

NYTimes Placement: Under an L.A. Freeway, a Psychiatric Rescue Mission

The Situation

Los Angeles County has one of the largest homeless populations in the country. An estimated one-fourth to one-third of individuals experiencing homelessness self-report living with some level of mental illness, underscoring the deep intersection between psychiatric illness and housing instability. To confront this crisis, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) created the Homeless Outreach and Mobile Engagement (HOME) program. HOME deploys multidisciplinary field teams, including psychiatrists, nurses, and outreach workers, to provide psychiatric care directly in encampments and on the streets. It is the only public-sector program in the nation that sends a dedicated psychiatrist trained in street outreach to deliver sustained, personalized care. What was needed was national attention on how a major county was proactively addressing mental illness and homelessness with compassionate direct clinical intervention.

Communications Strategy

The Wolcott Group was retained to generate positive earned media coverage and secure at least six major placements within 12 months regarding the HOME program. Our strategy focused on both local stories, but also securing one prominent placement in a national publication. We aimed to spotlight a humane, replicable government solution. Through targeted research, we identified Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times reporter Ellen Barry as the ideal journalist to tell this story. What followed was nearly a year of strategic outreach and persistence. When early interest stalled, we maintained the relationship and created a breakthrough opportunity by arranging an in-person meeting at the American Psychiatric Association conference in New York City, where HOME was presenting. The meeting reignited interest and secured editorial approval for a Los Angeles visit. In October 2024, we coordinated a four-day, unrestricted embed for Barry and a Times photographer. We managed all logistics, patient permissions, leadership preparation, and detailed fact-checking. By allowing the reporting to unfold authentically, following the team into encampments and documenting a patient's journey, we strengthened the story's credibility and emotional impact. Our strategy relied on transparency, preparation, and trust-building with both clinicians and media.

Results

Nearly one year after our initial pitch, The New York Times published a comprehensive feature on October 24, 2024, complete with photography, highlighting HOME's innovation, compassion, and measurable results. During the contract period, we secured eight major earned media placements, exceeding the six-story goal. The New York Times feature reached more than 9 million subscribers, generated 400 reader comments, multiple letters to the editor, public praise from County leaders and elected officials, national inquiries from agencies seeking to replicate the model, and increased media requests and conference invitations. The story reframed the public dialogue around mental illness and homelessness. It demonstrated that a government-led, street-based psychiatric model can deliver both compassionate care and cost-effective results. Through disciplined strategy and sustained perseverance, The Wolcott Group elevated a local public health initiative into a nationally recognized model for change.

