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MORE THAN JUST ORGANIZING: A Youth's Perspective on Working at the Coalition

Yessica Hernandez

My name is Yessica Hernandez. I'm 18 years old, a peer organizer at the Coalition on Homelessness and also a member of a homeless family living in an SRO. For me, homelessness is a problem that has multiple solutions, but most of the time people want to solve it by blaming the people who are homeless.

Every day the chance of becoming homeless increases. When people talk about homelessness they mostly feel shame and pity for "those people," but that's not needed because we know we are struggling but we are also strong enough to advocate for ourselves and for others.

I learned about poverty when I was younger, around 5 or 6. I didn't live in a mansion. I lived in a small house made of stones and my ceiling was made of plastic and aluminum, but I was happy. I have a loving family who always tried their best to support me and I'm grateful for that. I have lived here in San Francisco for eight years now. Most of the time I lived doubled up until I met the streets.

One day we faced a big issue which forced my mom and me to live on the streets. We have family and friends who gave us their support but we felt as if we were interrupting or bothering their space. So most of the time we would spend our days in Dolores Park just watching the hours pass by. We would see families playing together and enjoying a lot of time together; meanwhile, we were just wondering what was going to happen to us.

I graduated from middle school in 2018. That's when we were able to find a room in a hotel, the one I'm currently living in. That same year the company she was working for as a housekeeper closed, leaving us with no other resources. She had a few clients who gave us the opportunity to at least make enough money for half of the rent and for food. We ate things like noodles and eggs because it was what we could afford. I remember being tired of them but I couldn't complain.

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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.

STREET SHEET
STAFF

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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Every person in these
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anticipation to approach
a person you feel you
want "to Be" and you are
not to Be. That's the
emotion you will that
will strengthen your
anticipation to choose
in the right way of
communicating to the
opposite sex.

by Tammy Martin

OPEN THE SHELTER WAITLIST AND STOP THE SWEEPS!

Kelley Cutler

With Jeff Kositsky at the helm, the “Healthy Streets Operation Center” continues to traumatize homeless San Franciscans



A sweep in progress on July 7th, documented as part of the Sweeps Watch project. Photo by Couper Orona.

Bureaucrats lying is nothing new, but this is a really gross one. The former head of the SF Homeless Department was caught telling SFPD to give unhoused folks a 647e misdemeanor for a tent during a pandemic when resources are so lacking that they shut down the shelter waitlist. What I’m seeing on the streets is shocking. Not the amount of people, but rather how desperate people are for basic resources. For a safe place to sleep. Bureaucrats use the narrative that people are “service resistant” and that’s a lie. What services are they resisting?

The City continues to do tent counts. Not people, tents. I suggested they count all the people who are now having to sleep hard on the ground with no protection because the City stole their tent and survival gear and threw it in the crusher truck. They didn’t seem to appreciate my suggestion.

If there are so many resources available, then the Shelter Waitlist should be open. That won’t happen because the truth is that City staff have been saying in meetings that they are only getting like one shelter bed a day. That’s the reason the waitlist is still closed.

Finding a safe place to sleep can be even more challenging if you are a woman. Women are often out of luck because an available shelter bed might only be in a male dorm. The shelter-in-place (SIP) hotels are no longer admitting new tenants. COVID programs are starting to wind down. Yet there is still no public access to emergency shelter.

I talk to service providers on a daily basis who are extremely frustrated because they are having to turn people away daily who are hoping to get a shelter bed. Do you realize how traumatic this is for the person seeking help as well as for those who are trying to help them?

People are being told to go to 123 10th St to enter the “coordinated entry” system. But the reality is that the number of people in the system looking for housing is growing much faster than housing is becoming available. In a recent article for Shelterforce, Mary Kate Bacalao breaks it down for us in no uncertain terms: “As coordinated entry systems try to match growing numbers of unhoused people with limited amounts of housing, it’s more like The Hunger Games than Match.com.”

After reading this email it’s making more sense to me why Jeff Kositsky was such a huge fan of coordinated entry. He’s cool with sweeps and trying to hide “visible homelessness.” He needs to be fired. You can read more reasons in Street Sheet’s recent post on its Medium page.

