

HOUSING IS A HUMAN RIGHT PREVENTION IS A STRATEGY SAFE HABITAT A NECESSITY

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Dire Circumstances

Homelessness is a humanitarian disaster.

Residents of our communities, our neighbors, brothers and sisters, our seniors and our children are increasingly sleeping on the pavement, hidden under bushes, in our parks, in their cars, in doorways, under blankets and when lucky under the cover of a tent. These harsh living conditions lead to quick deterioration of physical health, exacerbate existing mental health crises, increase social isolation, create hunger, and encourage drug and alcohol use as self-medication. Many are already addicted to drugs or alcohol or both, are people living with HIV/AIDS, people preyed upon by predators, and/or victims of rape and forced prostitution. Children and youth are traumatized by this experience and our seniors are neglected. More and more people are leaving our prisons without an exit strategy for housing, while evictions of the economically poor are on the rise, increasing the number of people whose needs become more complex, within a system not prepared for the deluge.

While progress has been made towards ending homelessness for our veteran population, nationwide we are experiencing even greater rationing of care, dedicating existing resources for those who are experiencing chronic homelessness with co-occurring illnesses, and/or poor health and persistent mental illness. Significant dollars have been targeted and complex systems designed to decide who qualifies for, and who is placed in, housing. This works for about 20 percent of the homeless population. We are dedicating few resources and minimal funds for prevention, in comparison to funds for building permanent housing. We are providing even less for the 80 percent who may “qualify” for services but are not prioritized for permanent housing.

Everyone has a fundamental right to safe, decent affordable housing. People who live without this protection nonetheless have the right to respite and sleep, dignity of habitat, health care, meaningful work, further education, community,

and freedom from criminalization for their homeless status. Quality of life for homeless people continues to suffer while resources are wasted on writing citations and tickets, encampment abatement. Tactics like these provide no progress towards ending homelessness.

Negative health outcomes and mortality rates are highly correlated with homelessness. Until recently, Bay Area cities have doubled down on status quo actions by choosing to enact “quality-of-life” laws that restrict unsheltered people’s right to sleep, to sit, be sheltered from rain and cold, receive food, congregate, or hold onto possessions not on their person. Jurisdictions continue to expend significant resources on homeless camp abatement as their most immediately feasible remedy for short-term amelioration of business and community fears regarding encampments.

Strategies for Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing

Homeless prevention programs still receive only about 10% of the total funds dedicated to homelessness. Prevention efforts have not slowed the increase in numbers of people who become homeless for the first time and are forced to live on the streets. Every East Bay resident is affected by the housing crisis and its effect in decreasing quality of life. Most unhoused people are displaced local residents, formerly incarcerated, and/or lack mental health treatment. In California, a 10% increase in rent correlates with 6.5% increase in homelessness. Citizens and jurisdictions must commit to improve the health and lives of people experiencing homelessness and help get unsheltered people off the streets, and give them access to health care and housing. The task is daunting, and the paucity of existing local resources does not meet the most basic of the emergent needs.

Federal, state and local agencies must organize resources together. Policies that govern existing prevention services can allow for greater flexibility within multiple systems for cross-agency approaches, and addresses administrative barriers. Collaboration possibilities include agencies such as: Social Services Agency, Children and Family Services, Office of Education, First 5, Senior Services, Health Services, Public Health, Mental Health, Probation, Community Development, Consumer and Business Affairs.

At the local level, a comprehensive strategy needs to effectively identify and assess households in danger of homelessness, and prevent the worst from happening, especially by diverting families in housing crises. Prevention resources should be prioritized for populations and individuals most vulnerable to evictions. Outreach workers should dedicate themselves to connecting vulnerable populations with legal assistance that can help prevent evictions. The stock of housing that has historically supported people who are housing-insecure, by providing rapid re-housing, is largely unavailable today. Affordable and stable housing support must also address people's health and employment needs.

Work support programs are disappearing. Greater income support and housing subsidies are needed for people without access to meaningful and stable employment at income levels sufficient to afford housing.

People with serious health mental health conditions, youth aging out of foster care or juvenile justice systems, and adults with frequent contact with hospitals and criminal justice need access to service partnership providers in or near their housing.

Solutions focused on prevention for all vulnerable populations must ensure that people are better connected to help before losing their housing. This includes effective prison and institutional discharge planning to prevent post-release homelessness.

Focused on displacement, legal services seek to preserve safe and decent housing for low-income tenants and avert evictions, especially when tenants are forced to move due to landlord foreclosure or tenants face escalating rental costs. Preventing illegal evictions is far more effective and humane than reversing the personal and financial costs once people become homeless.

People leaving foster care systems and juvenile probation, and formerly incarcerated individuals must be provided with resources and supportive services to ensure successful re-integration into their family and community of origin when possible. This may include re-integration with Section 8 families. Wraparound support, especially for former foster youth, needs to be provided to the individual for 6 months prior to discharge and to families after discharge, including access to community college or vocational training, access to public

benefits, and supportive services for long-term self-sufficiency and homelessness prevention.

Prevention is most effective when provided as housing subsidies. Indeed, most people who are homeless indicate the support they need to obtain permanent housing is assistance paying rent. Rapid Rehousing services are more available for the 20 percent who “qualify,: for non-chronically homeless single adults, and families. Rapid Rehousing strives to ensure that homelessness is a rare, brief and one-time experience.

