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Subcommittee hears about the homeless in OC

Officials urge House panel to endorse
legislation funding emergency housing

From Register news services

WASHINGTON — In the basement of a public shelter, an Irvine councilwoman joined a governor, several mayors, humanitarians and the homeless in telling a congressional panel Wednesday of the underside of the state of the union — people with no place to sleep when the sun goes down.

With roughly 4,000 homeless people and only 300 emergency beds, Orange County has a problem that has shocked elected officials and citizens alike, said Mary Ann Gaido, spokeswoman for the Orange County Human Relations Commission.

"Very few people think of Orange County in terms of poverty, joblessness, misery or homelessness," she said. "In fact, our biggest problem is convincing people that there really are poor people here."

Gaido urged the House Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs' Subcommittee on housing and community development to pass legislation providing \$60 million for emergency housing for the homeless.

Rep. Henry Gonzalez, D-Texas, chairman of the subcommittee, said the homeless have become the "ultimate throwaway of a throwaway society."

Most of Orange County's homeless are not from the East, but "60 to 70 percent are indigenous," Gaido said.

In 1981, a social-service survey estimated the number of homeless at 1,500. But, in less than three years, the number has grown to 4,000, she said.

For Orange County, the problems of the homeless are more acute due to the lack of temporary shelters and low-income housing. But to solve the problem, more federal dollars are needed, she said.

Orange County already has used all of its \$299,000 offederal money provided last spring under the Federal Emergency Management Act. But more federal money will be slow in coming, she said.

Rep. Jerry Patterson, D-Santa Ana, a member of the housing subcommittee, said he plans to introduce legislation to increase the number of shelters for the homeless in Orange County.

But, he warned, "social spending usually falls on deaf ears in the Senate and the White House."

Mary Ash, who used to work as a chambermaid in New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel and then fell on hard times and lived for six years in Grand Central Station; Shawnee Gonzalez, whose infant spent the first two years of his life in an automobile; Mike Turner, a mechanic who drifted from Columbus, Ohio, to the Southwest when he heard a false rumor that there were jobs to be had in Arizona — all testified as representatives of a new American subculture: middle-class people with no place to sleep except for a charity cot.

The setting was unusual for a congressional hearing — the old Federal City College building that, after the coldest December on record, was converted by volunteers, with government consent, into a 1,000-bed shelter, the biggest of its kind in America.

In the audience, government officials with briefcases sat beside the sheltered homeless, in wool caps and multiple layers of sweaters.

Chicago Mayor Harold Washington told the panel that in his city, at least 12,000 are homeless and the number actually may total 25,000, with only 1,078 beds in shelters for them.

Gov. Mario Cuomo of New York estimated the numbers at 60,000 in New York City, 7,000 in St. Louis and 5,000 in Chicago.

"Homelessness in the United States has quietly taken on crisis proportions," he said.

Mayor Ernest Morial of New Orleans, chairman of the Conference of Mayors' task force on joblessness and hunger, said estimates for the country range from 500,000 to 2 million. He said people in his city are living in empty boxes.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency allocated \$40 million to private agencies to house the homeless this year, but the mayors said the amount was inadequate. Congress has authorized \$60 million to rehabilitate abandoned housing, but the funds have not been appropriated yet.

The witnesses said the homeless are no longer just the drifters that live on the fringes of virtually every society. Cuomo said the average age of applicants for public shelter has fallen to 34.

He cited four causes of the problem — high unemployment, the diminishing supply of low-income housing, the trend toward releasing people from mental hospitals and the denial of disability benefits for many who had been receiving them.