

CALIFORNIA

## How Redondo Beach brought its homeless numbers to ‘functionally zero’



Lila Omura, right, Redondo Beach's housing navigator, speaks to Billy Schmitt II, in Lilenthal Park in Redondo Beach, about finding him a place to live.

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In the morning, Lila Omura checked in on a woman on the beach who was kicked out of her shelter, again, because she wouldn't shower. By noon she had comforted a raggedly dressed man outside a coffee shop who couldn't stop crying and offered help to a woman on a bus bench who snapped back, "You need help more than I do."

It was a predictably unpredictable morning for Omura, a housing navigator employed by the South Bay city and the field leader for an aggressive program to reduce homelessness on its streets to a bare minimum.

Over the first six months of this year, the city reached a milestone: the median time it took Omura and her colleagues to get homeless people off the street fell to 14 days. That was more than it needed to earn the rare designation "functionally zero," a term broadly meaning that services are in balance with homelessness.

The recognition came from the South Bay Cities Council of Governments which picked Redondo Beach to lead the way to a goal of getting the upper hand on homelessness regionally.



Lila Omura, Redondo Beach's housing navigator, speaks with an elderly homeless woman who is living on the streets of Redondo Beach in October. The homeless woman declined Omura's offer of help. Omura said she would keep trying to get her off the street.

Since 2017, on a per capita homelessness rate, the city of 68,000 has dropped from 11th to 51st among the county's 56 cities that had homeless people, a Times analysis of homeless count data shows.

"We felt like our cities were doing well," said Ronson Chu, the council's senior project manager for homeless and senior services. "We were making a lot of progress, especially Redondo Beach. We wanted to measure the progress so we can say to our constituents that these services are working, so we can hold ourselves accountable and educate the public."

At a ceremony this week recognizing the city's achievement, three more cities — Hermosa Beach, Manhattan Beach and Torrance — will accept the challenge, Chu

said.

Redondo Beach was already well on the way to functional zero in 2022 when the Council of Governments launched its program.

The first step, born out of quality of life complaints pressuring the City Council, was to get control of the city's petty-crime problem. Homeless people were being arrested for trespassing, disorderly conduct and drug offenses. In 2020, City Attorney Mike Webb persuaded the Superior Court in nearby Torrance to send a judge to Redondo Beach one day a month to conduct a [homeless court](#) using the power of the bench to lead defendants toward shelter and treatment.

Next, there had to be somewhere for those defendants to go. The city built a village of 20 tiny homes, leased five rooms in a single room occupancy hotel, formed relationships with the home sharing nonprofit [SHARE! Collaborative](#) Housing and low-income housing provider Soul Housing. With \$300,000 from its own budget, along with county, state and federal grants and donations from service providers, the program has grown. The city now leases 18 SRO units and is adding 25 tiny homes.



Lila Omura, right, convinced Brooke Owens to move into one of the tiny homes in Redondo Beach. Owens and her daughter have been living homeless in Redondo Beach.

This summer it opened [a 20 units of permanent housing in a motel conversion](#) funded by state Project Homekey and obtained a county grant to double the size of its tiny home village.

The number of homeless people on the streets has steadily dropped.

In 2017, the annual homeless court found 105 people sleeping unsheltered on the city's streets. This year, the tally of the count conducted in January was down to 18. Vehicles occupied by homeless people were also down from 79 to 47.

The city is now developing a pilot mental health response program with a \$570,000 grant from the healthcare plan [Health Net](#).



Lila Omura looks over a wall of photos of some of the homeless she helped place into housing at the Redondo Beach Pallet Shelter.

Since 2020, the first year of complete records, 169 defendants have participated in the homeless court, said Joy Ford, the city's quality of life prosecutor. Currently 35 are in active cases, 63 have been placed in interim housing and 74 have graduated and are in permanent housing. Fewer than 2% have returned to court on new charges.

A key element of the court was human intervention. Omura and other case managers were on hand to guide those who accepted treatment with shelter as an alternative to sentencing.

Webb, who is retiring after five terms, has cobbled a fragile system that relies on funds and grants that may, or may not, be renewed.

His legacy, he hopes, will be the ability to maintain functional zero even as that system shrinks.

“I want the need for some of these programs to end,” Webb said. “Some will have to remain in place. We’ve always had homelessness. The city housing navigator needs to stay in place. I don’t know if we need to have the pallet shelters for ever.”

In declaring Redondo Beach “functional zero,” the Council of Governments highlighted it as L.A. County’s first city to achieve that status.

But it’s an informal claim. The designation of “[functional zero](#)” is not a hard and fast term. This spring, the city of [Signal Hill declared it had reached functional zero](#) after moving all its 45 homeless people into a shelter in Long Beach.

In designing its program, the Council of Governments consulted Beth Sandor, who heads the Built for Zero program at Community Solutions, a nonprofit that promotes the concept nationally.

Built for Zero’s definition of functional zero requires a community to “measurably solve homelessness” by making it rare and brief when it occurs and to document its progress with a by-name list updated at least monthly.



Lila Omura speaks with a homeless man on the streets of Redondo Beach. The man declined Omura's offer of help.

The Council of Governments wrote its own standard. It requires a city to move people off the streets into shelter or housing in at least a median of 90 days and to have more people leaving homelessness than falling into it.

