

A PATH FORWARD

YOU CAN HELP A HOMELESS PERSON WITH A SIMPLE HELLO

BY STEVEN P. DINKIN

On a chilly January morning, more than 1,600 volunteers took part in “We All Count,” a once-yearly tally of the county’s homeless population. Gov. Gavin Newsom was among the volunteers, undeterred by the 4:30 a.m. start time. The count is required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to determine federal funding for programs dealing with homelessness.

At the state level, the issue is a top priority for Newsom. He signed an executive order Jan. 8 that includes a number of actions to increase the availability of temporary housing and expand services for homeless individuals. Two days later, he committed more than \$1 billion in homelessness-related funding.

If you live or work in downtown San Diego, as I do, the issue of homelessness seems to get worse by the day. You may be dismayed but unsurprised to learn that our homeless population is fourth-highest in the U.S.

Last year’s count determined there were 8,102 people in San Diego County spending the night on the streets or at a shelter (a 6 percent decrease from the prior year). Since the count is taken on one specific date, experts estimate



A homeless count takes place in San Diego in 2016. According to last year's count, over 8,000 live on the streets in the county.

that the actual number of people who experience homelessness throughout the year is more than 20,000.

Housing affordability is the biggest driver of homelessness in San Diego. Data from the 2017 U.S. Census found that nearly one-third of the county’s renters spend half or more of their income on rent and utilities. About 27 per-

cent of homeless individuals who found housing here returned to homelessness within two years, according to Gary Warth of the Union-Tribune.

The count found 4,500 people who were unsheltered: living on the streets, in vehicles, canyons or other places not meant for habitation. Nearly half had been in this situation for a year or longer,

which HUD defines as chronic homelessness.

Many of us feel uncertain about what to do when we encounter someone who appears to be homeless. We tend to avoid making eye contact and walk a little faster. But we may also wonder, “How did this happen?” If the person asks for money or food, do we give them our spare change or the leftovers from our restaurant meal? Or do we stop short, thinking that our help may perpetuate their lifestyle?

This advice from bigissue.com may be useful: “The first way to help is a simple one — speak up! Homelessness puts an enormous strain on mental health with long hours of loneliness, isolation and sleep deprivation. A warm greeting, some small talk or even asking a personal question can make all the difference. The person you pass who is living on the streets might not have spoken to anyone that day — just a simple ‘hello, how are you’ could make an enormous difference.”

Such acts of compassion seem to captivate us. The recent story about Nomad Donuts in North Park was shared around the world. One of the shop’s regulars is Ray Taylor, who’s been living on the streets since 2011 due to a series of unfortunate financial setbacks.

Taylor’s presence prompted a customer to leave a one-star Yelp review, saying, “he really made (me) feel great about spending \$5 on a jelly donut.”

Goodnewsnetwork.org reports that the owner, Brad Keiller, spent several days contemplating how to respond. Eventually, he posted, “I understand how you feel, it’s not easy to look at. I know I probably lose some business, possibly yours, too, because of my choice not to chase him away, but I won’t. He’s not looking for handouts and he tries not to bother anyone. If you stop and talk to him, maybe you’ll come to like him, too.”

As you settle in to watch the Super Bowl, imagine the thousands of people who are outside today, living in canyons and cars, in shop doorways and on our downtown streets. Think about slowing down and saying hello the next time you encounter one of them. It can matter more than the outcome of today’s game.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC), a San Diego-based organization that is working to create innovative solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. NCRC is nationally recognized for its conflict management and communication strategies. To learn about NCRC’s programming, visit www.ncronline.com.

NOTEBOOKS

From Union-Tribune reporting staff

PUBLIC SAFETY: ALEX RIGGINS

Sheriff unveils ‘latest, greatest’ helo

Sheriff Bill Gore unveiled a new \$5.4 million helicopter last week that can fly longer and higher than the department’s fleet of older, smaller choppers, and which has upgraded technology over two other similar aircraft already in the fleet.

“It’s just an overall better helicopter ... to serve our whole community, particularly our ground units that are doing the patrol out in our community,” Gore said during a short ceremony Tuesday at the Sheriff’s Department’s Aerial Support to Regional Enforcement Agencies, or ASTREA, headquarters at Gillespie Field in El Cajon. The Sheriff’s Department is in the process of buying two identical Bell 407 GXi choppers to add to the ASTREA fleet later this year, Gore said. Each of those will cost \$5.4 million.

