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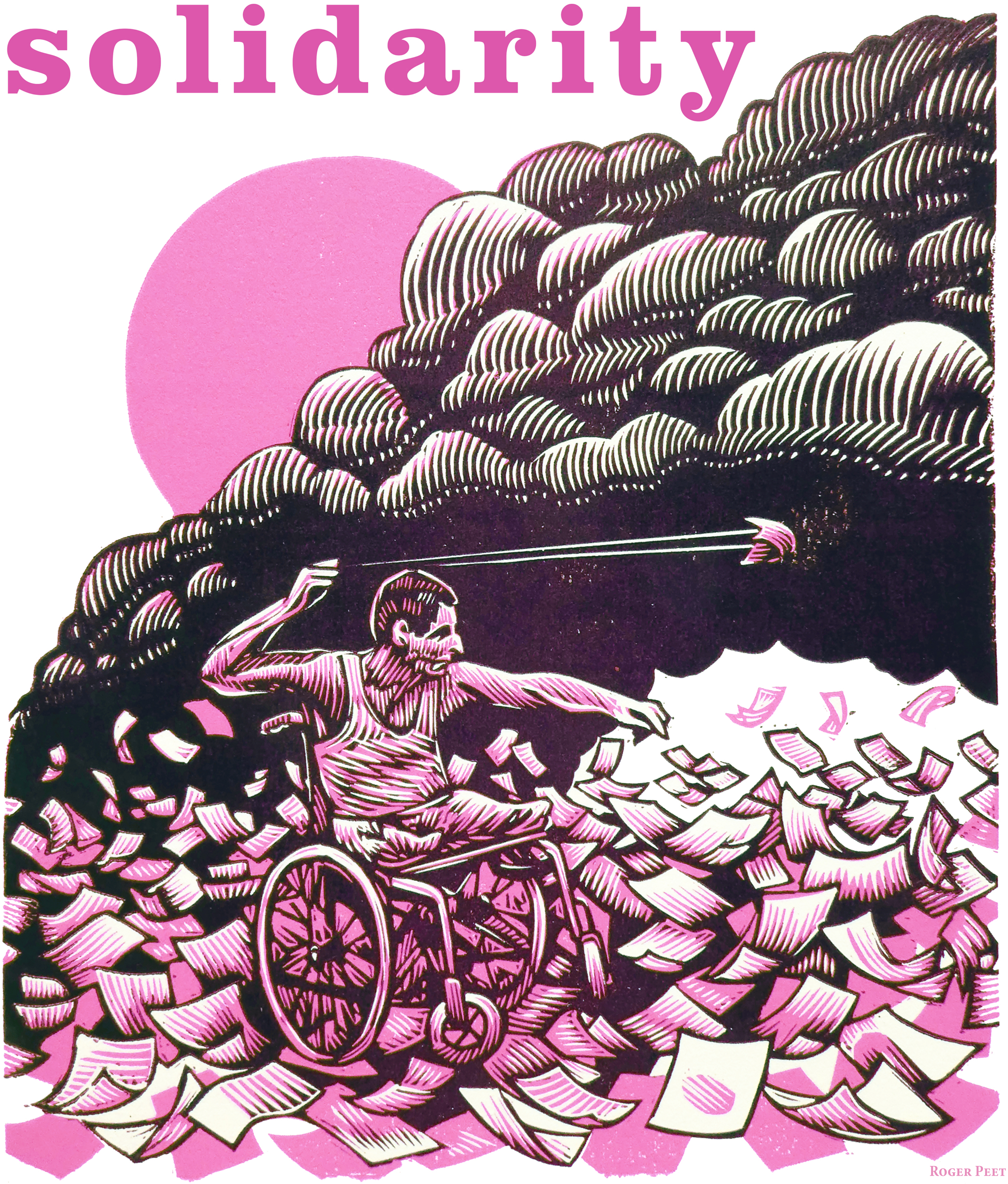
DISABILITY JUSTICE ISSUE

solidarity with Palestine



ROGER PEET
JUSTSEEDS.ORG

DISCRIMINATION VACATION

Zach

the Golden Lining of Shelter In Place

“I can’t wait to get back to normal!”

It’s a phrase I’ve heard dozens of times during this past year of our lockdown spa, where the whining and moaning from people seems to travel farther than the reverberating calls of the South American howler monkey. Never in my life have I seen so much complaining and temper tantrums from an ultra-privileged class. It’s been surreal, like watching a bratty kitten tear up your favorite couch because you gave it a warm bath.

“You do realize that incarcerated folks and people with disabilities live like this every single day, right?” I try, usually in vain, to elicit one iota of compassion from the toddler ableys, who are determined to remind me how hard their life is. And no, I’m not talking about people with children, those facing homelessness and financial ruin, domestic violence survivors trapped with an abuser, or other vulnerable populations that have every reason to hate quarantine. I’m talking about people who can’t go on as many hikes as they used to, don’t get the hugs they want, or can no longer frequent the bars and clubs for the 2 a.m. meat market to bump uglies with some random stranger. This is a very large portion of San Franciscans, believe it or not.

Quarantine was never about them. But in a society that is quickly replacing empathy with voter suppression, it’s hard to explain to people that this isn’t about you. One of the things our current president has done a better job with than his predecessor is describing to people (especially youth) that social distancing is about protecting your grandparents, your sick uncle, and the millions of disabled people just like me. This is about taking one for the team, about defeating a new and deadly virus with collective compassion for the people who are most likely to suffer. The news never seems to cover the rates of new disabilities developed from COVID-19 infections, either. Just like in wartime, we only hear about the deaths. Never the disabled.

continued on page 3...