Not only is it cruel for our system not to provide basic necessities to people forced to sleep on the street, it’s also cruel to put service providers in the situation of telling people in dire need of at LEAST a safe place to sleep that there is nothing they can do. Not even get on a waitlist. We need service providers to track how many people seeking shelter they are turning away because there are no shelter beds available. Without a waitlist we are not tracking how big the actual need for shelter has grown and bureaucrats are getting away with lying about people being “service resistant.”

I feel like I should point out that staying in a congregate shelter during a pandemic isn’t ideal. It’s not ideal even when we’re not in a pandemic. In fact it sucks. But it helps to understand the reality of homelessness right now. The BASIC access to a shelter bed isn’t there.

The lack of fair and equitable access

to shelter is not new. The “Navigation Center” was created as a new hybrid program where the exit was housing. Truth is it’s just a shelter. This rebranded shelter is “special” so there was neither public nor equitable access.

It’s a complaint driven system which shouldn’t be a surprise because Nav Centers were created to clear encampments aka “visible homelessness.” The guaranteed exit to housing soon changed to being time limited & many exited back to the streets because their time was up. So now we have no public or equitable access to Navigation Centers or the rest of the shelter system. How offensive to say people are “service resistant” to services they can’t access.

They put up signs threatening a misdemeanor for illegal lodging — the 647e I mentioned earlier — but the new signs were adjusted by taking out the info about calling 311 to get shelter. It’s no longer an option to get help.

They put up COVID signs saying to find a safer place to sleep, but provide ZERO alternatives on these stupid signs. That’s just insulting and kicking someone when they are down and when they don’t have public access to resources.

We need to be tracking placements out of SIP hotels. I don’t want to hear that someone is “service resistant.” They clearly haven’t been resisting the SIP hotels. I’m talking to lots of folks who were kicked out of SIP hotels and now no longer can even get on a shelter waitlist.

City staff have stated in meetings that they are only getting like one shelter bed a day. Since that’s the case HSOC needs to immediately stop these “resolutions” that are straight-up sweeps. You can see for yourself from their own communication that the focus is on tents and enforcement.

We need to show who we aren’t helping. Who we aren’t counting. Who we aren’t caring for. This is literally life and death. Don’t tell me we need to have a discussion about shelter access and how we need to reimagine shelters. While they are reimagining shelters, HSOC is doing sweeps.

The Homelessness and Public Health departments need to get their staff out of HSOC because they are being used as cover for sweeps. What can they accomplish if they are only getting like one shelter bed? And that’s not even appropriate for many people. I couldn’t stay in a shelter.

I have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a congregate shelter would not be an appropriate option for me. So what else does HSOC have to offer others with PTSD? The experience of homelessness causes compounding trauma. Sweeps are NOT trauma-informed. Quite the opposite.

So if the City has nothing to hide, they need to reopen the shelter waitlist and track the people they are turning away. If they have all these resources, then they don’t need HSOC. ■

From: Kositsky, Jeff (DEM)
To: Caltagirone, Gaetano (POL); Falvey, Timothy (POL); Pedrini, Christopher (POL); Yep, Paul (POL); Ng, Julian (POL); Maron, David (POL); Moran, Rachel (POL); Jones, Nicole (POL); Canning, Chris (POL); Rainsford, Nicholas (POL)
Cc: Fong, David (POL); Christ, Samuel (POL)
Subject: HSOC Update
Date: Thursday, March 4, 2021 4:47:47 PM
Attachments: SFPD DN 20-100.pdf
Importance: High

Captains:

I hope this finds you well. From time to time I will be reaching out to provide you some updates on HSOC’s work. I apologize for the long email but ask that you take a few moments to review. If you have any questions or concerns you can reach out to Commander Fong or Lt. Christ or you can contact me anytime at 415-866-0335. I am happy to help facilitate solutions to any encampment issues, large or small. I greatly appreciate SFPD and the great work that you all do.

