



# Sheltering the Homeless: Alternatives to the Armories

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## Background

The state currently makes 26 of the state's National Guard armories available as temporary homeless shelters during the winter months. The armories provided approximately 2,625 shelter beds nightly during the 1996-97 winter. However, the program has encountered a number of problems over its decade-long history. The program was intended as a temporary solution, but most local governments have not provided alternative shelter sites for the homeless. As a result, the use of the armories as homeless shelters has continued.

## LAO Findings

- ❖ The armories have been used because they (1) are already equipped to handle emergency shelter situations, (2) are available throughout the state, and (3) lie unused most nights.
- ❖ The Military Department has expressed various concerns about the program, such as conflict with other duties, health and security issues, and soldier retention. Our review indicates that none of these concerns appear to be serious, and that steps have been taken to minimize the problems.
- ❖ Significant barriers have prevented the local development of shelters: (1) high capital costs, (2) difficulty in finding suitable locations, and (3) coordination difficulties.
- ❖ Our review suggests that the most appropriate role for the state in seeking alternatives to the use of the armories is to help facilitate the local development of new shelters. This could best be accomplished by addressing existing barriers, through the provision of capital assistance (grants, loans, or in-kind support) and technical assistance.



## BACKGROUND

In reaction to unusually cold weather during the winter of 1987, Governor George Deukemejian directed the California National Guard (CNG) to make the state’s National Guard armories available as temporary homeless shelters. Opening the armories as temporary shelters was the state’s effort to protect the lives and health of homeless individuals during the year’s worst weather. Each winter since 1987, National Guard armories have been used as emergency homeless shelters. Figure 1 details the changes that have been made to the shelter program since 1987.

### Use of the Armories

Over the program’s decade-long existence, the number of armories and total beds in use has changed annually. As Figure 2 illustrates, as many as 36 armories were used early in the program’s history. A high number of 3,100 shelter beds were provided nightly on average during the winter of 1994-95—when displaced flood victims were sheltered in the armories in addition to the more permanent homeless population.

During the most recent winter of 1996-97, 26 armories were used as homeless shelters, providing an average of 2,625 shelter beds nightly. Figure 3 (see page 4) lists the number of shelter beds provided by each armory during the winter of 1996-97. While the total number of winter shelter beds across the state from all sources is not known, the armory program has provided a substantial portion of many regions’ shelter beds for the homeless. For instance, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority estimates that 45 percent of the county’s winter shelter beds are provided by the armories.