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COALITION ON HOMELESSNESS

The STREET SHEET is a project of the Coalition on Homelessness. The Coalition on Homelessness organizes poor and homeless people to create permanent solutions to poverty while protecting the civil and human rights of those forced to remain on the streets.

Our organizing is based on extensive peer outreach, and the information gathered directly drives the Coalition’s work. We do not bring our agenda to poor and homeless people: they bring their agendas to us.

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The Street Sheet is a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness. Some stories are collectively written, and some stories have individual authors. But whoever sets fingers to keyboard, all stories are formed by the collective work of dozens of volunteers, and our outreach to hundreds of homeless people.

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POETRY CORNER

Expel hate

The only way to expel hate, is to become revolutionaries of Love before it’s too Late.

We must come together let our voices be heard and not let hate become a verb.

Violence against Asians and others must not even survive.

Love is the only way to expel hate, we must fight hard to keep it by our side.

Note: Like the great Nelson Mandela said Power to the People.

Rodney McClain

POEM ON ABLEISM

Jessica

I wanna share something that I’ve personally experienced and still deal with today: Please from the bottom of my heart treat people with disabilities the same way you would treat someone without a disability! We’re the same as anyone else—we have feelings, we like to have fun, and we just wanna have a normal way of life. We didn’t choose to have a disability. Do not define someone by their disability. We’re so much more than it. I’ve personally dealt with people treating me like I’m a little kid or like I’m less than them, and let me just say it’s one of the worst feelings in the world. Feeling like you don’t belong, feeling so alone, really sucks. Please don’t be afraid to come up to us, be our friend. We don’t bite, we want people to talk to us. Include us in your groups, just talk to us. Make us feel like we belong and that we matter. Lastly, you’re not weird if you talk to people with disabilities. We should be able to feel like we’re just like everyone else and not like the outcast. Start making a change: Treat others the way you wanna be treated.

DISCRIMINATION VACATION

continued from page 2...

Well here I am, and it's disability pride month! So let me blow your mind with a little bit of reality from my corner of the city.

A part of me has absolutely loved the pandemic shelter-in-place. I mean loved it! What? Can I say that? It sounds wild, but hear me out:

San Francisco is like a personal social-distancing obstacle course for people like me. More than half of the buildings in the city I can't even get into (including doctors' and therapists' offices, to talk about how much this sucks), and even when I can enter a building, I'm not even able to pee in their bathroom, since I use an electric wheelchair. I can almost never go to crowded places like bars or clubs or music venues, as I will be immediately told that I'm a fire hazard, or otherwise ostracized, threatened, or worse. I was kicked out of a bar where we were celebrating my friend's birthday in the Haight-Ashbury because the owner didn't like my wheelchair being parked in the corner while I hobbled with my cane to try to dance.

An employee at Muddy Waters on 16th Street refused to put a wheelchair ramp down for me (which they have) because "I know you can walk!" — he had seen me use a cane once in public and was convinced I was faking my health needs (I can't walk with a cane anymore). The manager never returned my calls and I still can't go there now.

The $1.25 store owner at Mission and 24th Street routinely yells at me for trying to navigate the tightly cluttered aisles in my wheelchair. I've never complained about them and I completely understand his hardship in trying to make a living. But that doesn't stop him from hating my existence.

I can't count the number of times I've gone to a venue only to be kicked out, or have to pee in the street because there's no bathroom available to me. I frequently have to lay down on sidewalks next to my wheelchair, because my spinal pain keeps me from sitting straight up for long periods. It's extremely rare that anyone offers to help or sympathizes with this. However, the police are sure to let me know how angry this makes them as they menacingly tell me to "move along."

Bus operators, due to lack of training and oversight from SFMTA, have discriminated against me so often, so routinely, that I was forced to file an ADA lawsuit with the city.

My self-esteem is consistently shattered whenever I leave my home due to the hateful stares of strangers passing by, the inappropriate prodding questions of toddlers and children, and the sheer misery of all the stigma that surrounds being disabled in my community.

And should any of these things work out for me, and I would find an accessible place to meet someone, and say—oh, I don't know—bring a date back to my place, I would still have to humiliate myself by crawling along the filthy floor to the steps to my unit, because even my own apartment has no law requiring it to be wheelchair accessible. (a personal meeting with the DPW housing ADA investigator, along with the brutally unfair laws, made this very clear to me.)

So yeah, being in "lockdown spa" is no big loss for people like me. In fact, I've been calling it "Discrimination Vacation."

After years of being told that video attendance was impossible for public meetings, even at places like the disability transportation summit hosted by TRACS and World Institute on Disability (held at the Ed Roberts center, bless his soul, as he rolls over in his grave), all of a sudden, in less than 48 hours, we had videoconferencing everywhere and for everything. It's like a switch flipped when all the abley two-leggers whined and moaned, and all the things that would be impossible for cripples like me — things I had been told are "too expensive" or "not required by ADA law" — became the immediate order of the day. It kind of reminded me of the 2009 Wall Street bailout, when the federal government gave at least $8 trillion of our taxpayer money to the crooked banks that wrecked the economy. But when it's time for a $1.9 trillion stimulus to Americans to survive during COVID-19, wealthy corporate scumlords and politicians say 'whoa, that's too much!' After strong opposition, and removing billions of desperately needed help to working Americans, including a $15 federal minimum wage (it's still $7.25), the bill passed. The rich and the powerful (1%) like to dictate what's best for their needs, and that rarely means including or empowering disabled people with social opportunities or jobs.

