

Coalition on Homelessness, San Francisco
Annual Report
January 2005

1. Summary of Accomplishments:

The COH was able to achieve a significant number of its long-term goals in 2004, despite the fact that we were confronted with a major budget shortfall and reduced staff resources since May. Some of these outcomes had been in our agenda for many years. The achievements highlighted here are described in detail throughout this report.

Housing:

- After a 2-year long campaign by the COH, the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA) initiated the revamping of its process to fill vacant units.
- SFHA created a revolving loan fund to assist homeless families.
- Surplus Property Ordinance passed by the Board of Supervisors. City-owned surplus properties will be used to permanently house homeless people.

Homeless Services and Policy:

- Shelter Monitoring Committee legislation approved.
- The COH played a key role in drafting the 10-year Plan to Abolish Chronic Homelessness, which is a requirement of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The COH was also appointed to join the 7-member committee that will oversee the implementation of the plan.

Health Care:

- California Proposition 63 - This voter-approved legislation will add a 1% tax on incomes over \$1 million to fund mental health programs.
- Conard House – The COH was instrumental in saving this mental health program from changes on its contract that would have effectively terminated it.

San Francisco City and County Budget:

- The People's Budget collaborative, an effort led by the COH, proposed and obtained changes to the Mayor's budget proposal, restoring 9 million dollars to vital services for homeless and poor people.

Public Education:

- The *STREET SHEET* celebrated its 15th anniversary, making it the oldest continuously published street newspaper in the world.
- The *STREET SHEET* was recognized by and inducted into the Northern California Society of Professional Journalists.
- The COH published the report "*Hidden Voices: The Realities of Homeless Families and Homeless Immigrants.*"

2. Activities

I. Outreach

The principal purposes of outreach are to gather input and inform homeless and poor people on policy and program changes which directly affect their lives, to provide pertinent referral information to needed services, and to inform them of opportunities to become directly involved in our work. Between twelve and fifteen outreaches are conducted each week to homeless and low-income families and individuals.

II. Peer Support

An important component of our work is our ability to provide homeless people with the support they need to address their immediate concerns, while at the same time building long-term involvement.

III. Leadership Development

Throughout our work, the COH builds the capacity of homeless and poor people by providing them with training and support. The COH provides a safe and supportive space for homeless people to meet, develop ideas, and organize. Once communication and trust has been established, individuals get involved with COH activity in a number of ways. Some of these activities include writing articles for the *STREET SHEET*, engaging in peer outreach and support, creating policy in the work groups, attending meetings with public and social service officials to address deficiencies and discrepancies in service, and engaging in advocacy work. While participating in our work, volunteers and staff are provided COH training and are linked to training at partner organizations.

IV. Public Education

The COH engaged in extensive public education campaigns to homeless issues to the forefront of public discussions, including printed opinion editorials, radio and television interviews, monthly printing of the *STREET SHEET*, and printed letters to the editor. In addition, the COH will coordinate creative, powerful, and targeted public direct actions and demonstrations to demand and illustrate the needs of poor and homeless people and proactive solutions to homelessness.

V. Workgroup

The COH Workgroups design the programs and advocacy agendas to be pursued by the organizers and volunteers. Workgroups involve and foster collaboration between homeless people, concerned community members and providers of social, health care, housing, employment, and legal services, to systematically address the needs identified in the outreach. As members of a workgroup, they have a relationship with our constituency and an expertise on particular issues. Workgroups allow a broad base of people to create strategies to bring about systemic change.

VI. Organizing & Advocacy

The COH initiates organizing campaigns to address the issues identified in outreach and through which homeless and low-income people have the opportunity to develop their capacity as leaders and to directly impact policies, which affect their lives. The COH links homeless people to policy making bodies and local officials where they have the opportunities to be advocates on their own behalf.