Jeff Kositsky
HSOC Manager

Shelter and Services

HSOC has placed over 1500 people in shelters in 9 months. When we started about 90% of folks accepted assistance but now we are down to a 28% acceptance rate. In some cases, the individuals who are still in encampments struggle with behavioral health issues that make it challenging to accept assistance. We are also working with DPH to get more help to these folks and I advise that SFPD not engage with these individuals unless there is an emergency. However, other folks are simply refusing to leave the streets and in these cases, enforcement will be increasingly important. There is no shortage of shelter and clients who refuse to move can be cited for 647-e after they are offered and refuse shelter (see attached). Some folks believe we cannot site for 647-e during COVID-19 or that there is no shelter available; neither of these are true so please help us debunk those myths. Please note that if your officers need access to shelter from 9am-3pm, they can contact HSOC dispatch at 415-558-2723. More information on this can be found in the attached document.

2021 BUDGET VICTORIES

Our budget campaign to house San Franciscans and keep San Franciscans housed has come to fruition and due to hard work and organizing, many victories were achieved for unhoused San Franciscans. For one, the second installment of funding for Our City Our Home, Prop C which passed in November 2018 is about to hit the streets and it will result in dramatic numbers of people having the opportunity to exit homelessness. In addition, the Coalition's Housing Justice alongside HESPA campaigned for additional resources to augment Prop C and further fill unmet needs. Prop C generates over \$300 million a year for housing, shelter, mental health services and homeless prevention. In addition, in this budget cycle, HESPA garnered \$53 million for unhoused people over two years. In sum, we are talking about over 4,000 housing opportunities for homeless people, 1,000 shelter beds, prevention for thousands and behavioral health services for thousands of unhoused people as well.

HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS

- CART - Compassionate Alternative Response Team was funded at \$3 million to respond to 65,000 calls relating to homelessness that police are currently answering and to instead have an effective, safe, solutions based response to homelessness.
- 1 police academy, 15 vacant positions and \$3 million in police overtime were reduced from the budget.
- The Mayor initially tried to cut the four 24-hour bathrooms that existed prior to the pandemic out of the budget, but funding for these were replaced and another 24-hour bathroom, as well as 5 part-time bathrooms, were added

HOUSING

Our City Our Home

- Acquisitions: at least 825 units will be purchased with funding for operating costs for adults, families and youth
- Permanent Private Housing Market Subsidies (flex pool): 650 adults, families and youth will have rental assistance to

afford their own place

- Time limited housing subsidies: 265 adults and youth will have an opportunity to move into housing, with rental assistance for a period of time with the expectation they will be able to take over the rent on their own after a couple years.

HESPA

Subsidies: 172 subsidies for people with disabilities, seniors and families.

Bridge housing for 25 youth who have acute behavioral health challenges.

SHELTER

- Our City Our Home: over 1,000 new shelter beds were funded, including funding for RV parks with 100 spots, new 50 bed navigation center for justice involved people, hotel rooms for youth, pregnant people, families and domestic violence victims. This included funding to permanently operate the 120 trailers at the port, and to fund 190 tent sites through 2023.
- HESPA: some of the emergency needs were funded with OCOH as noted above; 100 nightly hotel vouchers for homeless youth, 26 nightly hotel vouchers for families, and (FINALLY!) a dignified drop-in shelter for 40 families.

MENTAL HEALTH

A number of mental health initiatives were funded in the budget, many of which were fought for by homeless community members and their allies. A large portion of the mental health investments were part of Mental Health SF, legislation passed in 2019, and funded by Our City Our Home, Prop C.

Our City Our Home

- 343 additional beds in a variety of intervention styles, from managed alcohol to traditional abstinence based programs, step down residential beds, board and care, Transitional Aged Youth (TAY) age 18-24 residential and co-op beds. In addition, an unnamed number of beds will be acquired.
- Street crisis capacity was dramatically expanded with the funding of seven Street Crisis Response Teams, follow up overdose teams, telehealth and street crisis expansions. Behavioral health in shelter and drop-ins was also funded.
- Care coordination for 1,500 clients and 865 intensive case management slots were funded.
- Funding was allocated for a mental health service center that would serve

as centralized intake had its hours expanded.

- Overdose prevention was funded to have clinicians follow up with care for those who survived an overdose to prevent future overdoses and improve health
- Behavioral health services for 2,600 supportive housing tenants was funded as well.
- Targeted services for TAY and transgender population was funded as well.
- Harm reduction therapy center was also funded to have ongoing care for individuals challenged by substance use.