Regardless of the reasons, that switch was flipped and the world became an accessible oyster to me. All of a sudden, I could join friends and engage with the community. I could go to art events, music shows, even flirt! I didn't have to pee in the street anymore, or struggle to find necessary nourishment, or a pillow when my body started to crash. I wasn't told to leave explicitly or through passive-aggressive stares, I was treated something like… *gasp* …an equal citizen!

Best of all (and this is due to a certain amount of privilege) I can be a chameleon sometimes, if I take off and hide my medical aids to look like the ableys. And while I tell people all the time that I am disabled—I'm a proud and loud crip—for the first time it became my choice to do so, and not a conversation forced upon me nearly every moment outside my apartment.

While the two-legged whiners are droning on about how "bored" they are, I've never been busier. Now that the playing field has been evened out a bit, I can operate and access life in ways similar to them. So it's been GO time! What have I done? For starters, I gave a national presentation on disability transit justice in February, I have won half a dozen arts contests (two first prizes), I've made friends and found community all over the country, I've hosted a music night and virtual hangouts, I've deepened my education by taking new free classes and joining community support groups, I've hosted two domestic violence support meetings and assisted survivors, and I've finally been able to access therapy regularly for the first time since being crippled, as well as many medical appointments ("telemedicine," the ableys call it), and many other things. It's been a busy year!

Most importantly, though, I've been able to deepen friendships with people. It's those simple moments in hanging out where people just enjoy space together, sometimes not even communicating audibly, but enjoying each other's presence. This has been one of the most wonderful occurrences of this period, and one of the deepest joys for me. I've been attending art groups where it's been absolutely wonderful and shocking to see that people know who I am. They know who I am! I'm not that anonymous wheelchair user "what's his name" that can physically make it out once or twice a year. I'm the regular guy that cracks jokes and makes art that people enjoy!

We don't often think about it, but routine and association is how we build trust and bond with one another. I think this has always been part of the fabric of living in human society. While disabled people like me live in segregation, we cannot build those relationships because we cannot access the spaces to communicate and bond. This, in my opinion, is the number one thing that holds the disability community back in this country, and that's why our fight against segregation is tantamount to our liberation.

I want to acknowledge that mine is an outlier case, and not the experience of most people during a very difficult time. While some parts of democracy have been improved through phone and videoconferencing, especially to access local government meetings, there is a large part of the population that simply doesn't have the necessary technology, and our leaders have utterly failed at making it available to them. This is what's known as the "digital divide"—a not-so-hidden caste system that is fully operational even in the heart of Silicon Valley, giving vast preference to those with a phone, laptop, or computer of some sort, and an internet connection. Nowadays, it's like you're not even a full human being unless you have a freaking computer phone to receive text messages for every single website signup form. It is often the source of brutal discrimination against the disabled, seniors, and our unhoused neighbors. During this time I've been distributing technology aids to folks when I can, with whatever leftover stuff I have here. But I wish our city was doing a lot more in this regard.

Aside from the digital divide, before this unique change of events we've had to go through numerous hurdles to engage in our local democracy. It's only too easy to forget that every meeting, every decision by the Board of Supervisors, every proclamation issued by the mayor, every Human Rights Commission meeting, has required each and every person from the public to go through a wall of policing, security, and metal detectors. To voice our support in our own democracy has required handing over our personal belongings to police with the potential for confiscation or harassment. Just think about that for a minute… we've experienced something closer to direct democracy than we've had in many decades!

The ableys, bigots, and political quacks will undoubtedly pose a false multiple-choice road forward of this or that—the technological accessibility of shelter-in-place, or the "back to normal" of enforced segregation. Tell them to shove it! We can have our cake and eat it too. Now we know what's possible, that the excuses were always bogus, and that we absolutely can have remote meetings and remote phone calls, it's time for us to fight for them. For example, one of the art groups I'm attending is going to have rotating in-person and virtual hangouts from now on, if for no other reason than to continue to include new members who have joined from other parts of the country.

The pessimist in me is awfully cynical about the access rollback that's approaching like a brewing storm over my life. I'm bracing myself to be shoved back into the closet of segregation, completely removed from the world again. I worry that everyone will be so enamored with physical interaction that I will become a distant memory of quarantine, an anecdote of the past. Please try to remember people like me, and think about ways to include us. If nothing else, this time has shown myself and others that disabled people are capable of doing a world of activity, when the activities of the world are changed to include us. Let's remember to keep the good changes around, to make this world accessible to all, even after we've kicked some COVID butt :). ■

Check out this piece online at streetsheet.org for more links and resources

DISABILITY JUSTICE ISSUE

BEING FORCED OFF ONLY FANS

tallasianchick

Remember when COVID hit and a lot of people lost their jobs? I am one of them, but my loss led to an amazing experience as a self-identifying disabled sex worker.

WHAT!? DISABLED SEX WORKERS EXIST!?