3. Outcomes

I. **Increased participation and development of a leadership core of homeless and low-income people in the work of the organization.**

- COH staff and volunteers, mostly homeless and formerly homeless individuals, conducted over **10 outreaches** weekly at treatment programs, drop-in centers, soup kitchens, streets and shelters to inform homeless and poor people on policy and program changes directly impacting their lives, and to provide pertinent referral information to needed services.
- The COH staffed and coordinated two work groups (Eye on Housing and Grupo de Mujeres) that are working to ensure the issues relevant to homeless families are not pushed away from the public eye due to recent focus on so-called “chronic” homelessness. (“Chronic” homelessness mostly relates to single adults with mental health and substance abuse issues.) Both groups have the steady participation of **10 homeless individuals**, the majority of whom are **mothers who are heads of their households**.
- Incorporated **five homeless volunteers** into organizing the campaign to pass the Surplus Property Ordinance. These volunteers attended organizing meetings, public hearings, and participated in all the steps of this successful campaign.
- Started the “Got Issues?” monthly program to bring homeless individuals to speak at the public comments section of the San Francisco County Board of Supervisors meetings. COH staff and volunteers coordinated the participation of an average of **15 homeless individuals per session**.
- Formerly homeless volunteers of the COH provided peer-to-peer support to other homeless individuals and families, helping **17 immigrant homeless families** and **16 immigrant homeless individuals (89 people in total)** secure permanent supportive housing.

II. **Initiated organizing campaigns through which homeless and low-income people engaged in a variety of activities, with a proactive impact on the political decision-making process and oversight of policies and programs that affect their lives.**

- Through the Eye on Housing campaign, led by our Family Rights and Dignity project, COH identified hundreds of vacant San Francisco Housing Authority housing units, and demanded that homeless families be placed in those units. **In a great victory for homeless families, the SFHA agreed to our demands and we were able to identify 300 families to apply for those units.** The Housing Authority is now going through the process of interviewing these families in order to confirm their eligibility. The SFHA has now housed 18 of those families, and

we are working through monthly meetings with SFHA's executive directors to reduce the length of the waiting list. We negotiated a preference for homeless families in public housing, allowing them to move more quickly up the waiting list for public housing. In addition, Eye on Housing's outreach included 32 homeless families who had not previously been identified by the SFHA and San Francisco's Department of Human Services (DHS), and two of these families have already been placed in permanent housing.

- The COH negotiated an agreement with SFHA and DHS to fund a **community liaison position** to assist homeless families in navigating the Housing Authority's bureaucracy. This is a fundamental step to facilitate the access of homeless people to public affordable housing by meeting the requirements of the cumbersome bureaucratic process they often need to go through.
- The campaign to fill vacant units under control of the SFHA enabled the COH to successfully negotiate with the Department of Human Services for the creation of a **revolving loan fund to assist homeless families with move-in costs**. This loan fund is now operational and the first family to benefit from it was housed in time for the New Year.
- **Surplus Property Ordinance**—In collaboration with other organizations, the COH led a campaign to designate city-owned surplus property to be developed or renovated into housing for homeless people. The campaign successfully advocated for the **Surplus Property Ordinance**, which was approved by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 2004.
- **California Proposition 63**—The COH received recognition from the Mental Health Association of San Francisco for our key role in getting Prop 63 on the state ballot, and ensuring its successful passage. This legislation creates a tax of 1% on incomes over \$1 million to fund mental health care programs. Due to Prop 63's success on the November '04 ballot, **San Francisco will realize an additional \$30-50 million in mental health funding**.
- Through the COH's advocacy efforts on Prop 63, we also garnered an inclusive community process to develop implementation plans for disposition of Prop 63 revenues.
- The COH led efforts at the Board of Supervisors resulting in the approval of **Shelter Monitoring Committee legislation** to provide sorely needed public oversight of city-funded homeless shelters. Comprised of community members and homeless people, the Shelter Monitoring Committee will conduct site visits and report their findings directly to the Mayor and Board of Supervisors.
- The COH has resolutely fought against shelter displacement resulting from the implementation of Care Not Cash, a local welfare reform measure. Our efforts have resulted in the **release of 38 set-aside shelter beds** unused by welfare recipients to vulnerable and medically at-risk homeless people seeking shelter.

III. Push a proactive vision of policy change and create civil and human rights protections for homeless and low-income San Franciscans, both locally and nationally.

