

Fact Sheet on Homelessness

Homelessness is not a lifestyle choice--it is the result of extreme poverty.

- Since 1976, HUD's total budget has dropped by more than \$45 billion per year, with the biggest drop occurring between 1980 and 1983 (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2001). In response to this dramatic decrease in funding for housing, San Francisco opened its first emergency shelters in the winter of 1982.
- The average rent in San Francisco for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,800, more than the average service sector employee's monthly paycheck (\$10 /hour gross, or roughly \$1,495 /month net), and more than an entire monthly public assistance check (\$723 for family of three).
- Low-income people who cannot afford market rents turn to subsidized housing for help. Currently, there are 29,000 people on the wait list for SF public housing, and the average wait is two years. There are 28,000 people on the wait list for Section 8, which was last open for a single month in 2001.
- In 2004, 103 homeless people died in San Francisco without a known address. (SF Medical Examiner's office, 2005).

How Many People Are Homeless and Who Are They?

- San Francisco Homeless Count in January 2005 found 6,248 homeless people on a one-night count. This is a minimum number and does not include people doubled up with friends or relatives or other invisible populations.
- Approximately 25% of homeless people are employed.
- Of these, **2,700, or roughly 40%**, are members of homeless families (*First Five*).
- ★ Children that are homeless are at risk for many short and long-term problems. They have a higher rate of serious and chronic health problems (i.e asthma, hospitalizations), developmental delays, mental health problems (especially depression and anxiety, compounded by exposure to trauma and violence), academic failures (including grade repetition), behavioral problems (i.e. aggression, poor social skills, difficulty with relationship building), hunger and poor nutrition. (*Housing First for Families Report and First Five*)
- An estimated 4,000 youth per year on the street (*Mayor's Office*), of which at least 15-20% are estimated by service providers to be under 18.

Are Homeless People Mentally Ill and Addicted to Drugs?

- 30% - 60% of homeless people suffer from mental illnesses and/or addictive disorders nation wide. (*National Coalition for the Homeless*).
- Every day, there are approximately 600 people on the wait list any day and it takes several months to get methadone and residential treatment,. (Community Substance Abuse Services, SF Department of Public Health, January, 2005).

Human Rights and Homelessness

- Human Rights abuses in the United States can be most visibly seen in the faces of the 3.5 million Americans who experience the trauma of homelessness each year.
- Throughout SF in from 1993 - 2005, 167,074 citations were given out for so-called *crimes* such as sleeping and sitting in public (San Francisco Municipal Court, December, 1993-2005).
- In the first 10 months of 2005, over 7,533 citations have been given to people simply because they

are homeless.

- In 2004, the first year of the Newsom administration, camping citations almost tripled.
- Each citation carries a fine of \$76. An unpaid or unresolved ticket goes to warrant in 21 days and the fine doubles. Accumulated warrants result in incarceration.
- The Coalition on Homelessness assisted in the representation of over 13,619 people who have received homeless tickets between 9/95 and 12/05. The cases go through the normal judicial system, where almost 90% are dismissed due to improper application of the law. (Coalition on Homelessness, SF, December 2005).
- The Department of Public Works and the Recreation and Park Department each have created specialized units that work with the San Francisco Police Department to continuously identify, confiscate and destroy homeless people's personal property.

What about the Shelter System?

- Homeless people must be fingerprinted in order to receive a shelter bed in San Francisco. San Francisco spent over a million dollars on this system that frequently breaks down.
- Within the city, there are approximately 1,840 emergency beds in permanent shelters. This is for all of those in need, including families, victims of domestic violence, youth, and single adults. Single adult shelters frequently do not accommodate pets, large amounts of belongings, or couples. Large shelters are difficult for people with mental illnesses to access.
- Under Care Not Cash (CNC), the County may reduce a county welfare check by over 80% in exchange for a shelter bed. That bed is reserved for them for 45 days whether they show up to sleep there or not. This system results in 60 – 80 empty shelter beds a night (*Shelter Directors Meeting 9-20-04*). Meanwhile more fragile shelter seekers are turned away from sleeping in an empty shelter bed.
- Homeless people who are not receiving CAAP, such as those receiving veterans or disability benefits, those with earning and undocumented immigrants, can not access CNC beds on a regular basis, nor are they eligible for CNC housing (The majority of housing set aside for homeless people under Newsom). If CAAP clients do not show up, their beds can only be released for one night to others. (*San Francisco Department of Human Services*).
- In a Coalition survey of 200 homeless people, 30% responded they had been displaced from shelter due to Care Not Cash, on an average of three different times. In a survey of 50 front line service providers, 52% reported that a negative outcome from Care Not Cash was displacement from shelters. (*Staff of shelters report 10.04*)

How is San Francisco Responding?

• San Francisco is moving towards a “Housing First” policy. Housing First is that homeless people can be placed in housing directly off the streets, without first going through a “readiness process,” shelter, or transitional housing program. Of course, at the Coalition on Homelessness, we have always believed that all homeless people are housing ready!

- The City - and the federal government often want to pay for this housing by cutting poor people's programs and benefits. This is most clearly played out in San Francisco's Care Not Cash, where

housing for one homeless person is paid for by the loss of benefits for three other homeless people. Currently, the Mayor of San Francisco is pushing to reallocate federal funding away from legal assistance, substance abuse treatment, and job training to housing. It has been used as a way to garner political points, justify budget cuts and implement paternalistic welfare reform policies.

- “Housing First” policy has, for the most part, focused on a very narrow portion of the population – those dubbed “chronically homeless.” This is defined as an unaccompanied disabled individual who has been sleeping in one or more places not meant for human habitation or in one or more emergency homeless shelters for over one year or who has had one or more periods of homelessness over three years. It typically refers to single adults, and chronic homeless initiatives funded from the federal government are not meant for two of the most significant homeless populations; homeless families and immigrants.
- San Francisco is mixing some positive moves towards housing people with very aggressive police activity. Armed with guns, bus tickets, misdemeanors, and threat of jail, police have been systematically harassing homeless people all over town. In fact, they have 32 full time police officers who do nothing but interact with homeless people.