hires from previous years and increasing workplace automation.

It may be a frightening preview of holidays to come: As mandated minimum wages across the country continue to rise, retailers are forced to pursue automated alternatives or fewer hires per store.

According to a survey by consultant Korn Ferry, nearly 67 percent of retail respondents said that minimum wage increases have made hiring seasonal staff economically challenging this year. It's not that retailers aren't hiring; rather, they're moving towards business models that require fewer employees than before.

For instance, the Wall Street Journal reported this fall that Macy's has cut 52,000 employees in the past decade — while operating "roughly the same number of stores..."

Similar (or steeper) declines are occurring at other large retailers including Kohl's, Nordstrom, Target, and J.C. Penny. The decline of human personnel on store floors has been replaced by the rise of robotic technology.

Gap has begun using automated arms and other types of artificial intelligence to sort clothing; its VP of Global Logistics Fulfillment explained equivalency of one machine that "would be four people working across four shifts."

Walmart is experimenting with robots that are able to roam store aisles to complete inventory checks and even assist in helping customers find products throughout the store.

Employers aren't doing this because they're evil; they're doing it because customers are price sensitive. These robots can on average double the speed of what a normal human can do while protecting customers against rising prices associated with increased labor costs.

Reducing the number of employees in the store allows retailers to promote and pay higher starting wages to those that remain.

Deutsche Bank predicted that Amazon would save roughly \$880 million from implementing robots.

But what happens to the less-skilled employees who used to fill those jobs? Many are left without a job opportunity.

Researchers David Neumark and Grace Lordan found that higher minimum wages have decreased employment in jobs that are easy to automate.

In other words, employers are replacing real employees with robots — and younger employees are among the most likely to be affected.

The loss of seasonal job opportunities, which might be the first job for many, can have negative effects later on.

Research from economists Christopher Ruhm and Charles Baum from University of Virginia and Middle Tennessee State University found that teenagers who had prior part-time job experience have roughly seven percent higher earnings later on in life compared to their peers who lacked early work exposure.

Amazon's decline in seasonal hiring should come as no surprise. There are tradeoffs to most any economic pressures to increase operating costs.

As minimum wage mandates continue to rise across the country, more retailers will be opting to implement robots over human capital.

When lawmakers push for more wage mandates, they should consider the hidden costs for those who need a job more than they need a raise.

Samantha Summers is the Communications Director for the Employment Policies Institute

ENVIRONMENT

Plastics are getting everywhere

By Sarah Mosko

Microplastics, tiny bits of plastic waste and pollution, are all around us — in oceans, rivers, soil and air, in whales, seabirds, and fish, and in us too. Sharing the same global environment and eating at the top of the food chain, we humans are not magically spared contamination from plastics.

The presence of microplastics in human feces is clearest proof of human exposure. And, there's plenty more evidence suggesting that we're taking the stuff in by eating, drinking and just breathing.

Plastics for dinner?

Research reveals that visible and invisible plastic debris is taken up by life forms throughout the ocean food web, from tiny plankton and shellfish to turtles, fish and dolphins. That such a spectrum of sea life is taking in plastics has sparked concern that, for years, humans have been consuming plastics too.

Most marine plastics are invisible to the naked eye. Petroleum-based plastics are most threatening. They resist biodegradation, fragmenting in-

stead into ever smaller pieces. Over years, these microplastics become smaller than a millimeter and virtually invisible, making them easily transferred up aquatic food chains from zooplankton, mussels and smaller fish to larger carnivorous species and mammals. It has been confirmed that fish sold for human consumption at fish markets worldwide contain plastic debris.

But, plastics also show up in less obvious places on the dinner table. One study showed that 36 of 39 brands of table salt from 16 countries, including the United States, contained microplastics.

In city tap water tested in five continents, over 80 percent of samples contained plastic microfibers from synthetic textiles. The U.S. samples fared the worst: 94 percent contaminated. And, all 12 brands of beer tested in the Great Lakes region contained microplastics, averaging four particles per liter.

How much plastic might we be ingesting? One study estimated that shellfish consumers could be eating 11,000 microplastic particles annually. Another figured yearly consumption of 5,800 bits from just

beer, salt and tap water.

Plastics appear inert, but they're not. The various polymers' building blocks and the additives used to impart desired properties can be dangerous chemicals that migrate out into the surroundings. Plastics also absorb toxic chemicals from seawater. When fish consume plastics the pollutants can transfer to their tissues.

It's frightening to contemplate that degrading plastics eventually reach the microscopic dimensions of viruses, enabling them to penetrate the lung and gut and reach vital organs via the circulatory or lymphatic systems.

How are plastics getting into everything?

Less than a tenth of the 9 billion tonnes of plastics produced worldwide thus far has been recycled, the remainder ending in landfills or fragmenting in the environment.

Water treatment plants weren't designed to remove microfibers sloughed off from laundered synthetic fabrics which, consequently, pollute oceans, lakes, streams, and soils.

Normal abrasion of cloth-

ing, upholstery and carpeting contaminates air with microplastic fibers. Besides breathing them in, there's evidence we consume more microplastics from the dust that invisibly rains down on our meals than from the food itself.

The solution?

"The Age of Plastics" has provided us with countless conveniences, but it's also unknowingly created a deadly monster: the microplastic contamination of the global environment and ourselves.

Sweeping reforms in humanity's relationship to plastics are urgently required. The European Union has recently banned common single-use plastics, like cutlery, straws and cotton swabs. Hopefully the United States will follow suit and pressure manufacturers to substitute or redesign plastics so they're made from sustainable, non-petro-chemical, non-toxic, biodegradable, and easily recycled materials.

Sarah ("Steve") Mosko, PhD, is a freelance journalist, environmental activist and long-time resident of Orange County.