

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



## Letters : Opinion : Programs bring results for the homeless

Bill Brown

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It was a lesson learned early in his career that left a profound impact on Santa Barbara Police Chief Cam Sanchez.

"I was a rookie with the Los Angeles Police Department. My training officer took me to a park. He wanted to teach me a lesson; it was soaking wet," Chief Sanchez remembers. "He pointed to a softball dugout at the field. He asked me, 'What do you see?' I told him: a homeless lady with newspapers on top of her and a little dog. He told me I had failed. He said, 'This is someone's mother, sister, aunt and grandmother. Today, if this is the only person we help, then we will have done our job.'"

That was 32 years ago. In that time, Chief Sanchez has brought the successful Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) to Santa Barbara. The Proposition 63-funded program teaches law enforcement how to deal with individuals with mental illness who are homeless. It's an important skill for both the officer and the individual; individuals who are both mentally ill and homeless are often ostracized or worse, victimized. And, most people with serious mental illness are not violent; in fact, according to the National Institute for Mental Health, those with serious mental illness are actually at higher risk of being victims of violence than perpetrators.

Contracting with the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's office, the newly-instituted Assertive Community Treatment Outreach and Education (ACTOE) program is showing positive initial results as well. It, too, reaches out to individuals who are mentally ill and homeless and it, too, is funded by Prop. 63. Because Isla Vista has one of the largest homeless populations in the area, the ACTOE team works to get them connected to life-changing resources.

"We target some of the hardest to reach individuals who are most in need. It's a slow process but with a tremendous amount of engagement, we've been able to get people into services who would never have done so in the past," says Suzanne Grimesey, division chief for Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health programs. "There's a person now who had been on the street for a very long time. He really stood out as probably the last person who would have accepted services. But today he's clean-shaven, moving into housing, has benefits, has stopped using drugs and is getting therapy and other services."

None of this would be possible without Prop. 63 dollars. Prop. 63, also known as the Mental Health Services Act, has raised billions of dollars since it was enacted in 2005 through a 1 percent tax on

incomes of more than \$1 million. Without it, California's mental health services would have been decimated; with it, thousands of lives have been changed.

Since law enforcement is often the first point of contact for people in crisis and psychiatric emergency, Santa Barbara County is indeed fortunate to have programs on both fronts — the Sheriff's office and the Police Department — to change the lives of individuals with mental illness who are homeless.

Bill Brown is sheriff of Santa Barbara County and is one of 16 commissioners on the state of California's Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission. He has served in that capacity since 2011.

<http://www.newsreview.com/sacramento/early-intervention-prevention/content?oid=5953180>