- **10-year Plan to Abolish Chronic Homelessness**—The COH played a key role in the drafting of the 10-year plan. Through its workgroups and outreach activities, the COH facilitated the input of service providers and homeless people into the plan. One specific accomplishment of the COH in this process was that for the first time in the nation homeless families and homeless immigrants were included as specific populations whose needs must be addressed within the context of the efforts to end chronic homelessness.
- **10-Year Plan Oversight** – The COH was appointed to hold a seat at the 7-member committee that will oversee the implementation of this plan. The COH is the only organization appointed to this committee, which will oversee the efforts of all government and non-profit agencies involved in the implementation of the 10-Year Plan.
- **The COH staffed the People’s Budget Collaborative** to analyze effects of cuts to social services as proposed in the Mayor’s budget for FY 2004, and identify alternative revenue sources and savings. The majority of the cuts proposed were to be implemented in programs run by the Department of Public Health, and would have had devastating effects to health care and other services provided to homeless people. Through the organizing and advocacy efforts of the People’s Budget Collaborative, **over 9 million dollars in proposed cuts were restored** to the City’s FY 2004 budget. Additionally, two additional COH-led initiatives were funded in FY 2004: establishing SSI and Medi-Cal advocacy in local mental health clinics, and adding 63 more publicly-funded methadone treatment slots in San Francisco.
- **Conard House**—The COH helped secure the continuance of the care provided by this agency when changes proposed by the DHS in its contract threatened their ability to maintain the kind of intensive services they had provided for decades.
- The COH conducted a **peer-driven research study of hidden homeless populations** to address issues concerning homeless people left out of the recent increased focus on the so-called “chronically homeless” which are mostly single adults. The resulting report, *“Hidden Voices: The Realities of Homeless Families and Homeless Immigrants,”* was released in November, 2004. A formal presentation of our report's findings was made at the Human Services Commission, and these findings were also presented at a variety of provider groups. We also organized a community forum and press conference to release the document. The report's findings led the Mayor’s 10-Year Chronic Homelessness Planning Council to include recommendations regarding both populations in its final plan. This was a particularly important success due to the opposition of the federal Interagency Taskforce on

Homelessness to the inclusion of families and immigrants in the local 10-year plans required by HUD.

- Maintained representation on local policy making bodies, including the Local Homeless Coordinating Board, Mayor's Disability Council, Service Providers Network, Mission Neighborhood Resource Center Advisory Board, San Francisco Mental Health Board, Shelter Advisory Committee, the City of San Francisco Shelter Plus Care Program Oversight Committee, and FEMA Emergency Shelter Allocations Committee.
- Coordinated testimony for San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Human Services Commission, and Public Health Commission hearings to press for positive changes in homeless policies and programs.

IV. Collaborate with national and statewide efforts that share our long term goals and develop coalitions between various organizations with similar social justice commitments in order to build a stronger political force.

- The COH is part of the SRO Families United collaborative, working with families in residential hotels. Other organizations in this collaborative are **Mission Housing Development Corporation, Chinatown Community Development Corporation, Chinese Progressive Association, Sixth Street Agenda** and **Saint Peter's Housing Committee**.
- The COH, together with the **San Francisco Organizing Project** led the participation of several **faith-based, labor and neighborhood groups** in the campaign to pass the Surplus Property Ordinance.
- In addition to the organizations mentioned above, the COH maintains strong alliances with **POWER, the Living Wage Coalition, the San Francisco Tenants Union, Homeless Advocacy Project, La Raza Centro Legal, Mental Health Association, Bay Area Legal Aid** and others. The COH also holds seats in the boards of **St. Anthony's Foundation, the Community Housing Partnership, Central City Hospitality House, Hyde Street Community Services, and Media Alliance**.
- On the national level, the COH has strong ties with **the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, New York City's Picture the Homeless, the National Coalition for the Homeless, the North American Street Newspaper Association**, and is represented on the board of the **National Policy Advocacy Council on Homelessness**.

V. Maintain and increase Public Education activities to change the public's perception of homeless people and homelessness.

- The oldest continuously published street newspaper in the world, ***STREET SHEET*** currently enjoys an average production run of **30,000 copies**. With

over **400 active vendors**, in its 15 years STREET SHEET has helped facilitate more than \$6 million in legal income for homeless people.

