

BART POLICE'S LATEST TACTIC TARGETS VULNERABLE PEOPLE

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If in hearing about the latest attempts to clear out evacuation routes at BART stations, you smelled a rat, you may be closer to the truth than you realize. BART police have been gearing up for months to clear homeless people who are doing nothing wrong or illegal out of BART stations, and some cynical pencil pusher came up with a perhaps not-so-perfect cover story.

When BART police officials first announced their intentions of clearing out travelers trying to catch a wink under the guise of clearing evacuation routes, my first thought was: “In an emergency, wouldn’t the well-healed alongside the down and out be evacuated together?”

Add to that a close look at the areas they are clearing people out of— open plazas and 20-foot-wide hallways, and the yarn falls apart.

The BART Police Department has been embattled almost since its inception, with bad publicity flowing directly from poor decisions and horrific incidents. In 1992, BART Officer Fred Crabtree, who was white, shot and killed 19-year-old Jerrold Hall, who was black, near the Hayward station after receiving reports that a BART passenger had been robbed. Hall was unarmed and shot in the back, and the department initially reported he was shot in the chest, and tried to hide the truth. Hall’s father asked for civilian oversight for BART police, but they didn’t bother putting that together for more than a decade later after Oscar Grant III was killed on New Year’s Day 2009.

BART police made precedent in the U.S. by being the first government agency to shut down cellphone service when activists gathered to protest the fatal police shooting of Charles Hill, a homeless man in psychiatric crisis. Then there was the well-known shooting of Grant, which was caught on numerous cellphones, and which BART police attempted to suppress. More recently, BART police were caught on film literally torturing a nonviolent black passenger by repeatedly tasing him as he cried and begged them to stop. Let’s not forget an earlier shooting that occurred of Bruce Edward Seward, a naked mentally ill man who had gotten a hold of the officer’s billy club at the Hayward station. See a pattern? Each of these victims were poor, and either black or mentally ill.

Let’s recap. Fatal shootings of black and mentally ill people, suppressing evidence, trampling free speech, no oversight, torture and, as if they just can’t stop this downward spin into the dark sinkhole

of immorality, they are now citing and arresting often black or mentally ill destitute people seeking shelter from the elements.

We are facing an unprecedented housing crisis in San Francisco. Mothers with their children are being forced to sleep at the Civic Center station while waiting six months for proper shelter. People are so desperate for a place to sleep, free of harassment, they are sneaking into elevator shafts and down train tunnels, literally risking their lives to get some rest. Last year, homeless father David Thomas was crushed to death by the elevator, and another poor man was killed by a Powell Street train when trying to get his belongings from below the platform.

We have one shelter bed for every five homeless people in San Francisco. People working three jobs cannot afford housing. We have passed laws making it illegal to sit or lie on sidewalks, closed down our parks at night, power-hosed down public areas under freeways that offer shelter, and just generally kicked and shoved people to the point where they have nowhere to simply exist. Instead of recognizing the crisis and coming up with effective solutions, BART has chosen the tried and failed route of rousting, citing and arresting. These latest efforts by BART to displace poor people from the stations will only drive them deeper into the tunnels, and even more deaths will occur.

BART police's latest move is unconscionable and follows right along that same old path of fear and intolerance of our poor communities. It is long past time for that train to stop.

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