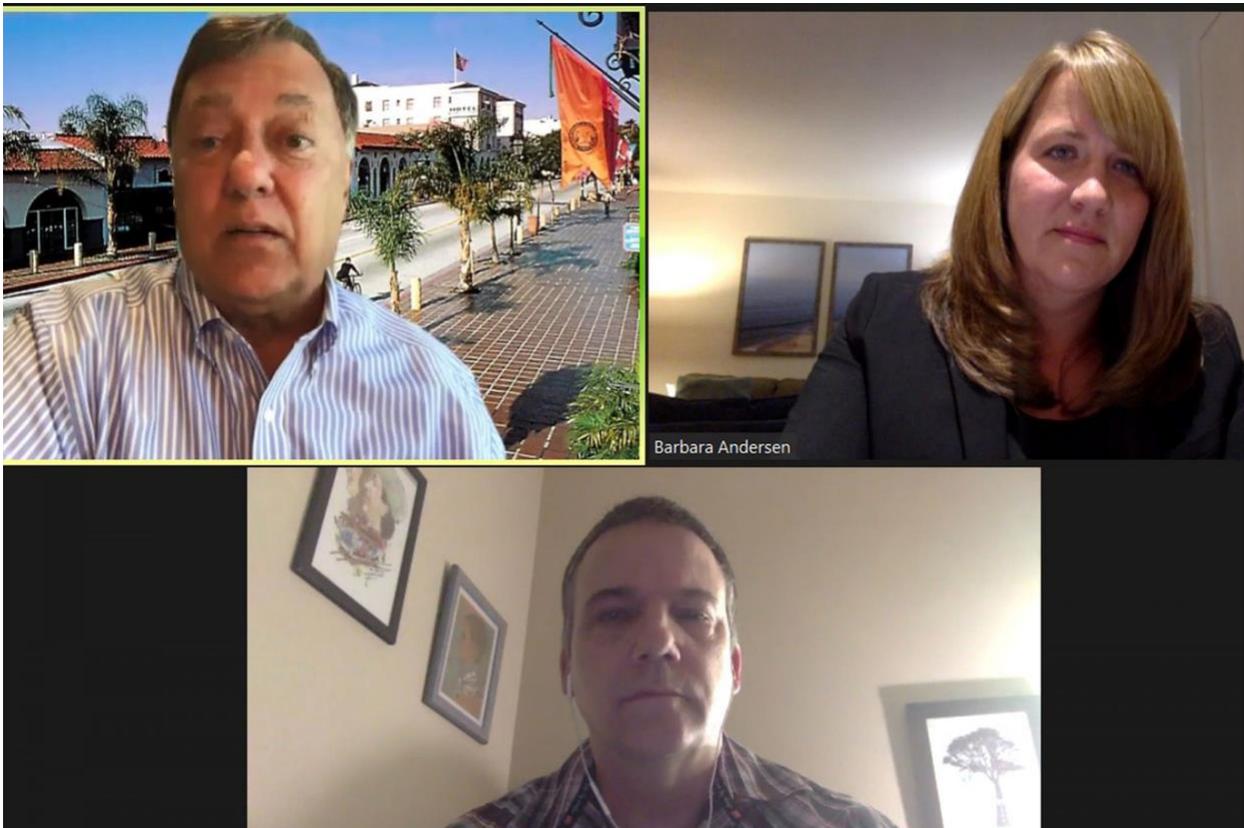


## COVID-19 Could Send Local Residents Into Homelessness for First Time, Experts Say

*Barbara Andersen and Jeff Shaffer say most Santa Barbara people who are homeless are not transients, and more housing and services are needed*



Hal Conklin, top left, Barbara Andersen and Jeff Shaffer meet via Zoom on Wednesday to discuss homelessness in Santa Barbara. (Joshua Molina / Noozhawk photo)

By Joshua Molina, Noozhawk Staff Writer | [@JECMolina](#)

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The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) could put more people on the streets and increase homelessness in Santa Barbara County, amplifying the need for more housing and supportive services, according to a pair of experts who spoke Wednesday in Santa Barbara.

"We are going to have individuals and families perhaps entering homelessness for the first time," said Barbara Andersen, a facilitator for [SB ACT](#).

Andersen joined Jeff Shaffer, director of initiatives at SB ACT, for a discussion with former Santa Barbara Mayor Hal Conklin, who leads weekly discussions with community leaders on a wide range of topics. Conklin's [Santa Barbara Leadership Team](#) has met via [Zoom](#) with [City Council](#) members, business leaders and city staff members.

Shaffer and Andersen talked about the importance of a diverse strategy to reach Santa Barbara's homeless population. It takes direct, repeated outreach to the individuals, supportive services, assistance navigating the system and a steady supply of housing to make a dent in Santa Barbara's homeless problem.

Shaffer said that about 70 percent of the people who are homeless in the county came from the county.

"They are not transients," Shaffer said. "They are citizens. Transient is an inaccurate term for most of our friends on the street."

Many of the people who are homeless now previously had homes in the area.

"These are folks if they live in Lompoc they probably want to be housed in Lompoc, if they are in Santa Barbara they probably want to be housed in Santa Barbara, it's where their friends are, their family, their doctor, all their systems of care is local," Shaffer said.

He said knowing that a large portion of the street population is made up of residents, and that they are not going to go somewhere else, officials should have to have a "pretty robust, very-low to low-income housing plan that we have to stick to, and we have to increase our number of shelter beds."

They talked about the importance of direct outreach to homeless residents to develop relationships.

"We know individuals who have experienced substantial trauma, which has resulted in them living on the streets, need that much more trust-building, care and support," Shaffer said.

Shaffer said that about 90 percent of people who are contacted directly on the streets want services, but that the system can be tangled and confusing, so they fall through the cracks.

"People will actually take resources, they will actually take the help, but on the other hand, you have to have shelter beds and the housing and all they things they actually need to enter into," Shaffer said. "People are wanting the help, but they have been let down by the system or they can't navigate it themselves and they need somebody to walk them through it, or someone who is not going to let them down half-way through."

He said that a year ago, SB ACT took two blocks of State Street and focused on making contact with the homeless population there. The regular contact helped get some of them off the streets and into services and housing.

"Instead of outreach going to meet with 'Mark' one time every two weeks, let's meet with Mark nine times in one week, and listen to him and find out what he wants and what he needs and build rapport and relationships," Shaffer said. There are 8 to 12 agencies that a homeless person needs to work with to get off the street and into services and housing. "You can be dropped off cold at some point when each agency is done with you," Shaffer said.

Shaffer also said that people need to know that every person who is homeless has a personal story. He referenced a homeless person who has an 8-year-old; his family got him addicted to drugs.

"He had no capacity at that time to make decisions," Shaffer said. "We don't know all these stories by these individuals that we see. We lump them all together in this needy group."

Getting to know them will also help officials understand the problems with the system, he said. "We need to involve them," he said. "Who else knows how the system does or doesn't work but the people who tried to engage with it?"

Andersen said the situation as it exists now is tough. The community needs to come together to build more very-low and low-income housing. When a homeless person gets sheltered, she said, it frees up room within the system, along with supportive services, opens shelter beds and allows officials to help even more homeless people.

"We have no capacity in our emergency shelters. We have a waiting list for [Transition House](#) that can be anywhere from two weeks to a couple of months long," Andersen said. "The system is in a place where if we don't invest simultaneously, people will lose faith and get stuck."

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