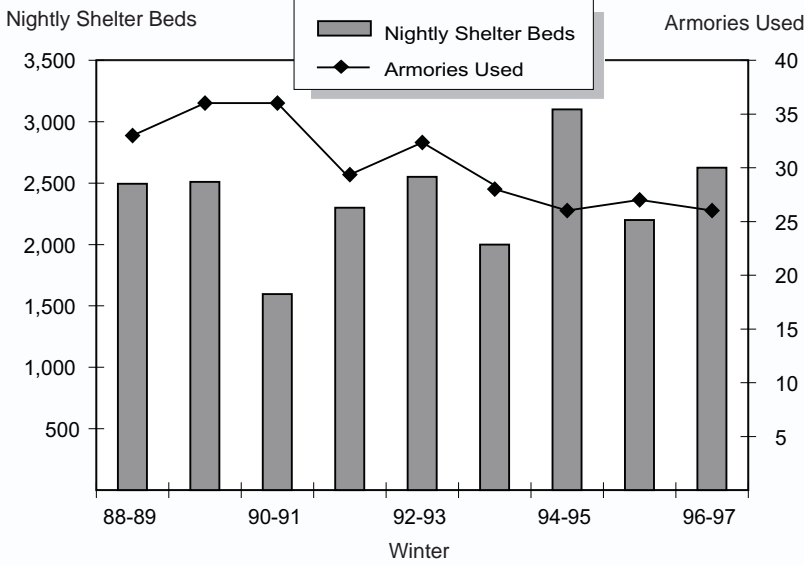
**Figure 1**

### History of Using Armories as Homeless Shelters

Year	Event
1987	Governor Deukmejian, by executive order, authorized the California National Guard to make the state’s armories available for temporary emergency shelters. Sixteen armories were used as shelters.
1988	Military Department and Office of Emergency Services established policy to license local governments to operate the temporary shelters during inclement weather.
1990	Armory program modified to keep the shelters open regardless of weather conditions during the winter months. Military Department received an appropriation of \$630,000 to fund the program.
1992	Governor Wilson expanded the armory program to a continuous 90-day winter program regardless of weather conditions. The program was extended through March of 1995.
1994	Chapter 1196, Statutes of 1994 (AB 1808, Areias), codified the program into law and extended its existence until March 15, 1997. Authorized 32 state armories to be available as shelters.
1997	Chapters 715 and 716, Statutes of 1997 (AB 242, Honda and SB 255, Lee), extended the program for 26 armories until March 15, 1999, with 1997-98 funding of \$810,000 provided through the Emergency Housing and Assistance Program.

**Figure 2**

**Armories and Shelter Beds  
1988 Through 1997**



**Recent Action**

In 1997, the Legislature enacted a series of bills that extended the armory program through the winter of 1998-99. Chapter 716, Statutes of 1997 (SB 255, Lee), extends the armory program as a temporary measure for 26 armories until March 15, 1999. In exchange for the extended use of the armories as shelters, county governments must submit a report by June 30, 1998 outlining their progress towards providing alternative emergency shelters.

In addition, counties using the armories must establish a local shelter advisory committee to address problems related to the use of the armories. The responsibilities of these committees are: (1) to

address issues related to shelter operation, such

as sanitation and security; (2) to ensure the shelter maintains a “good neighbor policy;” and (3) to assist in finding long-term solutions for providing housing for the homeless.

Chapter 716 also instructs the Legislative Analyst to “analyze and recommend to the Legislature alternative approaches for providing cold weather assistance to homeless persons that could replace the existing Temporary Emergency Shelter Program.” This report fulfills this requirement of the law.

Chapter 715, Statutes of 1997 (AB 242, Honda), provides funding to counties to help pay for the

use of the armories during the winter of 1997-98. Specifically, \$1.06 million was appropriated to the Emergency Housing and Assistance Program (EHAP) Fund, administered by the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD). Each county with an eligible armory may receive \$30,000 for each armory located within its jurisdiction, for a statewide cost of \$810,000. These funds could then be used to reimburse the Military Department for some of the costs associated with the use of the armories, or the funds may be used for a variety of other housing needs. The remaining \$250,000 allocation will be distributed through normal EHAP procedures to all of the state’s other counties.



Chapter 606, Statutes of 1997 (AB 67, Escutia), requires local governments to reimburse the Military Department for all of the costs associated with using the armories—including utilities, building maintenance and repair, administrative costs, and security. In previous years, these costs were paid by the Military Department using an appropriation from the state’s General Fund. Beginning in 1997-98, the Military Department will be charging local governments \$454 per night to cover these costs. With the \$30,000 per armory allocation, local governments will receive funds to pay the Military Department for 66 nights of armory use. If a government chooses to use its local armory for more than 66 nights, it would need to pay the Military Department from another source of funds. Local governments must now also provide uniformed security from one hour before the shelter opens until one hour after “lights out.” Furthermore, the license that local governments receive for the use of the armories requires the local entity to be responsible for: (1) complying with state and local health and safety codes, (2) any legal liabilities, (3) minor emergency repairs, and (4) relocating shelter users in the case of a state emergency.

### **HISTORICAL PROBLEMS WITH THE PROGRAM**

In May 1997, the Military Department released a report on the effectiveness of the emergency shelter program. The department cited a number of problems associated with the use of the armories as homeless shelters. These problems, along with our analysis of their severity, are outlined below.