HESPA

- Behavioral Health for 75 children, 500 youth and 800 adults in shelters and drop-ins was funded.

PREVENTION

Our City Our Home

- Eviction prevention legal services and back rent for 5,000 households
- Eviction prevention specifically for 2000 folks living in supportive housing.
- Prevention including shallow housing subsidies to keep folks in their homes for 416 veterans and 1000 justice involved individuals
- Problem solving for 1000 youth, 1000 families and 2000 adults which includes money for very short subsidies or other random services to help someone get back in housing if at all possible.
- Cameo house which was about to close and serves justice involved families is going to stay open with general fund dollars.
- Legal services for unhoused individuals to connect them with and protect public benefits.

HESPA

- Direct cash aid for homeless youth was funded with OCOH funds

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

- Our City Our Home: Workforce Earn and Learn to help folks make money and better be able to pay their rents and stay in housing for 2000 adults, 2000 families and 1000 youth.
- HESPA: Workforce asks for homeless adults, families and youth were not funded.

7 BUDGET LOSSES

In the final tally, we lost too much time of my thought campaigns. Here are some of them.

PROS

1. So many got Our City Our Home and Se... The Board of... discrepancies... London Breed... this year's budget... people than... Proposition C...

2. We got more... There are still... and we didn't... the Compass... is a great start... get anything... momentum...

3. Ten 24-hour... Mayor Breed... for public bail... we ended up... my opinion, ... a bargaining... coming out c...

4. Rent Relief... At the last m... and there w... help reduce t...

MORE A Youth's Perspective

continued from page 2...

Then COVID hit. It's like I questioned, "Are we being my mom's clients told me COVID ended but time passed. With much worry we know the streets again.

I was now a high schooler. the pressure – I considered job, but there was no luck. like opportunities were not to the First Friendship shelter point we couldn't afford pay rent for another month.

My grades were low. Real school anymore. And the son who asked her what I told her our issues, and she I called I was so nervous, met from the Coalition with our problems and promises in contact until he asked

BUDGET WINS AND LOSSES FOR SAN FRANCISCO

Carlos Wadkins

Two days of the City’s budget process, I spent time at City Hall to not do some type of wrap-up thoughts and what came out of this year’s budget. While the budget process is a bit over my head, here are some of the pros and cons for me looking back on

Good things from the asks made by Our City Our Service Providers!

Our City Our Service Providers was able to fix most of the issues between what we wanted and what Mayor London Breed had originally proposed, meaning that the budget has a lot more housing for a lot more people. Usual, thanks in large part to November 2018’s election.

Money for CART! All some concerns with how this played out, we didn’t get the full \$6 million we requested to fund the Compassionate Alternative Response Team, but this year Mayor and I honestly wasn’t confident that we’d get it at all. We’ve got a lot of work to do, but big things too.

24-hour Bathrooms and 10 additional Pit Stops. Mayor London Breed initially proposed a budget that cut funding for 24-hour bathrooms – a move I still find disgusting – but we ended up with expanded bathroom access after all. In November, Mayor Breed probably withheld the funding to have a referendum chip against Haney, but good on him for not taking it with more bathrooms than before!

Finally, after a minute, we finally got clarity on Prop I funds, which will indeed be rent relief! Hopefully this will help ease the eviction cliff I’ve been dreading for the last

year.

