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Santa Clara County says it's had 95% success in preventing homelessness at \$4,000 per household



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Cindy Chavez, president of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, talks about a successful homelessness prevention program in the county on Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020. With her are (L-R): Pancho Guevara, executive director of Sacred Heart Community Service, San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo and... [more](#)

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By [Jody Meacham](#) – Reporter, Silicon Valley Business Journal
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The top elected leaders of city and county government and heads of two social service nonprofits said Thursday that a small homelessness prevention program in Santa Clara County with just 2½ years of operational history has had remarkable success, and they want more taxpayer and business support to expand its impact.

They made their pitch at a press conference less than two weeks before a San Jose city election with Measure E housing money on the ballot, 10 percent of which is supposed to be spent on homelessness prevention, and at a time homelessness in Silicon Valley is growing faster than home production.

Among the statistics shared by the housing nonprofit Destination: Home:

- 95 percent of the 1,300-plus households — representing nearly 4,000 individuals — the program has served have been stably housed from the program.
- The typical cost per household to do so has been \$4,106.

- Only 8 percent of those served by the program have become homeless again within a year of leaving the program.

Still, the program addressed only a third of the need last year, officials said.

“Any for-profit venture would think that these outcomes, this impact and this scale is worth investing in,” said [Jennifer Loving](#), CEO of Destination: Home.

“We’ve shown incredible results,” said [Pancho Guevara](#), head of Sacred Heart Community Service. “We just have to have the political will to do it, and now we’re putting that question before the voters.”

Sacred Heart and Destination: Home are two of the dozen nonprofits that administer the Homelessness Prevention System. Half is funded by Santa Clara County and the cities of San Jose, Santa Clara and Morgan Hill, and the other half from the private sector, mostly from grants by Apple, Cisco Systems, Google and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

The system provides direct payments to individuals or families deemed at imminent risk of homelessness. The reasons those in the program were at risk closely match those reported in [San Jose’s annual homeless census and survey](#) — a financial crisis precipitated by a layoff, relationship breakup, medical emergency or the like.

“We’ve learned that if we build housing and we put someone in it and we keep them permanently housed, they stay housed even if they’re seriously mentally ill,” said [Cindy Chavez](#), president of the county board of supervisors. “They go from costing us \$90,000 a year to \$40,000. It’s the hospital. It’s the jail. It’s the courts. I mean, we spend a lot of money rotating people through a system that doesn’t deal with their illness and doesn’t deal with the fact that they’re homeless. What we’re learning is that it doesn’t cost that much to keep someone from becoming homeless.”

The way Chavez described the solution is one side of a much larger public debate about addressing societal ills such as crime and drug abuse. Is it more effective and less expensive to take preventive or after-the-fact measures?

She and San Jose Mayor [Sam Liccardo](#) touted homelessness prevention as solid evidence of the former.

Liccardo said one reason for calling the press conference was a concern that the public — confronted with the overwhelming extent of the region and state’s housing crisis that continues to worsen — could decide it’s hopeless and

turn against funding mechanisms like [Measure E, which he has championed in the city](#).

“I think certainly there’s an understandable public perception as this housing crisis has only gotten worse that whatever we're doing isn't working,” Liccardo said. “In fact, we have solutions that are working. We simply don't have the resources to scale them. And what is working is prevention and what is working is housing.”

Measure E would establish a property transfer tax targeted at business property in San Jose that would produce about \$70 million a year.

The City Council has promised the tax would be spent on homelessness prevention, permanent supportive housing and construction of affordable rental housing but stopped short of an ordinance that would mandate those uses because, under state law, that would raise the threshold for passage from a simple majority to a super-majority of two-thirds support.