Yes, but the United States doesn't like disabled people or sex workers, so this was a risk that I was willing to take due to my living situation. If you aren't disabled, then you are probably unaware of the working limitations of the disabled population of America. I cannot have a job due to the fact that I rely heavily on Medi-Cal and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. I live in San Francisco, and it's not a cheap city to live in. I only get $785 a month; that is not even a month's rent in this continuously gentrified city. I am privileged enough to not be one of many unhoused disabled people in the city and all around the world. However, there is a constant fear that I can be.

The only way for me to make money was to start doing sex work; this is called survival sex work. Survival sex work is sex work based on purely monetizable sexual services (AKA full service sex work) for survival because it is that sex worker's only option.

"Why don't you get a real job?" First of all, sex work is literally the oldest profession. Second, please understand that if I work, I will lose my full health benefits and potentially die. Lastly, we live in a toxic society where sex workers are deemed dirty and shameful, and sex work is seen as a last resort. In reality, it's so much more than that; for me, it was liberating.

My experience with sex work has been life-changing. I learned that people will pay for ethical porn and additionally, I realized that OnlyFans was and is so much more important than I thought, and it had to do with my authentic personality. A lot of sex workers use different names, do not show their faces online, and are mostly anonymous. Not all sex workers are the same. I can technically call myself a sex worker when I educate people about sex.

People were giving me money just to talk to me. I had a client who just wanted to vent to me and paid to do so.

Now, it's gone. A close family member came across my OnlyFans and threatened to kick me out of the house if I did not delete my account immediately. Furthermore, if I were ever to create another account, this beloved family member would never feel comfortable visiting me, wherever I ended up. This is what happens when Catholicism, ableism, Filipino culture, intergenerational trauma, historical trauma and sexual trauma all collide within the span of five years. I have experienced two 5150s, gaslighting, not being believed when I said one of my four brothers molested me when I was less than 5 years old, and a rape in January 2020 by a partner while I was drunk. My brain protects me by suppressing my memories.

People often forget that mental illnesses are also disabilities. Sometimes, they can even be more debilitating; for example, my brain cells started mysteriously dying in 2015. Trauma, in and of itself, is so crippling. I have found that I am who I am not because of my traumas, but how I dealt and am currently dealing with them. I acknowledge my trauma, just like the rest of my mental illnesses and disabilities—they are part of me and they may never go away and I have to accept that.

I have found things when I was so lost and low that have shaped me into the person that I am proud of today. I believe in learning from my mistakes and continuous growth. I try to learn something new every day, even if it's just a fact.

Becoming disabled is not something to fear—however, the people currently in power should be held accountable for the fear they have created. The American government and our financial institutions need to do better by the marginalized and disenfranchised populations. Billionaires shouldn't exist, and I should not have to suffer just because I am disabled. I did not choose this. So fix it, America. ■

LISTEN to STREET SPEAK:
Episode 7 explores why homeless advocates should support sex workers!
streetsheet.org

A STORY

Dlan

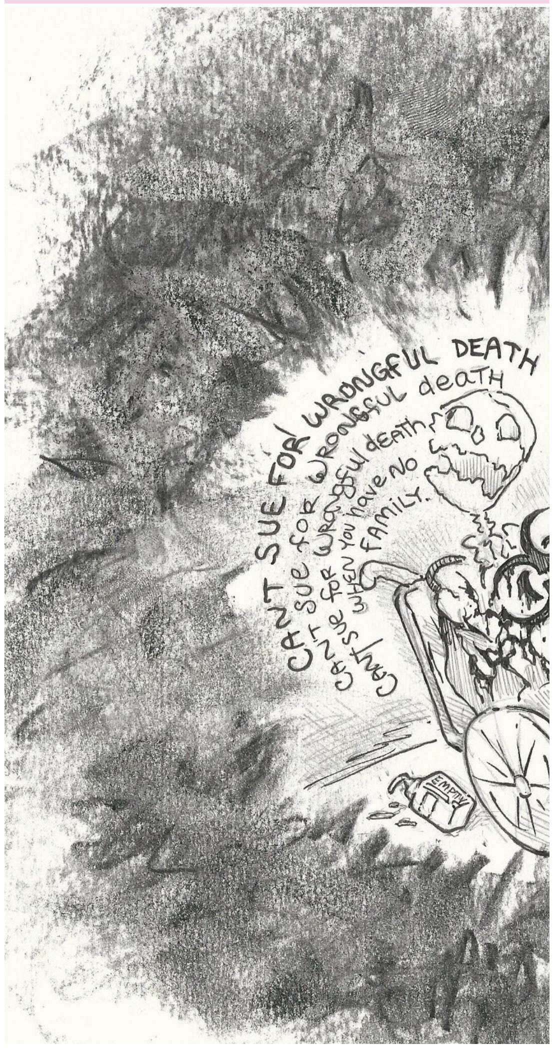
Before the war in Syria, life
My family was happy. Since
blind, I never went to schoo
6 years old my father found a teacher who co
and play instruments. By 7 years old, I had sta
small concerts and weddings. At 9 years old, I
to another to perform. Some trips took hours.
a bus, and that was it. I was fine because it w
after that, things changed.