<b>Figure 3</b>		
<b>Armory Shelter Beds Winter 1996-97</b>		
<b>County</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Average Nightly Number of Beds</b>
Los Angeles	Culver City	162
Los Angeles	Glendale	150
Los Angeles	Inglewood	144
Los Angeles	Long Beach	152
Los Angeles	Pomona	88
Los Angeles	Sylmar	91
Los Angeles	West Los Angeles	170
Merced	Merced	17
Orange	Fullerton	89
Orange	Santa Ana	101
Riverside	Indio	31
Riverside	Riverside	91
San Diego	Escondido	82
San Diego	Vista	41
San Mateo	San Mateo	81
Santa Barbara	Santa Barbara	177
Santa Barbara	Santa Maria	76
Santa Clara	Gilroy	83
Santa Clara	San Jose	266
Santa Clara	Sunnyvale	107
Santa Cruz	Santa Cruz	73
Santa Cruz	Watsonville	44
Shasta	Redding	73
Sonoma	Petaluma	36
Sonoma	Santa Rosa	101
Ventura	Oxnard	99
<b>Total</b>		<b>2,625</b>

### **Conflict With the CNG’s Other Duties**

The mission of the National Guard is to provide combat-ready forces to the federal government at the direction of the President, to contribute emergency public safety support at the direction of the

Governor, and to otherwise assist the community as directed. As part of its mission, the CNG provides emergency shelter for Californians in the event of a flood, earthquake, or other disaster. However, the CNG has argued that the homeless shelter program interferes with the organization's ability to meet its goals and duties.

Specifically, in its report on the emergency shelter program, the Military Department maintains that staff time spent addressing the use of the armories as shelters detracts from its ability to prepare for emergency missions. In the case of a flood or earthquake, the presence of homeless individuals in the armory could delay the CNG's response time. In these circumstances, the local government agency supervising the shelter program is responsible for relocating the homeless persons.

It is true that a conflict of priorities can exist as a result of the shelter program. For instance, during the January 1997 floods, the CNG in San Jose was delayed in its deployment for an estimated four to six hours while the homeless were relocated. Yet, the severity of the problem should not be overstated. Only 26 of the state's 111 armories are currently used as shelters and only for the night-time hours of one season each year. The exact number of delays in deployment over the course of the shelter program is not known. Based on the average number of deployments annually, however, we would expect only a handful of conflicts to arise each year.

Advance coordination, communication, and planning between the CNG and the local agency could alleviate many of the problems resulting

from state emergencies. For instance, improved procedures for the relocation of the homeless in the event of an emergency would minimize time delays. We would also note that the use of the armories does not interfere with the CNG's regular weekend training schedule. On those nights that the buildings are used for training exercises, they are not made available as homeless shelters.

### **Infrastructure Limitations**

The state's armories were designed to serve as warehouses for military equipment, to provide administrative and logistical support to CNG troops, and to serve as shelters in the case of a natural disaster. Some armories' infrastructure has not responded well to use as a shelter on a daily basis, especially in those that have been overcrowded. Problems with heating, plumbing, and bathroom facilities have been reported. While routine maintenance problems would be expected at any shelter site, these types of repairs might be required more frequently in the armories than in facilities designed as permanent shelters.

The law is clear that the local government entity administering the shelter is responsible for the payment of any minor emergency repair costs. Moreover, the inadequacies of the buildings' design have been addressed in some locations. For instance, in Glendale, the city government has funded infrastructure improvements at the armory to improve its use.

### **Lack of Comprehensive Services**

The Military Department has noted that the use



of the armories typically does not include the provision of comprehensive social services for the homeless. Ideally, while providing a warm, dry sleeping environment for the homeless, a shelter would also provide other services such as health care, counseling, and job training. The provision of social services at the shelter site might aid a local agency in assisting homeless individuals to find permanent shelter.

While the provision of on-site social services is a desirable goal, the lack of these services at the armories is due more to the temporary nature of the shelter program than to its location. A shelter that operates permanently and year-round would generally be better able to establish these types of social services. This lack of services would likely exist at any site that was used on an emergency basis only.

### **Security and Health Problems**

The Military Department has reported a number of security problems with the use of the armories as shelters. For example, during the winter of 1996-97, the military filed 16 “serious incident reports”—defined as break-ins, thefts, arrests, or complaints. Nearly all of these reports concerned either break-ins or arrests. Given that approximately 200,000 beds were filled over the course of the 1996-97 winter, security problems were infrequent. Moreover, security problems at many of the armories have diminished in recent years due to improved security procedures.

