

A new approach to getting homeless off LA's trains

The L.A. Metro system is trying a new approach with homeless people who use trains as shelter.

The program, in its pilot phase, consists of an outreach group that has been riding the Metro Red Line five days a week since May, talking with every homeless person they see. The team consists of a nurse, formerly homeless individuals, social workers, and mental health specialists.

The purpose is twofold: help L.A. County's effort to end homelessness and improve quality of life for Metro riders. So far, they've made contact with some 1,400 homeless people.

The group meets at Union Station each morning and splits into groups of two to start riding the trains.

"The population on the trains is very mobile," said Karen Florence of PATH. "Typically with a lot of outreach work, you're going to an encampment, you're getting to know people over a period of time. We don't really have that opportunity here."

They try to talk to people at the station entrance or on the platforms. On the trains, it can be hard to hear.

"People don't want so much attention called to them," she said.

Between 7th Street and Pershing Square, Julian Turner, one of the outreach workers spots a girl lying on a seat under a blanket. The two have a brief exchange before he gets off the train at the next stop. He was checking to make sure she remembered her appointment in a couple hours at a potential shelter, he said.

Turner knows a lot of the Red Line regulars by sight now.

"I worry about all of them, but her because she's real small," he said. "One time when I first met her I thought it was just a blanket in the seat."

Now, Turner said, he's located an aunt living out of state who the girl might be able to live with. In the meantime, he wants to get her into a small shelter that resembles a home environment.

As the morning goes on, the team will meet a young couple, expecting their first baby and looking for shelter. And a young man who lost all his belongings and his dog the night before when he was mugged.

L.A. County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who joined the team for an outing Thursday morning, said the outreach team has been a shining success and is due for expansion with dollars from Measure H, a new sales tax for homeless services.

"It makes it abundantly clear that no one really wants to be homeless, what they want and need is help to get out of homelessness," he said.

Pointing at a public restroom stall near Pershing Square, he said the city and county have come a long way from the time when setting up a restroom was considered a solution to the homeless problem.

"That is stopgap at best," he said. "What you need is these outreach teams, these mental health workers, these substance abuse workers, housing."

Metro is hoping to add two to three more teams to serve other lines in the coming months. L.A. County is also putting together similar teams to work encampments in every region of the county. The county's set aside \$73 million for expanding outreach in the first three years of Measure H.

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