We lived in Syria for a few more years, and du
safe at all. The war started and it was clear t
feel the same again. The sounds of bombs an
I remember one day when all of us were slee
suddenly heard the sound of war outside at 4
enough to shake the entire house. Once we w
again, there would be another bomb or guns
or ten minutes. My whole family was scared,
decided to leave and go to Kurdistan. I was o

I remember leaving before the sun came up t
van that picked us up. And just like that, we l
entire lives. I can still hear my grandparents
ing. We drove in that van all day. When we a
there was just desert. The van couldn't take u

So, we walked and walked through many m
were lots of children and elderly people there
than we could count were also making this j
the day, the sun was so strong. However, the
besides my family was the instrument I was
which is a long-necked fretted lute, was every
all I could to protect it from the environment
me. Many walked close by, not paying attent
instrument safe, I knew everything would be

That night, my family and I had to sleep in th
bus to Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan, but it only too
each day. When it was finally our turn, we ro
day. Eventually, it took us to a refugee camp.
at a school that was on summer break. We st
days. Many aspects of our lives were difficult
it was bad. In fact, some of it was beautiful. E
party for everyone there. All of us shared grie
we could find a chance to dance outside of ou
together. I would play music for everyone and
could pretend like we forgot all of the trauma
music.



FROM A BLIND SYRIAN REFUGEE

was great and safe.
I was born completely
l. However, when I was
uld teach me how to sing
arted playing at some
was going from one city
My dad just put me on
as safe back then. Soon

uring that time it wasn't
hat things would never
d guns were everywhere.
oing soundly until we
a.m. It was strong
ere about to go to sleep
not. They came every five
including myself. We
ly 11 years old.

o quickly get into the
eft our house and our
crying as we were leav-
rrived at our destination,
s any further.

ountains and trees. There
as well. More people
ourney. In the middle of
only thing I cared about
holding. That buzuq,
thing to me. I was doing
and the people around
on. If I could keep my
fine.

e streets. There was a
about two families
de that bus for the entire
The camp was set up
ayed there for about 20
back then, but not all of
very night we'd have a
f, but in those moments
r rooms, and laugh
l for a brief moment we
and live our lives in the

After those twenty days, people in the camp were saying it wasn't possible to stay there any longer. In one room, there could be up to three large families. Some families didn't even have that much, and had to sleep outside. People were complaining and saying all of us couldn't continue to live like this. The Kurdish police decided to take us to another camp, even though it wasn't finished being built yet. In fact, once we got there we discovered that they hadn't completed anything. There were only tents. Our bathrooms were just an open space and a big, deep hole without a toilet. There were a few times when people even fell into it. Officials kept saying they were "still working on it."

The discomfort didn't stop there. At the camp, sirens often went off. Whenever people reported a problem, officials told us that we were told it wasn't complete and blamed us for "choosing" this place. The tents we lived in were so small. I still don't know to this day how the seven of us managed to find a way to survive in it.

Everything happened inside that tent. We showered in the same place we cooked our meals. We had to fill our bottles with water from far away and carry them inside. We tried to layer rocks on top of each other to keep the rest of the tent from getting wet, but sometimes it was impossible to avoid. Even in the widest part of the tent you could barely stretch out your arms. In that situation, you are vulnerable to all of nature's elements. Sometimes it got very windy, and other people's tents would fly away. Other times it would rain and ruin many of the things we had. The worst part, however, was when it was hot. Tents started burning, even with people inside. I remember one time when a tent caught fire and caused another tent to catch fire, since so many of them were so close together, and people died. Whatever the weather was, we were exposed to the most extreme version of it.

Even during these hard times I found some happiness, because I was still playing music and music created community. All of us were suffering, but we could still talk to each other and enjoy the music.

We stayed in those tents for years. Then there was a philanthropist from the United Arab Emirates who came and said he would help improve the camp. He paid for small rooms with walls. No more tents! We stayed there for another year. My dad created an additional room by himself made out of rocks. Now we had two rooms, like a real house. It was much safer than before.

Soon after that, we got news that applications for visas were being accepted by those who had a disability or had a family member with a disability. Since I am completely blind, we were able to apply. It took a long time but eventually we received the news that the United States accepted us.

One night, our names were called, and we actually got taken to the airport. We had only been given one week to prepare everything and leave. Several times they'd give us a date, and then it would change—but this time it was real. We were actually leaving. While this was great news, leaving felt much more complicated than just being happy. We were sad to leave some of our family—aunts and cousins—and many of our friends behind. There were so many years where we were all living together side by side. Now it was time to say goodbye, possibly forever.

Around 2 or 3 a.m., we left the camp and went to the airport. Many came to the airport with us to say goodbye. We didn't sleep at all. It was our very first time on a plane. Being inside the plane and feeling the sensation of flying made me so happy. After several layovers we made it to California. At first we didn't have a place to stay, so we slept in hotels. We got support from a counselor who was assigned to our family, and she was very helpful and quickly found us a place to live. We were so grateful. However, we didn't have anything to eat or a car to help us go shopping. We also didn't meet any Arab people. It felt very isolating and scary in this new and foreign place.

At the time, I didn't speak any English—I only knew Kurdish and Arabic. So, I listened to YouTube videos and watched a lot of TV. I was only 15 years old. Then it was time for me to go to school for the first time in my life. I was so nervous. However, I felt something inside of me say that it was OK and to just go for it. That voice told me to do this challenge and that whatever happens, happens. As soon as I got off the school bus, I met the one-to-one aide that was assigned to me, and she spoke Arabic. I was so relieved. She worked with me for two years and helped me learn English.

Many people came into my life who helped me, not only at my high school, but also at the California School for the Blind in Fremont, where I went after a few years of high school. If it wasn't for my visual impairment, I wouldn't have met the incredible people who helped me succeed. My visual impairment has brought me so many things that I am grateful for. And as far as music goes, I now play more than ten instruments and am planning to one day be a music teacher.