The department also reported health problems—such as crab louse infestations and outbreaks of tuberculosis and hepatitis—related to sheltering the homeless. Since the client popula-

tion typically lacks adequate medical attention, these types of health problems are not unexpected. While we are aware of some such health incidents, the severity of the problem is not clear.

### **Soldier Retention Levels**

In its report on the use of the armories as shelters, the Military Department argued that the emergency shelter program has significantly lowered soldier retention levels in those armories that participate in the program. The department suspects that these soldiers leave their unit as a result of the extra work that the program requires and the contact with the homeless population. However, the department does not track soldiers’ retention or location in a way which would allow a comprehensive comparison of soldiers in shelter and nonshelter armories. Due to the frequent reorganization of the CNG and its military units, we have not been able to compare retention levels in shelter and nonshelter armories.

### **Addressing the Problems**

Changes to the emergency shelter program made by the Legislature in 1997, such as the creation of advisory committees and increased security, should improve the administration of the program. The creation of local advisory committees offers the potential to improve communication among local governments, residents, the National Guard, and the homeless. Armories that have successfully served as emergency shelters have often done so due in part to strong relationships among those concerned. These committees may encourage other local communities to directly address any problems surrounding the use of the armories.

## BARRIERS TO THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT OF SHELTERS

The armory program was never intended to be a permanent solution to the homeless problem in California. Instead, the program was designed as an emergency mechanism to provide shelter for homeless individuals until local entities could develop long-term solutions to homelessness. Chapter 1196, Statutes of 1994 (AB 1808, Areias), required that any city or county electing to use the armories as shelters report to the Department of Economic Opportunity (today's Department of Community Services and Development) annually on progress towards a long-range permanent shelter plan.

Despite local attempts to seek alternatives to the armories, most have failed to secure other shelter sites. It is likely that a number of counties will still have no viable alternative to the use of the armories when the current extension of the armory program expires in 1999. There are a number of reasons for the continued difficulty of local governments developing their own homeless shelters.

### Capital Costs

The cost of developing a new homeless shelter has proven to be prohibitive for many local governments. Grant programs to fund homeless programs do exist on the local, state, and federal levels; yet, using these funds for the construction

or rehabilitation of a shelter is often difficult. Many grants are restricted to the operating expenses of a shelter and prohibit capital expenditures. In addition, many funds are allocated in such small amounts that grants must be sought from many different sources in order to undertake capital improvements. For instance:

- ◆ For the past few years, the CNG has offered local communities a block grant in exchange for not using a local armory as a shelter. The grant of approximately \$20,000 is equivalent to the funds that would have been spent on the armory if used as a shelter.
- ◆ Under the current funding mechanism through EHAP, local governments will be able to use their state allocation of \$30,000 per armory for a variety of purposes, including shelter construction.

By themselves, the allocations would provide only a small portion of a new shelter cost.

Compiling funds from a number of sources can require large amounts of staff time and coordination. Despite these difficulties, some counties have been successful in developing new facilities (see box, page 8).



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## EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

### **San Jose, Santa Clara County**

This winter, the Emergency Housing Consortium, a local nonprofit organization, will operate its new Reception Center to provide shelter and services to the area's homeless population. The facility will provide 125 beds year round, with an additional 125 beds available during the winter months. San Jose will only be using the local armory as a shelter on an emergency overflow basis. Some key components of the development of this shelter:

- ◆ **Diversity of Funding.** The acquisition and renovation of an office building required about \$5 million. Both the City of San Jose and Santa Clara County contributed significant funding. In addition, other local cities agreed to pay a share of costs based on the number of their residents using the facility. Federal funds were acquired from sources including the Community Development Block Grant, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Private donors also contributed to the fund-raising effort.
- ◆ **Criteria for Location.** After an initial site for the shelter fell through, the community developed objective criteria for the siting of homeless shelters. The criteria established a number of goals, including locating new shelters away from existing shelters and residential areas and near other homeless services. Using these criteria, the final site was selected.
- ◆ **24-Hour Services.** The shelter will operate and have staff on-duty 24 hours a day. This will improve the level of service provided to the homeless, while also alleviating community concerns about safety during nonstaffed hours.