The new aircraft, including the one unveiled Tuesday, can carry up to seven people, compared to the older MD500 helicopters that carry just two people. The Sheriff’s Department is phasing those out.

The new Bell 407 is the third of its kind in the ASTREA fleet, but the first outfitted with a color camera for use during daytime missions, Sgt. Gavin Lanning said. It also has a more powerful overall camera system than the two other Bell 407 choppers, meaning ASTREA pilots can fly higher over a scene with the same recording capabilities as they have now.

The Bell 407 helicopters can also fly for more than three hours on one tank of gas, Lanning said. That’s more than an hour

longer than the lighter, smaller and older MD500 helicopters that are being phased out.

“This is the newest, latest and greatest version of the Bell 407,” Lanning said.

Another upgrade on the helicopter unveiled Tuesday are its sliding doors, according to Lanning. The two other Bell 407 choppers already in the ASTREA fleet — one that’s 12 years old and another that’s five years old — have doors that open out like those on a car.

Having sliding doors allows crews to open those doors while the pilot is hovering close to the ground, giving ASTREA crews new capabilities, officials said.

“It allows for easier loading of cargo and patients and that sort of thing during rescue operations,” ASTREA Lt. Jacob Pavlenko said during the ceremony. Lanning explained that pilots can hover over the ground and fly to certain heights with sliding doors open, while doors that open out must always remain closed during flight.

ASTREA currently has 10 helicopters in its fleet, including three firefighting helicopters, sheriff’s officials said. Once the two new Bell 407 choppers join the fleet later this year, sheriff’s officials plan to phase out all of the MD500s and the 12-year-old Bell 407, leaving four Bell 407s and the three large firefighting choppers.

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Two San Diego County sheriff's ASTREA members, including Sgt. Gavin Lanning, (left) stand in front of the department's new Bell 407 GXi helicopter that was unveiled Tuesday afternoon in El Cajon. SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT PHOTO

THE READERS' REPRESENTATIVE: ADRIAN VORE

Readers, news staff get acquainted

The Union-Tribune held the second in its series of town hall conversations with readers on Monday at the Border View Family YMCA in Otay Mesa West.

As the readers’ rep, I can tell you that since 2016, the rancor directed at the media has increased. Other reporters and editors would agree. With this in mind, Gustavo Solis, the South Bay reporter, said he expected to get hammered. But that didn’t happen. The readers attending the town hall were pleasant, he said.

Luis Cruz, the U-T’s community and public relations director, said what stood out to him most from the evening “was how nice the audience was.”

That might have had something to do with the format. Readers and U-T staffers sat together at tables, got acquainted and listened to each other. Reporters and editors were more than bylines or “the media.” Readers were more than an email or voicemail.

Solis enjoyed the exchanges, and what he heard made him reflect on his coverage.

It was important to hear from people who are not the standard news sources, he said — like the government officials, direc-

tors of organizations, superintendents and the like.

Although those sources are certainly valid and necessary to reporting news, reporters can also fall into a rut of consistently returning to the same officials for the bulk of their news coverage.

Solis said he realizes it will take more legwork to pursue news from elsewhere, but based on what he heard from readers at the town forum, it’s what they’re interested in.

Some of the topics the readers wanted to read more about:

- Programs South County schools offer.
- Local community events.
- The history of South County and how the area is undergoing major transformation.
- Affordable housing and infrastructure.
- More diverse society events.
- The connection between both sides of the border and how both sides work together.

The next U-T forum is planned for April at the Palomar Family YMCA in Escondido. The date has yet to be set.

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TRANSPORTATION: LAURA GROCH

I-5 shift near lagoon starts this week

Motorists driving on Interstate 5 over the San Elijo Lagoon highway bridge will see a shift in lanes as a bridge project continues.

As part of the San Elijo Lagoon Highway Bridge Replacement Project, Caltrans and SANDAG Build NCC highway construction crews will shift northbound and southbound I-5 traffic to the new outside highway bridges.

The southbound side is scheduled to shift starting this week, and the northbound side is scheduled for the week of Feb. 9. The traffic shifts will be done at night so crews can restripe and reset concrete barriers.

This shift is the first of several that will be completed along the 8-mile stretch of I-5 that is under construction over the next several months. Build NCC is the first package of projects being built through the 40-year North Coast Corridor

Program.

Build NCC includes rail double-tracking, extended carpool lanes, new bike and pedestrian trails, and the restoration of the San Elijo Lagoon. These improvements are being built simultaneously to minimize impacts to the lagoon and neighboring communities.