I love where I am now. We might be a family of seven in a two-bedroom apartment, but we are safe now and we are grateful for that every day. I am not scared of anything anymore. I feel like I can become whoever I want to become. I hope that my story can bring hope to others with a disability who are new to this country. You never know what can happen. Right now, I feel like every door is open for me. Before, I would never have guessed that I would one day feel this way. ■

A MESSAGE TO SIGHTED PEOPLE

My name is Dlan, and I am blind. I have been totally blind since birth. My whole life, sighted people have been trying to help, but they do it poorly. They often do not understand me and do not think of simply asking me what I feel comfortable with when they have tried to help. I don't need to be grabbed or touched to be helped. I want to spread the message of respect, communication and equality from those with disabilities to people without disabilities.

Here is how to better help blind people: First, don't assume blind people always need help. No matter who you are, some people can do things better than others—whether they have a disability or not. The way someone does something may simply look different than how you're used to seeing it. Second, you can feel comfortable around blind people, but please make sure you're paying attention to what's around you if you're guiding one of us. At that moment, we are trusting that you are making sure we are safe. If you don't know what to do, just ask. Most of us are happy to answer your questions on how to best give us assistance.

It's easier than you think: Ask and listen to blind people. That's it. It's very easy to help people who are blind or disabled. Avoid making assumptions. If people approach each other with more communication, there would be more respect. Treating each other this way will set us up for better interactions. I know many sighted people want to say and do everything correctly without offending anyone, but don't put that pressure on yourself. How can you know what to do without learning first from the person that is disabled? Communication is all it takes. And who knows? Maybe we'd all realize that we're more alike than different and can build community. ■

No internet, no vaccine:

How lack of internet access has limited vaccine availability for racial and ethnic minorities

In the US at least, racial and ethnic minority communities that lack internet access have been left behind in the race to get a COVID-19 vaccine, say three researchers who study health disparities. They outline their findings which show that if the online gap was narrowed, vaccine rollout would be smoother.

by Tamara Burns Loeb, AJ Adkins-Jackson and Arleen F. Brown

Reprinted from INSP.ngo

Racial and ethnic minority communities that lack internet access have been left behind in the race to get a COVID-19 vaccine. The average monthly cost of internet access, about US$70, can be out of reach for those who can barely afford groceries.

Reporters and scholars have written about the effects of lack of internet access in rural areas in the US and developing countries, but they have paid less attention to the harm of lack of internet access in racial and ethnic minority communities in major cities.

As researchers who study health disparities, we are concerned that even when vaccinations are offered in these communities, those at greatest risk for COVID-19 may be unable to obtain appointments without the help of family or friends. This includes racial and ethnic minority communities and older adults, the age group that is currently being vaccinated.

Our research suggests that lack of internet access may be an important reason. And for the almost 13.8 million older adults in the US who live alone, asking for help may not be an option.

THE COMPUTER AS COVID-19 CONNECTOR

During the pandemic, the internet has been an indispensable health tool to millions.

Telehealth services have provided a safe way for patients to make appointments for COVID-19 testing and other types of medical care. In fact, there was a 154 per cent increase in telehealth visits during the last seven days of March 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. This was most likely due to public health mandates that required a shift away from in-person care.

In addition, patients receive communications from their providers through email and other messaging systems that offer access to health care, health information and test results. And, departments of public health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have relied on their websites, online events and social media to educate the population about COVID-19. Access to the internet is essential during a pandemic.

This has been particularly true as the vaccine has been rolled out. Signing up for the vaccine has predominantly occurred online. This means that far fewer older adults from under-resourced racial and ethnic minority communities have been able to make appointments.

In 2018, more than one in four Medicare beneficiaries had no digital access at home. Those without digital access were more likely to be 85 years or older, members of racial or ethnic minority communities and from low-income households.

HOW INTERNET ACCESS CAN DETERMINE HEALTH

Over the years, medical and public health experts have identified social factors – structural racism, a person's neighbourhood, access to fresh food, exposure to toxins, income and education – that play a major role in health. These factors are often called the social determinants of health. Experts consider structural racism, or racism ingrained in social, business, educational and health policy and practice, to be one of the most damaging determinants. These factors in turn ultimately lead to more disease and death, as they have with COVID-19.

Early data on the case numbers and deaths from COVID-19 showed that structural racism likely increased exposure to the coronavirus among racial and ethnic minority communities. And, racial gaps also impeded access to testing and affected quality of care.

The pandemic has also illuminated the risk of infection to our aging population. However, research has placed less emphasis on how aging affects some populations more than others, such as the effects of structural racism and income.

Now, it appears that internet access is emerging as a new and troublesome determinant of health. This appears to be particularly true for under-resourced racial and ethnic minority communities and aging populations.

Although people can make appointments for a COVID-19 vaccine by telephone, call centres are frequently overwhelmed. Hold times can be extremely long. Access to the internet, having an internet-enabled device and understanding how to use both have been necessary to sign up for the vaccine. Many advocacy groups and public health experts have begun to see internet access as a fundamental civil rights issue.

During the fall of 2020, we looked at this issue in more depth with Black and Latino individuals who are HIV positive and at risk for a cardiovascular event. In our research, we found that 17 out of 30 patients had no internet, no computer or lacked knowledge of how to use the internet or a computer. They, like many people with health issues or from under-resourced racial and ethnic minority communities, are affected by numerous social determinants that amplify the negative health consequences they experience.

