

# ALL-IN 2016 Listening Sessions: Without Shelter

## People Experiencing Street Homelessness in Alameda County

Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless Consumer/Community Advisory Board 1/17/2017



### Street Homelessness in Alameda County

There is no doubt that street homelessness is increasing in Alameda County. Every day, we all witness more tents, encampments, and people living unsheltered throughout the County.

The purpose of these Listening Sessions was to learn about the experiences, opinions, skills and ideas of persons who are currently living on the streets, without shelter in Alameda County.

Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless (ACHCH) is a federally-funded Health Center program housed within the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency. Since 1988, ACHCH has provided health care and support services to people experiencing homelessness, throughout Alameda County.

The ACHCH program counts on the input, direction and participation of the HCH Consumer/Community Advisory Board representing consumers and community members advocating for better health care service for by the HCH program, and joining with the program in the goal of ending homelessness and health disparities in Alameda County.

*Homelessness will only be solved through caring, coordinated, investment of time, energy on ALL of our parts, from federal, state government, to cities and County, businesses and neighbors.*

*Towards that end, it is essential to understand what are the strengths, issues, experiences, hopes, dreams and points of view of persons who are experiencing homelessness, so we can work in partnership to develop long-lasting solutions.*

### Listening Sessions

During the week of 12/5/16, The HCH Consumer/Community Advisory Board carried out three listening sessions at the following locations:

- First United Methodist Church in Hayward,
- New Bridges (South Hayward Parish) in South Hayward;
- Causa Justa/Just Cause in West Oakland.

HCH CCAB members carried out outreach with posters, announcements at meal sites, outreach to encampments and through social media.

A total of 46 persons experiencing street homelessness participated, and 18 observers and collaborators participated. Participants were provided meals and a gift card for their participation.

HCH CCAB members were impressed and encouraged by the courage and strengths of the participants, and pleased by their willingness to speak out.

### Major Themes from Listening Sessions:

- There is tremendous diversity among persons experiencing street homelessness. They cannot be characterized, pathologized, or generalized.
- Persons experiencing homelessness have skills, talents, experiences and input to provide to society, and feel that their ability to contribute to society is systematically denied to them, and that they are trapped in cycles of poverty and homelessness that are hard to exit.
- Most participants were born and raised in the neighborhoods they in which they are now homeless.
- Most participants believe homelessness is solvable, through the construction of adequate affordable housing, and that if not for the housing crisis and unaffordable rents, they would not be homeless.
- **They are not homeless by choice.**

### Safety and Sleep:

- Sufficient sleep is a fundamental biological need and human right that is described by participants to be systematically denied to them, resulting in poor health, early death, and impact on their ability to access stable housing.
- Safety and personal security is of tremendous importance to participants. Participants reported extremely high levels of violence carried out against them on the streets, by housed persons, by other homeless persons and by law enforcement personnel. They do not have safe places to go, either in the day or at night.
- Friendship and affective relationships are crucially important to persons experiencing street homelessness, and homelessness negatively impacts their ability to have healthy relationships. There are valid reasons for a person on the streets to *avoid* relationships/friendships and be alone, but people are aware of the harmful impacts of avoiding relationships.
- Pets are an extremely important asset for persons experiencing homelessness.

### Gainful Work in Society:

- Most participants have skills and desire to work and support themselves, and give back to society, but face many barriers to being able to do so. Barriers include GA and SSI caps on outside income, Housing Authority restrictions on income and housemates, etc.
- Even recycling and day labor are becoming more and more challenging, due to restrictions and criminalization.

### Health and Nutrition:

- Persons experiencing street homelessness report high levels of malnutrition and poor nutrition, inconsistent with the amount of energy required to survive on the streets.
- Participants spoke of day-long walks just to access breakfast, lunch and dinner meal sites, and reported starchy, sugary, salty, bready food that is filling but not nutritious.
- People reported a lack of access to clean drinking water.
- People reported many more health problems than housed persons, and lacked access to health care for their needs.

### Criminalization of Homelessness:

- Participants overwhelmingly reported that they are treated unfairly by law enforcement due to their homeless status, and gave many examples, including seizure of possessions, destruction of camps, being unfairly ticketed, searched and checked.
- Many communities such including Hayward and Oakland have anti-homeless laws which ban distribution of food, panhandling, standing on sidewalks, and these laws are used to try and run people who "look homeless" out of public view.
- Harassment and destruction of camps and property comes from many actors, including CalTrans, BART, cities and local police.

### Encampments

- Due to the absence of accessible, safe shelters, many persons experiencing street homelessness live in small encampments, for safety. They experience harassment from police, businesses and housed citizens, lose possessions frequently and must move about frequently.
- Even with safe and decent shelter, there are many people, who due to trauma and other issues may not be able to access shelters.
- They believe that with legal status, basic supplies (toilets, water access, storage, trash, security) and self-help standards that Cities, County, providers, and homeless residents could establish encampments which could be reasonably healthy and tolerable for all., including neighbors and businesses.
- A growing phenomenon described is that at many visible encampments, housed persons illegally dump their own trash, leading many to believe that homeless encampment create trash. Participants expressed a need for safe parking/sleeping spaces for "vehicularly sheltered" homeless persons, with behavioral rules and safety of prime importance.
- Persons experiencing street homelessness are very aware of efforts to create Tiny Home or Microhousing Villages, and are very enthusiastic about these projects, and would like to live in them.

### Conclusions

The overall conclusions of all three Listening Sessions can be condensed into the following:

- Treat persons experiencing homelessness with dignity and care – "There but for grace, (go I)".
- Safe, accessible warm shelters and daytime support centers.
- Legal and city/county-supported encampment spaces. Safe parking places for vehicle-housed persons.
- Helpful and supportive health-oriented outreach providers.
- Healthy, protein-rich food in soup kitchens and food programs.
- Safe places to be during the days, to rest, read, bathe, charge phones, etc.
- Places to go and work, day labor, or even volunteer.
- Police and health providers who are adequately trained/interned in skills needed to protect and serve persons experiencing homelessness.
- Development of affordable and safe housing for all.

### For More Info:

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