CONS

1. SFPD and the Sheriff came out basically unscathed. After a year of everyone and their mother talking big about police and sheriff budget cuts, what we ended up with is pretty pathetic. In retrospect, I think I was a bit naive about what we’d get done here. When I arrived at City Hall the day before the budget passed, there was a lot of hope in the air that some big cuts would happen, and after sitting through weeks of budget hearings with supervisors pressuring SFPD and the Sheriff’s department and identifying potential areas to make cuts to, I believed it. On that first night of add-backs, a majority of supervisors we spoke to said they were willing to go after the police budget, and Supervisor Preston’s office had put together a list of potential cuts to SFPD and the Sheriff’s Department that amounted to more than \$80 million. Supervisor Walton’s office was proposing a \$30 million list of cuts that seemed at the time to be more achievable. However, between supervisors getting cold feet and their willingness to make concessions to the mayor, a lot of the supervisors who had agreed to support efforts to defund turned against us real quick, and by the time the budget passed that “achievable” compromise felt like a pipe dream. After a night of bouncing from office to office, hearing false promises of what each supervisor was willing to cut, I learned that most of them aren’t nearly as supportive of defunding the police as they had pretended to be, and the cuts they did actually support were low enough priority to them that they didn’t mind bargaining them away to appease the mayor. Supervisors Dean Preston and Shamann Walton were pushing the hardest for defunding – at least, from what I saw – but it just wasn’t enough.

2. CART funding isn’t secure. Somewhere in the last day before the budget passed, the

line item for CART changed from \$0 to \$3 million, but the name of the item also changed to “Alternative Responses Unappropriated Reserve.” I see two main problems with this: First being that the money no longer specifically naming CART makes me very nervous that it will get spent on some other alternative response team like the Street Crisis or Street Wellness response teams or whatever else. Secondly, we’ve had \$2 million in reserve for this program before, and the mayor was somehow able to take it away. So while it’s great that there’s funding there, we still need to get the Board of Supervisors to take action to allocate the reserve specifically to CART, and then get the ball rolling and money spent without the mayor diverting the funding.

3. Inadequate funds for City College City College was basically left on the brink for another year. They asked for \$40 million and got \$1 million, which is apparently just enough to get them through the year and beg for funding again next June. It’s unfortunate that City College, an essential institution for low-income San Franciscans pursuing higher education, has to continually fight just to stay funded, especially given how small their budget is compared to the ever-increasing police budget. After the budget was passed, while walking through the halls of city hall, supervisor Ronen declared that she regretted not being able to secure funding for City College this year, but committed to doing so next year. A year is a long time for more organizing and advocacy to happen, but only time will tell if the leaders of this city will be convinced to fight, in actions not words, to save this essential institution.

There were a lot of good things funded this year, so we should celebrate a bit, but I can’t help but be irritated with some of the concessions made. I also want to note that this process is complicated and not nearly accessible or accountable enough to most of the people it affects. There’s so much going on behind closed doors that we are cut off, and what info we do get can be really hard to understand. I hope what I originally wrote as a Twitter thread helps simplify it a bit for those of y’all like me who aren’t experts on this stuff.

THE COALITION IS MORE THAN JUST ORGANIZING: A PERSPECTIVE ON WORKING AT THE COALITION

the misfortune never stopped. I was asking, “Why am I being punished for something?” Most of my mom that they should stop until the pandemic passed by and COVID was still here. I knew that we were definitely hitting

student. At some point – because of me leaving school to work a full-time job with that. I searched and it seemed nowhere to be found. We had to go to the shelter temporarily because at some point, until we found money to again stay in this hotel.

really low. I could not concentrate on anything. One day, my mom met this person – she was so worried about. My mom told me she gave my mom a number. When I called, but I felt better. The first person I met was Miguel Carrera. He listened to me and said that he would help us. We stayed with him and he helped me to join them in a program as

a leader in a program that was called the SRO report back, which was held I think in June 2020. The program involved asking families at SRO hotels to report on the conditions in their living spaces. The whole purpose of this was to create leadership among families in hotels and to keep the environment that families in hotels live in safe because of COVID.

When the program was done, Miguel asked me if I was interested in helping them translate the meetings at the Coalition on Homelessness. I was so happy that things finally started to get better. It was like seeing a rainbow after a storm. I started as a volunteer translator for Housing Justice meetings every Tuesday, and then I got myself more involved in meetings. I was part of the Prop. C listening sessions. I learned a lot, and one thing that I learned is that I should not give up because a lot of problems can happen throughout our life, but there is always a light that will be there for you.

