

San Francisco Can Solve Homelessness

The San Francisco Human Services Network (HSN), a coalition of more than 90 not-for-profit organizations, joins the discussion of ballot measures regarding homelessness. The member agencies of HSN are confident that, with determination, cooperation, planning and adequate resources, solutions can and will be effected.

The inability of the City and County of San Francisco to develop and implement consistent and effective policies and strategies to address the dilemma of homelessness has become a permanent and divisive source of debate and political machinations. Perhaps fifteen years ago, when the phenomenon of homelessness was coming to the consciousness of the public, the lack of consensus regarding solutions and specific strategies to “solve” homelessness was understandable. Those involved in public policy decisions were just coming to grips with an emerging social problem, one that was often created by the policies of the very individuals who were now confronted with the consequences of those policies.

However, close to two decades later, the excuse that this social phenomenon is relatively new—or, at least, noticed for the first time—is no longer relevant. San Francisco has lurched from homeless policy to homelessness policy. Often promising approaches have been abandoned in mid-effort because of a change in the political leadership or a budget crisis. Uncooperative, or even hostile, federal and state administrations have created a climate within which critically needed resources for housing and supportive services have been reduced or eliminated. In May 2002, the San Francisco Civil Grand Jury found that departments are insufficiently supported to develop and implement the Continuum of Care, the City’s five-year strategic plan for homeless services.

In this context, unsurprisingly, many voters are attracted to ballot measures that promise change. This ballot box approach is frustrating in that it serves to politicize and oversimplify a complex set of issues that require a comprehensive array of strategies. The member agencies of the San Francisco Human Services Network, more than 90 nonprofit organizations, join the discussion on the relative merits of “Care Not Cash” (Prop N) and “Exits from Homelessness” (Prop O) without consensus. At the same time, we share a perspective that both Prop N and Prop O are piecemeal approaches to the crisis, and when the votes are in, San Francisco will still face the challenge of crafting effective solutions to homelessness.

The Mayor’s Office, the Board of Supervisors, the Departments of Human Services and Public Health, and the community-based organizations serving homeless people still need to develop policies that are respectful as well as demanding of those who are most vulnerable in the community. They still need to coordinate their policies and services. They still need to find the resources to make available that which is the most obvious key to success for individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of being homeless—affordable housing with supportive services.

The circumstances that create homelessness and the subsequent barriers that prevent an escape from the homeless trap are not mysterious. As simple as it sounds, the primary solution to homelessness is to ensure the availability of housing, where people can live in dignity, regardless of their economic circumstances. This is not, of course, a solution to the concomitant problems of substance abuse or mental illness, borne by some who are homeless. However, experts agree that little can be done to change these circumstances without a decent and affordable place to live.

Foremost, it is fundamentally true that there is not enough affordable housing in San Francisco. In its report "*Homelessness in a Progressive City*," the Homeless Task Force of SPUR writes, "San Francisco's General Assistance (GA) payments have failed to keep pace with the costs of rents in San Francisco and as a result fail to even cover the average cost of one of the city's most basic SRO rooms—let alone a studio or one-bedroom apartment." The SPUR report makes clear that the growing disparity between "the rate of poverty and the depth of poverty" and the cost of housing is the single most significant contributing factor to the increase of homelessness. In San Francisco, the unusually high cost of housing exacerbates this national trend. Even minimally adequate housing options are beyond the financial means of most homeless individuals and families.

The mystery then is not what needs to be done to eliminate homelessness. Rather, the mystery is why San Francisco has not sufficiently planned and implemented the evident solutions:

1. Affordable housing, especially for the poorest in our community, and prevention programs for those at risk of becoming homeless;
2. Treatment services for persons with mental illness or substance abuse problems; and
3. Exits from poverty, through living-wage work opportunities or government support, that do not penalize those who cannot work or for whom there are no jobs.

In May 2002, the Office of the Controller of the City and County of San Francisco issued a major report on homeless services. "Although the City and County of San Francisco... makes available a wide spectrum of well-delivered services for its diverse homeless population, the City has not yet developed an effective, unified strategy for dealing with the issues related to homelessness in San Francisco." This report, which began as a management audit of the city's system of service delivery, presents an analysis and set of recommendations that go far beyond the usual purview of such an instrument. The report articulates a series of practical and affordable steps San Francisco must take if the community is to address homelessness effectively.

It is regrettable that the Controller's report has been all but lost in the turmoil surrounding current ballot measures. The report offers an objective, non-political analysis of the economic realities and other complex issues that have led San Francisco to its current crisis. It acknowledges the need for commitment to a comprehensive strategic plan and a unified and coordinated system of services.

Most significantly, the Controller's report affirms that San Francisco will meet the needs of its homeless citizens best by investing in additional service-enriched transitional and permanent affordable housing that is culturally-appropriate and tailored to the diverse needs of homeless adults, families, youth and seniors. "[M]any different kinds of homeless people live here.... On their roads to finding permanent housing, these homeless individuals may need short-term services like crisis intervention, urgent medical care, and detoxification; such transitional services as case management, education, financial management, and job training; and, eventually, medium- to long-term treatment for... mental health or substance abuse issues."

We in the San Francisco Human Services Network assist homeless people and others in need on a daily basis. We know them as individuals. We experience their sorrows and their joys, their challenges and their accomplishments. Like other San Franciscans, we sometimes are frustrated that things do not always work as well as they should. We recognize that there is room for improvement in our current system of service delivery. But we also believe strongly that the solutions to the problems of homelessness in our city are clear and very much within our grasp.

We unanimously support Proposition B, the Affordable Housing Bond measure on this November's city ballot. We know that passage of Prop B will provide critical leverage to make available up to 4,000 units of permanent affordable housing, many of which will allow people now on the streets to escape homelessness and to live with the dignity and respect that we all seek.

Further, we in the San Francisco Human Services Network call on our elected officials, the leadership and staff of City and County Departments, advocates for the homeless, including homeless individuals themselves, and our fellow service and housing providers and their constituencies to work together. We believe that the city can draw on our two decades of rich experience to plan and implement a coordinated and consistent set of policies and strategies that work. With shared planning, serious collaboration, clearly placed responsibility and accountability, we can direct current and new resources to create a variety of affordable supportive housing options for those men, women and children in our city who are homeless or at risk of being homeless.

(San Francisco Controller Edward Harrington's report concerning the performance audit of homeless services in the City and County of San Francisco can be found on the web at <http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/controller/Audits/hs.pdf>. Other on-line resources include the SPUR report at <http://www.spur.org/Homelessness.pdf>, the Civil Grand Jury report at <http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/courts/grndjury/2002reports/homeless.htm>, and the City's Continuum of Care plan at <http://www.ci.sf.ca.us/lhcb/coc.pdf>.)