### **Novato, Marin County**

The Hamilton Service Center, a new permanent 80-bed, \$2.5 million shelter, will soon be under construction in Novato. The facility, located on the former Hamilton Air Field, will provide year-round shelter and services. The center is temporarily housed in a renovated warehouse on the site, which eventually will be converted to a job training center. Some of the factors in the successful development of the shelter include:

- ◆ **Reuse of Military Land.** A 1994 base closure law facilitated the shelter by requiring the consideration of the needs of the homeless in the reuse of the base. The project has, however, been slowed by a delay in the land transfer from the military.
- ◆ **Broad Range of Financial Support.** Like the San Jose shelter, the Hamilton Service Center sought funds from a wide variety of sources. The center received a matching grant from the Marin Community Foundation for each dollar raised. Each city in the county was asked for a per capita contribution for construction costs.
- ◆ **Inclusion of Job Training Program.** The center will provide job training to the homeless in order to address their long-term needs. The inclusion of job training helped to gain the support of the local business community as well.



### **Difficulty in Finding Suitable Location**

A number of communities, although determined to build an alternative to the armories, have been unable to locate a suitable site for a new homeless shelter. A site must be relatively affordable and offer an existing building for rehabilitation or an empty lot. In addition, access to the site by public transportation is desirable. While each community will generally have a few sites that meet these criteria, local governments have encountered sizable community resistance to building a shelter in their area. Some residents do not want a building in their community that houses homeless individuals, and these citizens have often been able to block shelter proposals.

### **High Levels of Coordination Necessary**

In order for a local government to develop a viable plan to build a new shelter, a high degree of coordination among various entities may be required. Coordinating factors include finding a suitable site, developing transportation services, and arranging on-site social services. These activities require significant staff time, leadership, and planning. In some cases, these tasks require the cooperation and coordination of multiple local governments and nonprofit organizations. Many local governments do not have the resources to effectively undertake this lengthy and often controversial planning effort while still adequately serving the day-to-day needs of their communities.

### **Lack of Incentive**

The aforementioned problems for local entities in developing alternatives to the armories are not impossible to overcome. However, taken together, they provide a substantial obstacle to the local development of homeless shelters. Furthermore, the state's actions over the past decade to extend the armory program on multiple occasions has perhaps unintentionally created a disincentive for local governments to seek alternatives. As long as local governments perceive an ability to continue to use the armories, they are less likely to spend the time and money to develop alternative sites for shelters.

Chapter 716 requires that county governments which use the armories submit a report to the state by June 30, 1998 in order to continue to use the armories during the following winter. The report must outline the county's progress towards providing alternative emergency shelters. This report must also include a description of recent activities, planned activities, obstacles, and proposed solutions to that end. While the preparation of this report will force counties to consider alternatives to the armories, the statute does not require that specific progress be made in providing alternatives.



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## ALTERNATIVES TO THE ARMORIES

From the state's perspective, the armory program is a relatively inexpensive approach to emergency shelter. For the cost of a few dollars a night per person, the state has helped ensure that individuals are protected from the natural elements on the coldest and wettest nights of the year.

Given the concerns of the Military Department, however, the Legislature has sought to explore alternative ways to house the homeless during the winter months. In considering options, we have focused on state roles which assist local communities. This is because local governments have traditionally held the primary responsibility for providing emergency shelter for the homeless. For instance, although the state has made the armories available as shelters, the responsibility for administering the shelter program has remained at the local level.

We think that this primary local role is necessary, for several reasons:

- ◆ The state lacks expertise in directly providing services to the homeless.
- ◆ The state lacks in-depth information on the needs of individual communities.
- ◆ The state does not have the authority or knowledge to choose appropriate shelter locations.

Consequently, we believe the main alternatives to the use of armories involve local development of shelters. Toward this end, the state can assist

local shelter development by helping local communities address barriers to such development. As discussed earlier, there are several reasons why local entities have had difficulties in establishing new shelters for the homeless. For some of these barriers—such as finding suitable shelter locations—there may be little the state can do. Local governments hold the planning and zoning authority to designate a site within their jurisdictions as appropriate for a homeless shelter. Furthermore, local governments have the greatest ability to address their local residents' concerns about siting a shelter in their communities. For other barriers, there are specific actions the state can take.