For people who live with serious mental illness, permanent supportive housing is most effective. Housing Court, a specialty court for matters involving residential housing, and similar legal interventions for tenancy preservation, offers mediation with landlords to prevent eviction. Similarly, Mental Health Court prevents people living with serious mental illness from cycling through jails and shelters. Interagency collaborations (local and/or state) can build community-wide approaches, enable funding, and host data sharing.

Prevention activities are most effective when the intervention is well-targeted and delivered with efficiency. Communities most commonly focus on targeting interventions to promote rapid exit from shelters and supporting people with disabilities as they leave psychiatric or correctional institutions. Effective homeless prevention requires ongoing commitment by public agencies to these strategies, strong leadership and alliance-building, and adequate resources.

Facing Reality

While all of the above programs, policies and strategies will keep some people housed, many more will become homeless each year **as long as the current economic forces promote gentrification and economic inequality**. This forces us to a full discussion of creating alternative habitats/dwellings where people can live with dignity and support while they wait for placement in permanent housing which might be built in the next decade.

Creating Safe Habitat

Enabling Legislation. Several East Bay cities have access to funds provided by California statute, AB 932 "Shelter Crisis: Homeless Shelters". Low-cost, community-engaged solutions are challenging to implement but have proven to be cost-effective. Enabling legislation allows cities to fight the fight to bring immediate solutions into action.

Short of permitting Safe Organized Sites ("SOS") as described below, basic human rights of homeless people must be met by supporting access to hygiene facilities (bathrooms, wash stations, showers, laundry) and sanitation, adequate food and potable water, cooking facilities, access to medicine, access to additional safe places such as Warming Centers during inclement weather. To mitigate conditions of illness that are symptomatic of poverty and homelessness, unsheltered people require access to social workers, health workers, nurses and doctors, substance and mental health treatment, opportunities for education and employment. The right to shelter on demand, when pathways to more permanent housing are also available, shortens the duration that people must live outdoors.

Safe Haven, Safe Park, Rest Area, Sanctuary Camp. Sanctioned camp models are located on publicly-controlled or private land (blighted commercial, nonprofit, faith-based) used by a group to manage a supported encampment with little or no jurisdictional involvement. Models range along a spectrum from charitable (help is handed from provider to client, with institutional funding required) to self-managed (rules created by residents, staff facilitate, public agencies deliver support, partnership with neighborhood). Most Bay Area examples lean heavily toward charitable models. Levels of permanence range from temporary (provides safe shelter until people are adequately housed; the current standard is 4 months to fills a gap in existing housing system). "Temporary" is a revolving door as only the luckiest get housed in 4 months in the current situation of less than 1 percent housing availability in the Bay Area.

A Rest Area is distinct in accommodating a lower threshold of community engagement by a short-term camper. It is provided, sometimes at the front-end of a self-organized Sanctuary Camp, for a night's respite and an opportunity to experience the camaraderie and sense of purpose that a Sanctuary Camp can provide, and offers a step-up to that commitment level.

Iterations of San Francisco's Navigation Center and Oakland's Safe Haven do not use a self-organizing organizational structure. Instead, instead they offer safety for a time-limited basis in an externally-reinforced 24-hour staffed structure, operating under the obligation to provide intensified services to stabilize campers, connect to mainstream resources and County Coordinated Entry. They support housing "document readiness" to secure more permanent housing. These approaches are at least 7 times more expensive than self-organized versions.

Self-Organized Camp. Self-organizing seeks to increase the degree of safety, support, stability, and predictability in a camp. Residents who self-organize are inherently seeking to prove that they are capable of conducting themselves as a community that can successfully interact with and integrate as neighbors in a larger community. Self-managed camps provide a more tangible sense of belonging, resident ownership of a safe place to call home, increased safety in the neighborhood surrounding the camp, purposeful and reciprocal roles and relationships. The model includes a well-established code of conduct (sobriety, safety/nonviolence, non-harassment, cooperation, participation). With an ethos of mutual support, participation evolves into expectations for voluntary contributions that formalize into operational duties, including for security. The organization is led by a horizontal leadership team for day-to-day decision-making, in between weekly camp meetings where everyone's attendance and voice is required and due process is maintained.

Transformative, Self-Evolving Village. These emerge along a continuum – from unsupported encampment to more permanent housing – as an organic response by unsheltered residents themselves, usually in partnership with community advocates and stakeholders. The effort organizes by itself or with nonprofit support, as it builds a model that demonstrates social, environmental, and economic sustainability as a low-impact, low-cost, collectively-driven initiative. In addition to small sleeping units and on-site shared amenities, educational and vocational activities may be located in the camp.

Developing safe sites for sleeping outdoors is a public health requirement, even where it is not accepted as a public policy option. Providing for sleep is not a permanent solution to homelessness. But given the health and housing emergency, measures must be taken to secure safe spaces where safe and dignified sleep can occur.

Any citizen possesses the sacrosanct right to self-determination and autonomy to determine what is appropriate for their circumstances. Time-limited interventions for safe sleeping violate this right. Self-governance upholds this right. Varying levels of peer and professional oversight can support locations where unsheltered people are not expressly ready for autonomous, self-organized, and participatory solutions.