Redondo Beach reached that equilibrium in the first six months of 2024 when the by-name list grew by 65 and 66 people were taken off the street. Of them, 31 went to shelter, 14 to permanent housing, 11 to mental health, detox or domestic violence facilities and 10 were reunified with families.

Tracking median time on the street is more art than science, especially for a beach city, where the more moderate summer climate can be a draw.



“People will be in Redondo and they go to Riverside for half a year and then come back to Redondo,” Chu said. Sometimes the city will learn through the grapevine that a client is in jail.

“If we go for a couple months without seeing them again and we don’t know where they are, we don’t blame the city for not getting them off the street,” Chu said.

As part of the functional zero program, Omura and outreach workers from Harbor Interfaith Services have monthly briefings with City Attorney Webb and Chu at the Council of Governments. They talk over cases and add any new names to the by-name list that now has about 300 entries, some in shelter or housing, some still on the street and many recorded as missing.



Lila Omura, left, shares a light moment with Vietnam veteran Wesley Hesson, 78, who she found living homeless in Veterans Park in Redondo Beach. Omura was able to reach Kenneth Berry, a peer specialist with the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, who was in the area and placed Hesson into housing.

Omura got her start in outreach with the ministry of the New Life Church in Harbor City, dispensing food, clothing and prayers. A spunky 56-year-old, who has been homeless herself, she was lured away from a 30-year career in commercial purchasing to become a full-time outreach worker for Harbor Interfaith. Omura made such an impression on Webb, that the city hired her in 2022.

Her first success was connecting with a woman who had been a fixture for years at the 405 Freeway and Inglewood Avenue. Undeterred by numerous rejections, Omura got through after the woman known as “405 Lady” was released from a mental health commitment. At last she accepted shelter and later obtained an apartment. Next, Omura dealt with a stretch of encampments along a storm drain channel behind a Hilton Homewood Suites.

Monitoring it on a recent day, she found only one tent, and it appeared to be abandoned.

A day on the road with Omura illustrates how difficult it is to quantify any given person’s status, let alone help them. Hours, even days, of hard work can pass without anything resembling a successful outcome.

After lunch on the day she comforted the crying man, Omura drove a woman from her broken down RV to a strip mall to cash her disability check, urged a woman in a tent by the railroad tracks to go with her to a shelter and listened to the unintelligible story of a man she had never seen before sitting on a bench outside Redondo Beach City Hall.

A few days later, Omura reviewed how things turned out.

The man who couldn’t stop crying called his mother, who arranged to meet in a nearby park. Working two phones in her city vehicle, Omura determined that he had a case manager in nearby Hermosa Beach where he usually hangs out. Case closed.

The woman by the railroad track had agreed to go into one of the city's tiny homes, but then she disappeared, probably moving closer to her roots in Hawthorne, Omura thought. Omura also secured a tiny home for the woman in the RV, but she too disappeared.

Then, cruising the business district, she spotted the woman who had snapped at her on the bus bench. Omura said she's known only as Jane Doe because she refuses to give her name. She had a bare foot resting on her knee and was picking at an open sore.

Omura parked and approached. She was rebuffed again.

Getting her help would be a project, Omura said. The city's mental health team, made up of a police officer and a clinician, later found her suitable for a psychiatric hold. Omura reserved a bed at Harbor UCLA Medical Center and scheduled a county ambulance to transport her. At the last minute, the ambulance was pulled to an emergency and canceled.



Karen Ford, right, looks over her new SRO room which Lila Omura, a Redondo Beach housing navigator, helped get for her in Wilmington.

Some days just go that way.

The new day, though, brought limited successes. In the morning Omura picked up client Karen Ford at her hangout at a mini-mall and drove her to an SRO in Wilmington. Ford looked over the vacant room and agreed to move in.

Meanwhile, Omura was stressing over a mother and daughter who had overstayed their welcome with a friend who took them in after their flower shop failed. She had secured two tiny homes for them, but the mother, Brook Owens, wasn't answering her phone. At noon she would have to release the tiny homes to the next person on the waiting list.

At last, the mother picked up. Omura drove to the house but only the mother came out. Her teenage daughter had changed her mind. Three days later, the mother bolted from the tiny home and was apparently back with the friend.

Later that day, Omura checked out a small park where an angry man with a pit bull had been reported.

She found Billy Schmitt II, absorbed an expletive-filled tirade, and made friends with his dog, who turned out to be adorable. Finally, he calmed down and explained that he was angry because he thought he was being neglected. Yes, he wanted to get into a program, he insisted. On the spot, Omura called [Exodus Recovery Safe Landing](#), a walk-in shelter that accepts city referrals.



Karen Ford gives a hug of thanks to Lila Omura.

There were no open beds. She kept calling, and three days later a bed opened. She drove Schmitt there.

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**Doug Smith**

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Genaro Molina is an award-winning staff photographer for the Los Angeles Times. He has worked in journalism for more than 35 years starting at the San Francisco Chronicle. Molina has photographed the life and death of Pope John Paul II, the tragedy of AIDS in Africa, the impact of Hurricane Katrina, and Cuba after Castro. His work has appeared in nine books and his photographs have been exhibited extensively including at the Smithsonian Institute and the Annenberg Space for Photography.