### **Lack of Funding for Capital Costs**

In order to encourage the local development of homeless shelters, the state could make funds available to help cover the capital expenses of shelter construction. Based on the level of funding that the Legislature wished to commit for this purpose, a number of funding mechanisms could be used.

***Redirect Existing Funds in 1997-98.*** One million dollars will be directed to local governments for operating expenses this fiscal year. In future years, this level of funding could be continued for capital grants, as opposed to operations. This funding could be established as a matching grant program, whereby local governments would need to contribute an equal level of funding to receive the state's support. The availability of funds for

shelter construction or rehabilitation would allow some communities to proceed with permanent shelter plans.

Converting the current level of the state's financial support from operating to capital expenditures might result in the short-term loss of shelter beds. Some local governments might not be able to fund both the development of a permanent shelter and the continuation of paying for emergency beds in the local armory. Therefore, the Legislature might wish to provide temporary augmentations to its shelter funding. An increase in funding in the short-term could maintain the existing number of emergency winter beds while funding the development of permanent shelters.

**Establish a Loan Fund.** As another option, the state could establish a loan fund for the construction or rehabilitation of homeless shelters. With an initial state investment in the fund, local governments could begin to receive loans for capital expenses. As local governments repaid the fund, other local governments could then draw on the fund for shelter costs.

**Use State Surplus Property.** The state could make available its surplus property to local governments for conversion into shelters. The State Surplus Property Inventory, compiled by the Department of General Services, provides a listing of parcels, buildings, and other state properties available for sales, transfers, or exchanges. A majority of the surplus properties are vacant plots of land. To create permanent shelters, the state could donate to local governments or lease at a reduced cost its surplus land. The availability of suitable sites would vary across the state. How-

ever, if a local government found a desirable property, it would reduce the cost of land acquisition.

As a condition of continuing to use the armories and receiving additional state funding, local governments could be required to file a formal plan with the state outlining the steps in developing an alternative shelter—finding a location; arranging funding for construction, rehabilitation, and operations; addressing community concerns; and coordinating the provision of services. Unlike previous progress reports, the plan could be required to be submitted to the state for review and approval as a precondition of receiving funding.

#### **High Levels of Coordination Necessary**

As noted earlier, it takes considerable effort and planning to build a new shelter. While ultimately the responsibility has to be met at the local level, there are ways the state—through the HCD—could provide assistance:

- ◆ **Handbook on Developing Shelters.** As described above, at least two counties have succeeded in developing new shelters. The department could publish a short handbook describing those cases and highlighting the strategies for completing these projects.
- ◆ **Technical Assistance.** The department could also provide technical assistance—through direct help, contracted assistance, or one-time planning grants—to counties trying to develop shelters.

Similarly, we recommend that the progress reports required by law to be filed by the counties



by June 30, 1998 be forwarded to the HCD for its review. The HCD staff could then provide comments to local governments to help in overcoming specific obstacles to developing alternative shelters to the armories.

### **Lack of Incentive**

Finally, we noted earlier that the state's numerous extensions of the armory program may be sending the signal to local governments that the armory program is ongoing, thereby implicitly creating a

disincentive for some counties to find alternatives. If the Legislature is certain that it wants to end the use of armories as homeless shelters, establishing a "dead certain" end to the program could actually help the development of alternatives in some cases. (This approach could be linked with other strategies—such as state assistance for capital costs—to minimize the loss of shelter beds.)

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the past decade, the National Guard armories have provided an average of almost 2,500 beds during the winter nights to house the homeless. The armories have been used because they (1) are already equipped to handle emergency shelter situations, (2) are available throughout the state, and (3) lie unused most nights.

While the armories have been successful in providing shelter to the homeless, the operator of the armories—the Military Department—has expressed various concerns about the program (such as conflict with other duties, health and security issues,

and soldier retention). Our review indicates, however, that none of these concerns appear to be serious, and that steps have been taken to minimize the problems.

The Legislature has viewed the armory program as a temporary one and therefore has sought alternatives to it. Our review suggests that the most appropriate role for the state is to help facilitate the local development of new shelters by addressing existing barriers. This could be accomplished by providing both capital cost assistance (through grants, loans, or in-kind aid), and technical assistance.

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