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## Commentary: U.S. needs stars' attention too

Local groups would benefit from Hollywood charity

By Robert Weiner and Jonathan Battaglia

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Before becoming a star, Kelly Clarkson spent time in a homeless shelter in Hollywood. Halle Barry did the same in New York -- it can happen to anyone, especially after the recent financial crisis.

Hollywood is an international symbol for American glitz and glamour -- one of the prized jewels of our culture -- and where movie stars live, work and play. However, the city of West Hollywood has over a 12% poverty rate, about the same as the national average of 13%. Some of these people are homeless. The Census Bureau says the homeless live in Targeted Nonsheltered Outdoor Locations, or TNSOLs, which is a fancy name for a park bench or a street corner. TNSOLs in Tinseltown are an unacceptable reality. Hollywood must step up for the homeless in their backyard and across the nation.

CNN's "Big Stars, Big Giving" has highlighted Madonna's building a girls' school in Malawi, Elton John's funding AIDS research in Africa and Ben Stiller's raising money for Haiti. All are just causes, but so are their neighbors who spend nights in TNSOLs. Hollywood stars need to visit homeless shelters in their own neighborhoods before they tackle problems overseas. It's not hard for Hollywood to get involved.

The Obama administration's "Opening Doors," a "Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness," released June 22, proposes an end to child and family homelessness in 10 years. The administration wants to end chronic homelessness and homelessness among veterans in five years. Where were actors and actresses at the news conference and unveiling of this national strategy? (The answer is: not present; and they could have attended this publicly announced event and would have been brought forward.) Now, why not a Hollywood-White House meeting to see how we can solve this problem once and for all?

Actors and Hollywood can donate time and money (and hold news conferences to bring visibility to the cause and to encourage others as they do) to dedicated charities like the National Alliance to End Homeless, the Bowery Residents' Committee or the Coalition for the Homeless, all of which received top ratings from the American Institute of Philanthropy.

The National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty chose Los Angeles as the No. 1 "meanest" city toward its homeless. According to a UCLA study, the city spent \$6 million to crack down on crime in the Skid Row area, but only \$5.7 million for homeless services. The cost of writing warrants and tickets for jaywalking, loitering and drug abuse against the homeless could have paid for supportive housing for 225 people. Hollywood stars should lobby for a change in attitude and legislation toward their neighbors.

Actress Rebecca Gayheart started the Chrysalis Butterfly Ball, which raises funds to help Los Angeles' homeless find jobs. This year, the sixth annual ball brought together hundreds of stars, from actress Mila Kunis to "Family Guy" creator Seth MacFarlane. It's an important step in the right direction, but homelessness deserves more than an annual ball.

The cost of having so many Americans mired in poverty is far greater than the cost of helping them take care of themselves. The public cost for one person in supportive housing is \$605 a month, according to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. They report that a homeless person costs the public \$2,897 a month, nearly five times more than one who is housed. Emergency services, mental health and police costs increase exponentially when someone is homeless. In a city with more than 80,000 homeless on any given night, it's a costly proposition.

Hollywood stars, government and taxpayers should take note. Even beyond the humanity, it's far more cost-effective to house our homeless than to leave them on our streets.

Robert Weiner was a White House public affairs director and spokesman for the U.S. House Government Operations Committee. Jonathan Battaglia is a policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and a student at the University of South Carolina.

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