
The homelessness problems we have created, we must fix

By Alex Briscoe | June 30, 2016

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While the Bay Area has become the face of the new economy, it also has become the poster child for disparity and futile attempts to alleviate poverty in a land of plenty. Of the more than 7,500 people living on the street in San Francisco, 23 percent are chronically homeless. The region's incredible wealth and rampant entrepreneurship have cast homelessness in stark contrast.

Last year, homelessness topped the list of local concerns, when 35 percent of residents ranked it as the most pressing social issue. This year, it remains so for a **record 51 percent**. In a rare move last week, media outlets across the region agreed to coordinate coverage on the topic, drawing attention to possible solutions.

President Lyndon B. Johnson declared war on poverty in 1964, a move that led to vital aid through programs such as VISTA, Head Start and the Job Corps. Today, however, our safety net — fragmented along jurisdictional lines and by funding streams for things such as health, welfare and corrections — mitigates the harm of poverty without attacking its roots.

Thus, our siloed interventions trap us in a world where we define those in need by their problems. In no instance is this truer than when we see people living on our streets.

Now more than ever, the public sector, health and human services, and philanthropy must come together to examine homelessness and build new systems of mutual accountability.

The challenges today are the direct result of past policy decisions. In the late 1970s, there was a surplus of affordable housing. Since then, real estate prices, foreclosures and the overall cost of living have increased, while wages and public assistance have dropped. President Ronald

Reagan's Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act cut federal spending on mental health by 30 percent starting in 1981. And the homeless shelters authorized by the **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987** gave people a place to go but little else to help them stabilize their lives once there.

Our failure to provide adequate support in other areas has led to higher rates of homelessness among certain segments of our population. Without family support, 39 percent of foster youth experience long-term homelessness. Greater incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder and physical disability among veterans put them at outsized risk of substance use and unemployment, and thus also unable to afford rent.

While African Americans make up just more than 7 percent of the total San Francisco population, practices such as refusing to make mortgage loans or sell insurance in areas deemed to be financially risky (known as "redlining") and racially disparate drug sentencing have helped lead to this result: African Americans comprise 33 percent of the city's chronically homeless.

For 12 years, I worked for Alameda County, the last six years as health director. I knew intimately the overlap of our child welfare, criminal justice, veterans services and health care systems. I was responsible for administering the 911 system in Oakland and 13 other cities in the East Bay.

Once we identified housing as a critical determinant of health outcomes more than five years ago, we worked hard to house more than 10,000 people. Even so, we barely made a dent in total homelessness across the county. The fragile nature of life in poverty landed people on the streets as fast as we could house them.

We have a unique distrust of government in American culture, but it is government that has the size and scale to address the underlying causes of homelessness. Philanthropy and business have a critical role to play because private dollars are nimble. They can be used to fill gaps, create, build capacity and inform.

If we start from a place of compassion, we make progress. Take, for example, the Supplemental Security Income Trust we established in Alameda County. While the vast majority of the chronically homeless qualify for federal disability payments, the application process takes 18 months to complete. During that time, symptoms worsen, trust erodes, and people get lost in the system.

Local governments, under state mandate to provide General Assistance, disburse dollars from the county fund to patch the hole. In Alameda County, our SSI Trust uses philanthropic dollars to pay applicants right away, freeing up local public-sector dollars to invest elsewhere and reducing costly psychiatric emergency visits, hospitalizations and incarcerations among this population. Because a federal SSI payment is retroactive to the date of application, the private investment is recouped in full.

We saw successful enrollment grow from just 10 percent of eligible individuals to more than 90 percent in our jurisdiction. With the passage of the Affordable Care Act, and the growth of managed care, we are seeing extraordinary new opportunities like this for local safety nets.

The city of San Francisco has taken a promising step in creating a Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing. But this team cannot work in isolation. Local government must take the lead on aggregating data across sectors to carefully map the experience of our homeless citizens and the services available to them. Philanthropy and nonprofit organizations must then agree on key indicators and data-collection practices in support of these efforts.

Philanthropy also can step forward to convene leaders and experts in foster care, health care and criminal justice, who do not yet have seats at most decision-making tables. And, in partnership with government, we can design creative financing strategies, seeded at the city level, to capture state and federal matching dollars.

Individuals have a role to play, too. You can support the [proposed San Francisco sales tax](#) on the November ballot, which, if approved, would generate \$50 million to subsidize supportive housing and rapid rehousing over the next two years. You can advocate that your elected officials make targeted investments in building new units of supportive and affordable housing to accommodate all San Franciscans. And you can stay informed on the issues by visiting the [SF Homeless Project website](#).

Homelessness is the symbolic issue of our time. It exposes what William Julius Wilson called “the stable underclass” and what scholars Cornel West and Robert Reich have shown to be the effects of persistent trauma and hopelessness. It reflects back at us a lack of social and economic mobility for those most in need, and sadly our collective ability to abide and sometimes sanction preventable suffering.

But these challenges were made by human hands. The spotlight on them is a flame that should

be carefully fanned. We must rewrite the contract between community and its public servants. We need only a commitment to look honestly at some of our culture's most uncomfortable truths about race, class and inequity, a willingness to redefine our roles, and a deep desire to create ties that bind. There is no greater opportunity to show our humanity.

*Alex Briscoe is managing director of **T Works** at Tipping Point Community. T Works is dedicated to building cross-sector partnerships for the common good. Visit www.tippingpoint.org/TWorks. To comment, submit your letter to the editor at <http://bit.ly/SFChronicleletters>.*

What you can do

Support the proposed sales tax on San Francisco's November ballot to subsidize supportive housing.

Elect legislators who will advocate for affordable housing.

Inform yourself. Go to [SF Homeless Project](#).