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## Skid Row shelter charges fees as economy drives new philosophy in services to homeless

CHRISTINA HOAG Associated Press

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### Video:



A Los Angeles shelter recently began charging those who want to use the shelter a modest fee to stay overnight. The move not only underscores new economic realities, but also a changing philosophy toward helping the homeless. (June 2)

LOS ANGELES — Skid Row resident Dadisi Komolafe points indignantly to the sign reading "Union Rescue Mission," and grumbles that the name no longer fits since the shelter started charging for a nightly stay.

"They should change it to 'Union Hotel'," said the nearly toothless jazz musician, who sleeps on the street. "If you have to pay to stay there, it's not a mission. A lot of people are getting turned away."






For decades, four missions have given out "three hots and a cot" for free in

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downtown Los Angeles' Skid Row, where 4,000 down-on-their-luck people cram a 50-block area to form the nation's densest concentration of homeless people. The overflow from the shelters — nearly 1,000 people — spills nightly onto urine-stained sidewalks in a bedlam of tents, cardboard boxes and sleeping bags.

Two months ago, Union Rescue started charging \$7 for an overnight stay, and cut its three free meals a day to one.

The move was driven by budget woes caused by the pinch of plummeting funding and soaring demand. But Andy Bales, the mission's chief executive, said he had been trying to institute fees for several years under a philosophy that homeless people should learn self-sufficiency. Faced with similar crunches, more shelters are taking that view.

"We've increased our sustainability, but we really think people are feeling better about themselves if they're not just taking handouts," Bales said.

Most homeless shelters across the country are free of charge, reflecting the concept that shelters are meant to be a safety-net of last resort before a berth on a sidewalk.

"Our aim is to get them off the street," said Herb Smith, president of Los Angeles Mission in Skid Row. "I don't think charging them is going to generate relationships to help them do that."

But others take a tough-love philosophy — free services create dependency and expectations of a free ride that don't motivate people to take responsibility for their lives.

They point out that most homeless are not destitute. The majority

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receives Social Security disability, which is about \$845 a month in California, or general relief, about \$221 a month. Some have jobs.

"It's a choice if they want to spend their money on a homeless agency or on something else," said Amanda Fewless, spokeswoman for the Orlando Union Rescue Mission in Florida, which charges \$6 a night after offering the first seven nights for free. "It's a choice they're making with the money they do have."

In Honolulu, the nonprofit Institute for Human Services started charging fees at its two shelters three years ago. The shelter gives 90 days free, thereafter charging \$70 per month for a single person, or \$90 for a family, said spokeswoman Kate Record.

"It's really encourages them to get on their feet and prepares them for paying rent," Record said. "It prevents people from taking advantage of the shelter, coming and going like a hostel."

Like Union Rescue Mission, both shelters say they will not turn away people who truly cannot afford to pay.


But the idea of charging fees grates many homeless advocates, who note that even \$7 is a lot for a homeless person.


"Shelters are becoming very difficult to afford," said Neil Donovan, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless. "These are people in dire economic conditions. They have very limited disposable income. It doesn't do anything for their economic situation."

Pushback from homeless advocates last year caused New York City to derail a plan to charge income-based rent at its homeless shelters.

Instead, the city's Department of Homeless Services now mandates that shelter residents maintain a savings account, with the amount of their deposits based on income. They can withdraw their savings when they move on.

"It creates an incentive to leave," said department Commissioner Seth Diamond. "This is about building behavior


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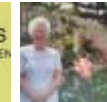
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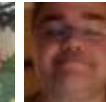
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of self-sufficiency."

A savings account is also part of Union Rescue Mission's program. Of the \$7 fee, \$2 goes into an account that is turned over to the residents when they leave.

Residents receive three free nights. If they choose to stay and pay, they receive perks — three meals a day and permission to remain in their dormitories instead of having to leave early in the morning. Mothers with children do not have to pay and can eat all meals for free.

When the fees started April 1, the shelter's 300 beds emptied overnight with some residents angrily claiming it was illegal for missions to charge fees. "One guy ripped down the sign," Bales said. "People thought it was a cruel April Fool's Day joke."

Since then, 200 beds have filled back up. If all beds are occupied, the program would generate about \$45,000 annually, which Bales noted barely dents the mission's \$1.4 million budget hole this year. The agency, which relies on donors after local government funding dried up, has already cut staff, salaries and benefits.

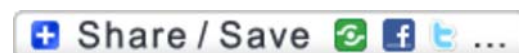
The policy has had some unexpected advantages.

Residents say the shelter is much calmer and cleaner since the fees started and paying guests seem more serious about getting their lives in order. There are fewer fights and emergency calls.

"Beforehand, it was like a madhouse," said Ronald Wells, who has been living at missions for a year. "People really weren't interested in doing anything for themselves."

Edward Bravo, who became homeless after being evicted from his apartment, said paying his way makes him feel better about himself. "When everything was free, it was okay," he said. "Now I feel inside of me, it's helped me."

—  
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