- In January '05, *STREET SHEET* was **recognized by the Northern California Society of Professional Journalists** for our investigative coverage of local, state and national homeless issues, and was inducted into the Society's membership (pending).
- The COH presented the report “*Hidden Voices: The Realities of Homeless Families and Homeless Immigrants*”, as described on page 5 of this report.
- COH activities have received a wide coverage in the local and regional media. Our staff is frequently quoted in news stories related to homelessness. A Google search of news that mentioned the COH in May, 2004 returned over 30 matching results for that month alone.
- Op-ed pieces written by COH staff have appeared in the San Francisco Bay Guardian, the Atlanta Constitution Journal, and numerous online publications.
- Our fact sheets are widely regarded as a source of accurate information by media, service providers and advocates.
- COH staff and volunteers participate in an average of three to five public forums and panel discussions every month.
- The COH organized an ongoing speak-up campaign that engages homeless people to participate once a month in the public comment section of the Board of Supervisors meetings.

4. Organizational Changes

In 2004, the Coalition on Homelessness (COH) like many of our partner organizations throughout the Bay Area experienced a period of financial distress. Due to the incredible community response to our plea for support we were able to continue our work and maintain our programs. Taking a proactive response to the crisis, the COH is setting a new structure that will give us a much more solid fiscal foundation for the future, as well as continue the vital role we have played in the San Francisco homeless community.

The COH decided to use the need to reduce our budget and cutback our staff to create the opportunity to produce a new structure that we expect will allow us to better adapt to the profound shifts in the issues related to homelessness and poverty. Changing demographics and profound changes in homeless public policies will require adjustments in the way we respond to the needs of our constituency.

Organizational Structure

The COH used to work on different homeless-related issues by staffing six independent projects plus the *STREET SHEET*. Although that structure allowed us to cover a wide range of

issues, the autonomy of each project sometimes resulted in duplicated work and occasional coordination problems.

The new structure of our program staff will allow us to continue working on the same scope of issues as we previously did, but with greater coordination and staff support.

The main features of this new structure are:

- the elimination of the six independent projects,
- the creation of the Organizing Director and Volunteer Coordinator positions,
- keeping the focus on outreach and workgroups as the primary source of our advocacy and organizing priorities,
- the *STREET SHEET* remains as our main vehicle for public education.

The new structure groups together some of the existing workgroups to reflect the overlapping of some of the issues they address. The goal COH is to maintain the following workgroups:

- **Community Health Equity and Economic Rights** – devoted to health care and economic rights issues
- **Housing and Shelter workgroup** – working on affordable and public housing, and shelter system issues.
- **Homeless Families and Homeless Immigrants workgroup** – this workgroup will bring together two of the main hidden homeless populations.
- **Civil Rights and Youth workgroup** – this workgroup will focus on citation defense, organizing on civil rights issues, as well as working with homeless youth.

The Organizing Director will supervise and coordinate the work of the four workgroups, ensuring that issues overlapping one or more of those areas are adequately covered. The COH is also creating four Organizer positions. The organizers will work together in the different campaigns and projects undertaken by the COH, although each one will be assigned to staff one of the four work groups listed above.

The other key position created by the new structure is the Volunteer Coordinator. The COH has historically relied on the strong support of its volunteers, most of them homeless or formerly homeless people, to carry on its advocacy and organizing work, as well as some services provided to the homeless community.

Such services have always been regarded by the COH as **peer-to-peer support** rather than “client services.” COH volunteers and staff provide referrals, assistance with application forms, translation of documents, homeless verification letters, and legal assistance. The Volunteer Coordinator will ensure that this work continues to be carried on in the future, providing proper training and resources to the volunteers.

Outreach will continue to be the central tool of our organizing model. The COH relies on its constant outreach activities to ensure that its agenda reflects the needs of our constituency. Under the new structure, outreach teams will continue to be made up of staff and volunteers prepared with up-to-date information and expertise in the different issues. Emerging issues will be identified through the outreach, vetted by the program staff at weekly meetings, and assigned to the proper workgroup. If actions are required, such as further research or the development of policy proposals, the program staff will work in collaboration with the Organizing Director and the lead organizer on that issue.