While online health services could be used to increase access and retention in care among vulnerable groups, not having access widens existing disparities.

SOLUTIONS EXIST, BUT THEY MUST BE IMPLEMENTED

To address the internet gap, policymakers must identify lack of internet access as a barrier and protect against its effects. This could include reserving vaccines in under-resourced racial and ethnic minority communities for local residents and designating senior hours for those 65 and older.

Policymakers could also mandate timely reporting of demographic information, even within medical settings, to monitor equity. Public health administrators could also partner with organizations that work with vulnerable populations, such as Meals on Wheels, to deliver food and vaccines to individual homes.

Departments of public health also could work with organizations and trusted community leaders to produce culturally consistent multimedia information on vaccinations and other health topics. They could also arrange for billboards, freeway signs and posters at local restaurants.

In addition, health care professionals and organizations can help by teaching patients about government subsidies and internet programs for low-income individuals from internet service providers. They can also provide training on how to use the internet, which would be at least a good beginning for these vulnerable groups. ■

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Courtesy of The Conversation / INSP.ngo

"MAKE PEOPLE FEEL LIKE THEY MATTER"

Street Medic Couper Orona Cares for Unsheltered People

Anisha Tammana

"Being disabled and on the street is one of the hardest things anyone could deal with," says Couper Orona. A retired firefighter, Couper has for many years supported the unhoused community in San Francisco as a street medic. She was injured when working as a firefighter in the Sacramento area; living with disability after a surgery and then facing homelessness after a divorce forced her to navigate a system that ignores the most vulnerable.

For Couper, trying to access services in San Francisco proved difficult, especially due to her reduced mobility. Appointments to access services require long waiting times that are simply not feasible for many disabled people. One of Couper's friends has been prioritized for housing, Couper says, but still is not able to get off the streets because she cannot find wheelchair-accessible housing. Couper herself says that she has followed every rule when applying for housing, but to no use. "It's the way the system works," she says.

Those experiencing severe mental health issues can have difficulty making appointments. Many who don't have access to a phone cannot make the calls they need to make. A lack of health care, accessibility issues and the high likelihood that sweeps will result in the loss of medication make it almost impossible for a mentally ill or disabled person who is homeless to access services.

"They say people are 'service resistant' when the services are [actually] resistant to them," says Couper.

Couper volunteered at a womens' drop-in center for about three years, using her firefighter skills to help those around her with medical needs. These days, she is well known among San Francisco's unhoused community for her street medic work. Often, she is woken up in the middle of the night to tend to someone's medical emergency. Having saved lives countless times, she has built trust with the community.

For years now, the City has proudly swept tent encampments and proclaimed that the homelessness crisis has improved due to the reduced number of tents. Instead of being offered housing, people will be harassed by the City's police and public works departments. This harassment leads to fear, which only increases when an individual relies on certain items like canes to help them move around. To leave one's tent is to risk having Public Works steal and destroy all personal belongings, including the most necessary devices.

When asked about how San Francisco can better support homeless folks with disabilities, Couper expressed a need for respect. She says the City's leaders are not informed by the actual lived experience of people facing homelessness and make no attempt at performing outreach in the community themselves.

"No one chooses to be homeless, but the city chooses not to help people. London Breed wants them to be out of the way," she says.

Money that could be used to house people is instead spent on anti-homeless architecture to prevent people from getting too comfortable. Couper says she is embarrassed for the city. "London Breed is destroying people from the inside out."

When asked how able-bodied, housed folks can attempt to understand the intersection of homelessness and disability, Couper says, "I want people to care again. Stop and help someone when they need help. Don't ignore them. Seeing one person help gives others the courage to do so. Get off your phone and be a part of your environment. Make people feel like they matter." ■

THE RIGHT TO WASH:

Is San Francisco Capable of Ensuring this Foundational Human Right?

John Stiefel

Within the past month, San Francisco made an important stride toward providing water to more unhoused San Franciscans. Yet as the City makes improvements to water access, it has taken significant steps backward when it comes to access to sanitation and hygiene. Just this month, the City's plan to substantially reduce access to public toilets across San Francisco, targeting locations with high concentrations of unhoused San Franciscans, was unveiled.

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) are essential for every person on the planet. A person can only live about three days without access to drinking water. Adequate sanitation and hygiene, which also rely on access to water, are essential for mitigating illness, disease and plagues that have ravished humanity for millennia. Due to the central role that WASH plays in maintaining life and dignity, the United Nations (U.N.) Human Rights Council recognized access to safe drinking water and sanitation as a human right in 2010, requiring that "drinking water and water for personal and domestic usage as well as sanitation and hygiene facilities are available, accessible, safe, acceptable, and affordable for all without discrimination." Soon after, California became the first state in the United States to legislatively recognize the human right to water and sanitation in 2012. California recognizes that "every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes."

In 2015, the human right to water and sanitation was embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of global goals designed to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. The SDGs were established by the U.N. and agreed to by nearly 200 nations, including the United States. Goal #6 of the SDGs calls for the "availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all", including targets to "achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all" and "achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations." While many countries are striving to reach the goal of universal access to water and sanitation for all people on the planet, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that in 2017 2.2 billion people were without safely managed water services and 2 billion people still did not have basic sanitation facilities, such as toilets or latrines.

