

ALL – IN 2018 Listening Sessions: People Experiencing Street Homelessness In Alameda County

Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless Community/Consumer Advisory Board (HCH CCAB)

Kimberlee Burks, Sabrina Fuentes, Jeannette Johnigan, David Modersbach

People Living in Homelessness Require Human Dignity and Human Rights

We are all witnessing a huge increase in the numbers of people forced to live unsheltered, on the streets in Alameda County. Members of the HCH CCAB carried out three Listening Sessions with people experiencing street homelessness in Hayward, Castro Valley and Oakland, with the goal of learning about the experiences, ideas, needs, skills and ideas of some of our brothers and sisters on the streets. We found that people's lives and needs cannot be generalized, given the diverse social geography of our county. Some special ideas were emphasized by the groups in Castro Valley, Hayward and in Oakland, and in all of the three sessions, these key findings were common:

Health and Hygiene

Access to clean toilets, showers, washing facilities, laundry etc, is a fundamental human right. People spoke of spending so much time just finding toilets, not being able to shower. Cities, county, churches, centers can provide hygiene facilities for all at low cost compared to the costs of disease, economy and happiness when there are no public facilities.

Support Services and Outreach

The large majority of participants **do not** have a case manager or provider that they can count on for help navigating systems and accessing benefits, housing, jobs, legal help, medical care and other critical needs. We must increase the numbers of good outreach workers who can provide key services on an ongoing basis to unsheltered folks.

Storage

It is essential to have places to store personal property. People described the profound impact of losing precious personal items, and how difficult it is to protect what little they have and need. They described the rackets and scams of private storage facilities. It is not too complicated or expensive to envision systems where folks can easily and safely store key personal possessions.

Information and Resources

Listening session participants said that they are not getting accurate information about housing, health and support services available to them. They are confused about Coordinated Entry, and did not have confidence in their ability to access accurate, genuinely helpful information through the 211 system.

Safe Parking

Many people entering (and exiting) homelessness do so through living in a vehicle. Participants said that safe parking programs can be hosted on a local level, include bathroom access and provide a way to sleep safely without fear of police or predators. These projects can be small, cheap and extremely effective to help provide support and stability to a lot of folks.

Community Support

Most everyone receives some sort of support from their communities: Churches, food programs, neighborhood associations, individuals, all provide important nourishment, services, hygiene, and social and emotional connectedness. We must look beyond Cities and nonprofits, to support the work that dedicated community members are doing to help their homeless brothers and sisters.

“We were born and raised here!” Over 80% of participants reported being from the very communities where they now live on the streets. Participants in all three sessions described themselves as “displaced persons,” rather than homeless. “Look me in the eye – I am a human being.” “I hope to use homelessness as a learning experience.” “Don’t judge me, because this system has failed us.” Homelessness is a serious crisis, a public health emergency, and it should be treated that way”. “There is a wealth of ideas, energy and experiences among people living in homelessness. Listen to us!”

Castro Valley Listening Session Finding:

Transportation

Castro Valley participants spoke of the difficulties that folks have being able to access services located all across the place: Walking all day just to get a shower, and when you get back, you're sweaty and dirty again. It is difficult to access health care services, housing providers, case managers, especially in unincorporated County, or South County or the Tri-Valley area.

A solution could be “WE CARE-A-VAN” a small shuttle that has a regular schedule, picking up and taking people to food and showers, and to locations like Social Services, health care centers, and support services.

Hayward Listening Session Finding:

Personal Safety

Hayward participants spoke of their personal safety: Living on the streets is DANGEROUS. All participants reported assaults and traumas against them. Many cannot sleep at night for fear of attack, and in Hayward, cannot even set up a tent or sleep together with others for protection. Just setting up a tent means that you will be cited or told to “move on” by police, in a city that prohibits sleeping while homeless.

Sadly, homeless participants fear the police as much as anyone. They describe some good cops, but also bad ones who harass and harm folks, and you never know which will approach you.

Participants counted and told stories of people who died on the streets during the past years. Hayward folks requested year-round shelter provision in the City of Hayward.

Oakland Listening Session Finding:

Housing & Social Justice

Oakland participants – primarily Black -- were outraged and indignant about the way they have been cast to the streets because of race-based gentrification of the neighborhoods they grew up in.

Most had no confidence in the housing/homeless system, feeling shuffled from street to tents to shelters to multiservice center and back to the streets, with little hope of permanent housing. They did not feel they have a voice in the conditions of their shelters or programs.

Participants desired opportunities to channel their anger into advocacy and organizing, whether at City Hall or Sacramento. They want to be part of the organizing and advocacy to end homelessness and to reduce the racism and disparities all around us all.