On I-5, the same number of lanes will remain in each direction during and after the traffic shifts. Drivers will see a curve in both directions over the San Elijo Lagoon highway bridge. Overnight lane closings will be required, and may start as early as 8 p.m., but no full freeway closings are planned. California Highway Patrol will provide short traffic breaks to lead motorists into the newly shifted lanes.

Visit keepsandiegomoving.com/build-ncc.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

A BASKETBALL LEGACY AT SDSU

San Diego State University has retired the jersey of Aztecs star basketball player Kawhi Leonard. Here’s a look back at what made him a special player.

From The San Diego Union-Tribune, Saturday, March 19, 2011:

IN GOOD HANDS

Leonard’s grip on Aztecs’ success throughout season has been huge

By Mark Zeigler

TUCSON — When Kawhi Leonard was born, Kim Robertson noticed her son had a birthmark on his neck.

“I said, ‘Good, they can’t switch babies on me,’” Robertson says.

Then she scanned down his body and stopped at his hands. They were enormous. Big, wide palms. Long, curling fingers. Completely disproportionate to the rest of the physique. Now she really knew nobody could switch babies on her.

But she took Kawhi home and got on with their life and never gave her son’s hands much thought. They lived in Riverside; there was no need to buy winter gloves.

Leonard himself never thought much of it, either, until he was a freshman at Canyon Springs High. He was a wide receiver on the football team, and the school didn’t have receiver gloves that fit him in the equipment room. The coaches sent him to a local sporting goods store to get some, and the clerk brought out his biggest size.

Didn’t fit. They had to special order some.

And that was before Leonard hit his growth spurt.

The average male hand, measured from the base of the palm to tip of the middle finger, is 7 3/8 inches. For women, it’s 6 3/4 inches. Leonard’s are 9 3/8 inches.

“Yeah,” he says, “I have pretty big hands.”

The hands that guide them.

San Diego State is 33-2 this season and a No. 2 seed in the NCAA Tournament and a victory against Temple away from reaching the Sweet 16, a promised land that a school devoid of any real basketball tradition had never dared dream about before Leonard arrived on campus last year. There are other pieces around him — a senior point guard, two starting senior forwards, a veteran bench, a veteran coach — but it is increasingly apparent that this team will go as far as its sophomore forward leads it.

The Aztecs won a Division I NCAA Tournament game for the first time in school



history on Thursday, 68-50 against 15th-seeded Northern Colorado, and Leonard wasted no time establishing his dominance. He scored SDSU’s first eight points and finished with 21 points to go with 10 rebounds.

NBA scouts and opposing coaches marvel at his unique athletic package. The broad shoulders. The long arms (his wing span is 7 feet, 3/8 inches). The powerful legs. The relentless energy. The uncanny instincts.

The day before their game, Northern Colorado coach B.J. Hill was asked what concerned him about Leonard.

“That’s a long list,” Hill said. “He’s a

deadly combination of size, athleticism and motor. You don’t really see guys who are 6-7, 225 (pounds) and have his skill set and play with the tenacity that he does for every second that he is out there. I mean, he is what all coaches dream of.

“A lot of times you can get little guards at 5-10, 5-11 that play like that. But to find a 6-7 guy like that ...

“I mean, we don’t face anybody like that in the Big Sky.”

The conversation, though, eventually returns to the same thing. Those hands.

“I thought I had big hands,” says 6-9 Aztecs forward Malcolm Thomas, Leonard’s roommate, “until I met him.”

“I put my hand up to his once,” forward Tim Shelton says. “It made me feel like a little kid, and we’re the same height.”

They are his greatest asset and, some NBA scouts concede, perhaps his greatest liability.

They allow him to extend one of those telephone poles disguised as arms, get a finger on a ball and ... thwaaap, it’s his. The Human Avatar, his teammates call him.

“If I get my hand on the ball, I feel like it should be mine,” says Leonard, who averages 10.6 rebounds and has 23 double-doubles (double figures in points and rebounds) in this season alone. “If I just deflect it, I get mad.”

But at 6-7, scouts say, Leonard isn’t tall enough to play in the post at the next level, and NBA wings generally must be lethal from the perimeter. And Leonard isn’t, or isn’t yet.

HISTORICAL PHOTOS AND ARTICLES FROM THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE ARCHIVES ARE COMPILED BY MERRIE MONTEAGUDO. SEARCH THE U-T HISTORIC ARCHIVES AT NEWSLIBRARY.COM/SITES/SDUB