I learned a lot organizing events and organizing families. While we do a lot of organizing work, the Coalition is more than just organizing. We connect with our people’s pain and fight for the best solution to end that pain. We create leaders that will one day speak up for themselves and others just like me. That’s why we don’t want pity. Because our resilience doesn’t need it. We aren’t animals — we are humans who can go above and beyond. Just because we are vulnerable, it

doesn’t mean we can’t strive for victory. The Coalition has a lot of wonderful people that are welcoming and willing to help out. For me, the Coalition is a second home. We make sure families know their rights, and they fight for them right now.

At the beginning of June, Mayor London Breed released her proposed budget. Many of the items that the Coalition on Homelessness has been fighting for — like funding for a drop-in family homeless shelter — were included. Yet many other important items, like funding for the Compassionate Alternative Response Team (CART) — a program to replace police response to homelessness with pairs of trained social workers and peer outreach workers who can actually address the social and behavioral health needs of unhoused people — were not. Additionally, there were a couple of bad surprises, like the mayor cutting all funding for 24-hour bathrooms.

But, after several weeks of protests, phone calls and public comments from dedicated organizers like me, the Board of Supervisors passed a budget that includes not only funding for CART, but also expanded access to public bathrooms. We showed that we have power when we come together as homeless people to demand dignity and investment. ■

THE HUNGER GAMES OF HOMELESS SERVICES

As coordinated entry systems try to match growing numbers of unhoused people with limited amounts of housing, it's more like The Hunger Games than Match.com.

Mary Kate Bacalao

This article was originally published in Shelterforce - <https://bit.ly/3i7lzeh>

In hundreds of communities across the country, coordinated entry systems are attempting to match growing numbers of unhoused people with limited amounts of housing and services. As Virginia Eubanks notes in her book, *Automating Inequality*, proponents of coordinated entry like to call it “the Match.com of homeless services.” In theory, coordinated entry uses algorithms and other digital tools to streamline the local response to homelessness, putting unhoused people in a database and pairing them up with housing and services calibrated to their needs.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) conceptualized coordinated entry in the early 2010s during a swell in homelessness after the foreclosure crisis and the last recession. With a typical carrot-and-stick approach to policymaking, HUD used a competitive funding program—the Continuum of Care program, which awards about \$2.5 billion annually in highly regulated homeless assistance dollars—to push more than 400 communities (called “continuums of care”) to develop and operate their own coordinated entry systems.

HUD's goal was a paradigm shift from a first-come, first-served model of homeless services—where the concern was that service providers distributed resources willy-nilly—to an efficiency approach, where data systems would distribute resources objectively, based on need. Proponents of coordinated entry used stereotypes to argue that the old model was inequitable: it privileged homeless people who “gamed the system” and service providers who “cherry-picked” the easy clients, over the supposed neutrality of algorithms.

This thinking makes it seem as if homeless response systems are simply disorganized, rather than deeply and dys-

functionally under-resourced. The logic goes: if we could simply line people up outside of a half-empty pantry according to whether they are starving or only very hungry, then we can better stretch the limits of the food we have. This logic may solve incidental problems, but it distracts us from grappling with the essential problem. As Gary Blasi, professor of law emeritus at the UCLA School of Law, points out, “Homelessness is not a systems engineering problem. It's a carpentry problem.”

Joe Wilson, executive director of Hospitality House in San Francisco, puts it bluntly: “Coordinated entry is a classic case of shrinking the problem to fit the solution.” Coordinated entry systems deliberately work backward from an inadequate supply of housing—using eligibility criteria, assessment tools, and prioritization standards—to justify rationing it out to a small minority. It is a system built to rationalize an unconscionable mismatch between housing options and unhoused people. As Eubanks writes, “Coordinated entry is a machine for producing rationalization.”

Here's how it works in San Francisco: Unhoused people presenting for services get entered into a centralized database, and trained staff apply several layers of assessments that weed them out of the running for housing. The first layer is

a “threshold score”: at or above the threshold, and the household is deemed “housing-referral status,” meaning they scored high enough to get a housing referral. Below the threshold, and the household is deemed “problem-solving status,” meaning they scored too low to get housing. Instead, they get cycled back for another round of problem-solving services, which didn't work the first time—mainly because people are homeless, and problem-solving is designed to solve problems other than homelessness.

