Eliminating bail in California could undermine Sacramento’s progress against homelessness

BY JEFF HARRIS SPECIAL TO THE SACRAMENTO BEE
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Sacramento's homeless crisis is one of the most challenging problems our community has ever faced. There's no issue I hear more about as a member of the City Council. Unfortunately, the scale of the crisis has overwhelmed our ability to respond, with an estimated 5,500 people on the streets on any given night, many of whom need help for severe drug addiction.

Robert Erhart, 51, who lives in a homeless encampment on 22nd Street under the W-X freeway, said Monday, March 1, 2021, he doesn’t want to stay out there. “I don’t want to stay out here. I want to work,” said Erhart. Around 200 homeless living in tents under the W-X freeway will be getting eviction notices as Caltrans prepares to launch a freeway widening project that will turn that section of the central city, from 6th Street to 26th Street, into a construction zone for the next year.

RENEE C. BYER RBYER@SACBEE.COM
Fortunately, progress is on the horizon. After months of work and outreach, the city of Sacramento unanimously approved a comprehensive plan that provides at least 20 shelter sites and tangible steps for getting people off the streets and connected with the services they deserve.

While the plan's approval is a cause for optimism, it may face a massive setback because of a new law under consideration in the state Capitol.

California is examining a significant overhaul of its public safety system that would automatically make most crimes eligible for $0 bail. Requiring zero bail means most arrested individuals will quickly be released into the community until their court date — even if they're arrested for dealing serious drugs like methamphetamine or fentanyl.

This is a problem because homeless individuals — given their challenging circumstances — are especially vulnerable to drug addiction and are often preyed upon by dealers who are all too willing to get them addicted. While it’s a worthy intention to keep people out of jail unless absolutely necessary, zero bail will deal a severe blow to efforts to address homelessness and the devastation caused by drug addiction.

I have personally witnessed how methamphetamine, in particular, is driving some of the most complex issues related to homelessness. We are now seeing younger and younger people becoming addicted to this highly destructive drug. Rehabilitation becomes exponentially more difficult once a person is homeless and has severe addiction. Unfortunately, many of these individuals commit crimes to support their habits and fall into a difficult cycle to escape.

Unless we want this tragic cycle to continue, state legislators must reject zero bail. Instead, they should examine a different approach that doesn’t take away accountability from the people who are willfully dealing drugs and creating new addicts within our community.

Last year, I helped create the Substance Use Respite and Engagement program, which provides a safe place for people to get help outside a hospital or jail. However,
vital rehabilitation programs like this are undermined if we cannot disrupt the supply chain of insidious substances into the community.

Sacramento will never be successful in housing significant numbers of the homeless or reducing crimes to support addiction if law enforcement can only cite and release drug suppliers because of zero bail policies.

The city’s comprehensive homeless plan relies on building community trust and so there is less neighborhood resistance to **opening new shelters and housing options**. We are also developing “good neighbor” policies to demonstrate that these sites can be responsibly operated and not a magnet for crime or drug use.

I am deeply concerned that Sacramento residents will lose faith in the plan unless we can make progress on helping individuals break the cycle of addiction, homelessness and crime.

The city of Sacramento is stepping up to combat the homeless crisis by spending $100 million to expand temporary shelters, safe parking and transitional housing. But to make this plan successful and get people the help they deserve, we cannot stand by while hardcore drugs continue to prey on vulnerable individuals and create more addicts.

The last thing we need are new obstacles from the state, and imposing zero bail will do just that. California must reject Senate Bill 262 and zero bail if we want to see progress in reducing homelessness and drug addiction.

*Councilman Jeff Harris represents the 3rd City Council District in the city of Sacramento.*