In countries with high WASH coverage like the United States, universal SDG WASH targets will only be achieved when they are met for all subgroups within the population. With contexts like the U.S. in mind, the WHO and UNICEF have highlighted "informal urban settlements" and "disadvantaged groups" as high-risk subgroups that are routinely left without adequate access to WASH services, thereby keeping these countries from achieving universal access to WASH. According to UNICEF and the WHO, "equitable access implies progressive reduction and elimination of inequalities between population subgroups". Within the U.S., unhoused Americans living in informal urban settlements are a high-risk subgroup that has too long been ignored.

San Francisco mirrors many urban contexts within the United States: It has a very high level of WASH services for the majority of its community members, but a very low level of WASH services for unhoused San Franciscans. In an effort to highlight this disparity, the Coalition on Homelessness launched the Water For All Campaign, which applied the international minimum standards for water access to unhoused San Franciscans. The coalition's Water For All report revealed that 60% of unhoused San Francisans fell below the lowest level standard of having access to 15 liters of water per person per day, while 74% of unhoused San Francisans fell below the standard of 50 liters of water per person per day set for urban, middle-income settings. Furthermore, 78% of unhoused San Franciscans do not meet the combined minimum international standards for travel time and distance to a safe water source, set by the WHO, UNICEF, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

When it comes to assessing a community's sanitation status, a lack of open defecation is a central indicator used by the international community. Additional indicators, including the ratio of people per toilet, as well as distance to a toilet, are used to assess a community's progress toward the goal of universal sanitation coverage. Similar to its disparity in access to water, San Francisco has a very high level of sanitation coverage for the majority of its community members, while having a very low level of sanitation coverage for unhoused San Franciscans. For residents of and visitors to San Francisco, as well as those paying attention to national and international media coverage highlighting San Francisco's infamous "Poop Maps", open defecation is a clear and present reality in San Francisco. Furthermore, San Francisco falls below international minimum standards for the number of people sharing a toilet, as well as for the distance to a toilet.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, San Francisco set out to increase WASH access among its subgroup of unhoused San Franciscans. The severe lack of public water access points was mitigated by connecting temporary water taps to fire hydrants. Furthermore, San Francisco increased the number of public toilets throughout the city, calculating the number of toilets needed by using the international standard of one toilet for every 50 unhoused people set by UNHCR as the sanitation standard during the first six months following an emergency. While this effort began moving San Francisco in the right direction, it fell short of achieving the international minimum standards for access to both water and sanitation, and failed to meet the international Sphere standard ensuring that all San Franciscans have access to a toilet within 50 meters from their dwelling. Furthermore, despite having proven its ability to achieve the target of one toilet for every 50 unhoused San Franciscans during the year of sheltering in place, San Francisco recently began removing public toilets throughout the city. According to a Public Toilets Policy Analysis Report, issued by San Francisco's Budget and Legislative Analyst on June 9, 2021, San Francisco has removed toilets from 17 city sites during the period of May 2020 to May 2021. Furthermore, the Mayor's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2021/2022 included a $2.4 million cut to the City's 24-hour "Pit Stop" public toilet program, reducing the number of 24-hour public toilets to zero. At the very point in time that San Francisco should be increasing its efforts to adhere to the international minimum standards of one toilet for every 20 people set by UNHCR during the transition phase following an emergency (e.g COVID-19), San Francisco has instead quietly cut funding for public toilets, thereby eroding the significant progress that has been made over the past year. This action will move the community further away from the goal of universal sanitation coverage and increase the inequality of WASH services between San Francisco's subgroups.

At the same time that San Francisco is losing ground on sanitation access, there is a glimmer of hope for unhoused San Franciscans when it comes to water access. The City recently approved the addition of three permanent drinking water stations within the Tenderloin, the district with the highest concentration of unhoused San Franciscans. This increase was an emergency recommendation of the Water For All Campaign, and the result of a lot of work among homeless advocates. It also highlights the willingness of San Francisco's Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC) to partner in the shared goal of providing water access and prioritizing the expansion of water access to unhoused San Franciscans. While the SFPUC has publicly acknowledged that access to water is a human right, achieving this goal is dependent on a commitment from the City to fund these critical WASH facilities.

San Francisco is one of the wealthiest cities on earth, yet it has not achieved universal WASH access. As long as San Francisco continues to ignore unhoused San Franciscans, it will never achieve universal WASH access. Barriers to achieving universal WASH access in San Francisco have less to do with financial resources and more to do with political will. According to a report by the United Nations, San Francisco's failure to achieve universal WASH access is more than passive negligence, but rather an active strategy to discourage unhoused San Franciscans from residing in the community. Leilani Farha, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Adequate Housing called this strategy a human rights violation in a 2018 report, which said that "attempting to discourage residents from remaining in informal settlements or encampments by denying access to water, sanitation and health services and other basic necessities, as has been witnessed by the Special Rapporteur in San Francisco and Oakland, California, United States of America, constitutes cruel and inhuman treatment and is a violation of multiple human rights, including the rights to life, housing, health and water and sanitation."

The United Nations, the United States, the State of California, and San Francisco's Public Utilities Commission all acknowledge that WASH is a human right. Yet as San Francisco agrees to expand access to water, its simultaneous removal of public toilets exposes a more underlying issue that has been stunting the community for decades: Its dismissal of unhoused San Franciscans. San Francisco must ensure WASH access for all of its residents, including those who are unhoused. ■

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