It's important to note that the threshold score is not a stable number: it goes up or down depending on how much housing is available at a given time. If there's a lot of housing available, the threshold number goes down, and more people get housing referrals. If there's not a lot of housing available, the threshold number goes up, and only the most vulnerable people get referrals. And they get referred to whatever is available, not necessarily something suited for their needs (for high-need families, this is almost always a time-limited rental subsidy that may return the family to homelessness when the subsidy ends).

This is a far cry from the efficiency approach touted by proponents of coordinated entry, and it creates an infuriating sense that homelessness is a

This is how coordinated entry shrinks the problem—not in the sense of reducing it, but in the sense of putting tens of thousands of unhoused people through a digital process of elimination until the number of people prioritized for housing more or less matches the amount of housing that happens to be available. Ultimately, coordinated entry is not “the Match.com of homeless services.” It is more like the Hunger Games of housing access.

In any human services system, definitions and eligibility criteria play a role in shrinking the problem: they regulate who—and by extension, how many—can access the system's limited resources. In coordinated entry systems, prioritization goes much further: it provides the rationale for using digital tools to shrink the pool of people who are eligible for housing down to the number of people actually prioritized for and placed in housing.

As Eubanks describes in *Automating Inequality*, prioritization evolved from research by Dennis Culhane at the University of Pennsylvania, which differentiates between “crisis” and “chronic” homelessness. The idea—based on principles of medical triage—is that the crisis homeless may need the service equivalent of a Band-aid to get back on their feet, whereas the chronic homeless may need the service equivalent of surgery. Under the old first-come, first-served model of homeless services, the crisis homeless were sometimes getting services that should have been prioritized for the chronically homeless.

Coordinated entry endeavored to fix that with a prioritization tool called the VI-SPDAT, or Vulnerability Index—Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool. Co-authored in 2013 by OrgCode and Community Solutions, the VI-SPDAT was designed as a pre-assessment triage tool, a precursor to a holistic assessment by a trained case manager. But with the sustained push from HUD and the widespread adoption of coordinated entry, many communities took up the VI-SPDAT as the assessment tool itself, with the result that people's answers to deeply personal questions get reduced to a single numerical score that is often decisive about who will be prioritized for housing.

In a recent blog post, Iain De Jong, the head of OrgCode, clarified that the VI-SPDAT was not designed to make these decisions: “right in the name of the tool are the words ‘Decision Assistance Tool,’ not ‘Decision Making Tool.’” But in making the VI-SPDAT (or variants of it) the primary assessment tool, coordinated entry systems both automate and over-rely on prioritization to manage a zero-sum level of resources. And ultimately, prioritization only helps us reorganize an empty pantry. It does not push us to confront the fact that it's empty, and it does not hold us accountable for the

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Mario Navarro, Compass Family Services' office manager, greets families dropping in for diapers, food, and services in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Stacy Webb of Compass Family Services

an eligibility assessment—only people who meet the definition of homeless can be enrolled. The second layer is a service called “problem-solving”—an effort to divert people from the system they've just entered by solving some problem related to their homelessness (e.g., an unpaid utility bill). The third layer is a primary assessment—a standardized set of deeply personal questions (about medical and mental health problems, experiences of physical or sexual violence, and other sensitive topics) designed to probe how vulnerable each person is compared to the others.

The answers get fed into a ranking algorithm, which reduces each household's vulnerabilities to a single numerical score. Each score gets assessed against

relative concept: everyone enrolled in the system is homeless, but if they aren't “homeless enough,” they cannot get meaningful help.

San Francisco's coordinated entry system assessed 7,406 people in the 2020 fiscal year and weeded that down to 1,332 housing placements. In Los Angeles's longer-running system, they have assessed 32,728 people (older adults) and narrowed that down to 7,568 permanent housing exits. It's easy to see in both systems how the population shrinks from about five eligible people to one person ultimately placed in housing. This is the logic of lining up 10 hungry people outside an empty pantry and telling seven or eight of them that they're not hungry enough to qualify for food.

FIGHTING FOR LIMITED RESOURCES

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people who have not been prioritized.

Courtney Cronley, associate professor at the University of Tennessee, describes the VI-SPDAT as a “single, unvalidated measure of vulnerability” that is used broadly across the U.S. and Canada to determine whose needs are highest and who is most deserving. “The tool’s origins are murky,” she writes in a blog post: its co-authors developed it with demographic samples skewing older and male from a single geographic area. “Community-level studies,” she adds, “show consistent evidence of racial bias and unreliability in its use.” As De Jong readily concedes, “the tool was never designed using a racial or gender equity lens.”

Cronley’s research bears this out: She finds that women are twice as likely as men to report being homeless as a result of trauma, and that white women and Black women have similar odds of experiencing traumas that result in

homelessness. But the white women she researched scored consistently higher than Black women on the VI-SPDAT—because the tool measures vulnerability based on behaviors more typical of white women, such as visiting emergency rooms and reporting activities like survival sex to their case managers.

C4 Innovations published a similar racial equity analysis of assessment data from four coordinated entry systems. They found that white people scored statistically significantly higher on the VI-SPDAT than Black and Indigenous people of color. They also found that white people were prioritized for supportive housing at higher rates than BIPOC individuals. (This finding did not apply to families, but many communities do not prioritize families for supportive housing.) Like Cronley, the C4 researchers found that the VI-SPDAT was more likely to identify vulnerabilities based on behaviors more typical of white people.

The result is that coordinated entry systems—by virtue of who they are not prioritizing—may be perpetuating structural racism in ways that commu-

nities have called out for years, but that researchers are only just discovering. This is particularly egregious in homeless response systems, given the role of racism in causing homelessness and the stark racial disparities in who experiences homelessness. To name just one example: 50 percent of homeless families in America are Black, yet racial (and other) biases may be intersecting every day to deprioritize women of color, many of them single moms, for housing.

This is a predictable, maddening result of the way coordinated entry was designed to streamline dysfunctionally under-resourced homeless response systems. And it deserves not just research but immediate attention from public officials, system designers, practitioners, and others. We have designed coordinated entry systems to be fundamentally inequitable: every day they’re slicing off shavings from a pie that is too small (resource scarcity) instead of assessing how the pie needs to grow to eliminate disparities—for people of color, for LGBTQ people—and meaningfully improve life and health outcomes for all unhoused people (resource equity).

Where do we go from here? We must get rid of coordinated entry—or redesign it. An equitable redesign would highlight problems and gaps rather than rationalize the mismatch between housing options and unhoused people. It would show the full picture of people and families needing support, rather than using artificial categories—like “problem-solving status” in San Francisco—to minimize the appearance of need and de-prioritize people who should be eligible for more. An equitable redesign would center racial and gender equity, and it would use digital tools transparently, to promote inclusive decision making and help us hold coordinated entry accountable to the goal of ending homelessness.

We must stop reorganizing the empty pantry and focus on putting more food in it. We must bring people in instead of weeding them out, with an emphasis on equity for people of color and LGBTQ people. We must insist on human decision making in the field of human services, and we must stop relying on digital tools to shrink our problems instead of solving them. ■

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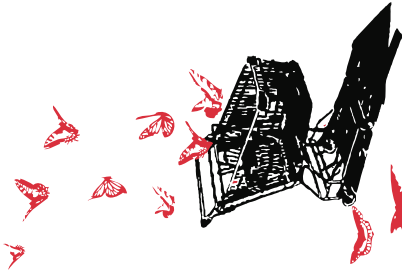
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SOCIAL JUSTICE CALENDAR

JULY
17

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Join us for an afternoon walking tour to
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ACCESS: Tickets are \$10 and available
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AUGUST
1

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Francisco. We are mainly hoping to work
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ACCESS: Classes will be held over Zoom
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be provided for the duration of the class as
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SEPT
9

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ACCESS: SOMArts is wheelchair accessible
and offers multiple gender neutral
bathrooms. Please contact development@cohsf.org
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STREET
SHEETS

JULY 15, 2021

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WE'RE BACK & IN-PERSON! ARTAUCTION21

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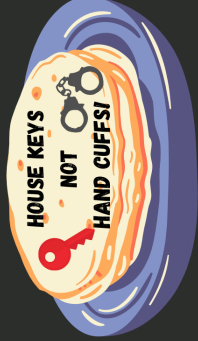
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