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Our City Our Home



A look back at the people power that passed **Prop C**

Family shelter, reimagined and reinvented

Haight **CAMP**, a respite for unhoused residents through the pandemic

Putting **Prop C** to work with critical drug treatment services

EVERYONE deserves mental health care

OUR CITY, OUR HOME ISSUE

Cover art is by @aledelacosta
aledelacosta.net

SAFE AND DIGNIFIED SHELTER FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES, FUNDED BY PROP C

LEAVING FIRST FRIENDSHIP

Tracey Mixon

In August of 2018, I became homeless with my daughter, who was 8 years old at the time. After staying a few weeks somewhere unsafe for us, I found myself at the emergency family shelter at the First Friendship Institutional Baptist Church near Alamo Square.

I was so unprepared for what I encountered at First Friendship: mats on the floor, no showers and no privacy. Having breakfast and dinner served to us was the highlight of this horrible living situation. But for me, the hardest part was having to be out of the shelter by 7 a.m., even on weekends. One Friday, my daughter was extremely sick and ended up leaving the shelter in the night by ambulance. When we arrived back later that night, we barely had enough time to sleep before we had to get back up to figure out where to go that day. That was hard. We had no place to be when my daughter needed rest to heal from being sick.

At the same time we were going through this, I applied for a peer organizer position here at the Coalition on Homelessness. I was hired during the big push for Proposition C. I had no campaign experience, but I was enthusiastic about Prop. C because I knew that if it passed, it would help homeless people. Experiencing homelessness and then becoming an advocate for homeless folks has been life-changing.

By the time Prop. C passed in 2018, I had long since transitioned from First Friendship to a private room in a family shelter, which was a vast improvement over First Friendship. We had our own room, which was extremely small with no private bathroom. But it provided us with privacy until something better came along. I didn't have to worry that if my daughter got sick we would have to get up and leave.

Every opportunity that I have had since then, I have advocated for families still stuck at the First Friendship shelter long after I had left.

I had an opportunity to speak with Supervisor Dean Preston shortly after he was elected about my experience in First Friendship. He then took the time to go to the shelter himself and see the conditions in which families are living.

Then, COVID-19 happened. Because of the risks posed by the pandemic, the congregate First Friendship shelter was shut down, and an opportunity arose for families to have a private space to eat, bathe and sleep. A place where if your child is sick, they are able to stay and rest. This is what the Oasis family shelter offers to homeless families. ■

THE OASIS

Dominique Griffin

Back in 2020, I was experiencing homelessness with my two young children, and trying to find a way out. After speaking with a few intake workers, CalWORKS staff and housing workers, my family was finally placed in the Oasis hotel through the Coordinated Entry system.

I arrived in the middle of November 2020, and once I got my key with excitement and nerves, I entered my room. To my surprise, it looked really nice. The room was huge! It might have had something to do with us being placed in the corner room, or maybe we had gotten lucky, but either way I was very blessed and pleased. My kids were just as in love with the place as I was: It was peace of mind, it was a hot shower every night, it was space. Shoot, it was our new home. The room had lots of closet space, more than enough room for all of our clothes, and the bathroom was spacious, with a working shower and tub (great for relaxing bubble baths)! There were lots of tables and chairs, and room for other items and a place to sit other than on the bed. The beds were very comfortable and there were only two, so I of course shared my bed with my 9-year-old daughter and my oldest son. My 14-year-old got the second bed alone!

The other great thing about living at the hotel was that we got meals three times a day. Breakfast might include a breakfast burrito, pancakes (to re-heat), oatmeal that you can make yourself, or cereal and milk. Lunch was hot

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food: chicken with veggies and bread, tacos or fried fish. Dinner sometimes included a roast with potatoes, hamburgers and fries, or pizza—some days, it was hit-or-miss, taste-wise, so I learned to get seasoning and hot sauce just in case! But some days it was so bad, I would have to pay out of pocket for some tasty fast food.

Another awesome bonus was that we went from getting \$40 per month for washing our clothes to the shelter providing laundry services. We would put our clothes in a huge bag, set it out by our door on a Monday morning, and our clothes would be back by Wednesday morning with all clothes not only washed, but folded—even socks and underwear!

Once the shelter found a good case worker, I was able to meet with him or her once a week to talk about all of my needs such as housing-, job- and school-related items to get me on track while staying at the shelter. I also was a part of the weekly meeting to discuss other needs, such as how my stay was at the shelter, if my neighbors were being cool or if there was anything wrong in my room. Since this was a shelter-in-place hotel, I was able to get room service, but only once a week on Fridays. A housekeeper would vacuum, take trash out, change the

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.

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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sheets, make our beds, and clean the bathroom. She always did an awesome job. She also always liked how clean I kept my room—this might also have something to do with my OCD!

Staff was always helpful; they did three check-ins per day—morning, noon and night—to make sure you were safe and alive and to make sure you didn't need anything. When you did, they were really great about helping.

Oasis was unlike any other shelter that I have been at. It was by far the best one, hands down. It felt like a right-place, right-time situation for me. It was not overbearing for me at all. I loved this place. I was one of few residents that really saw this opportunity as more than just a shelter, but instead as a way to really use what I had and to make something out of my time while I was there.

Since then I have been able to find stable housing in Pittsburg, CA. I really appreciate the second chance. This was really life-changing for me, and I know it will be for a lot of other families like mine. ■

PROP C FUNDS SAN FRANCISCO'S FIRST COMMUNITY-LED SANCTIONED ENCAMPMENT

Christin Evans and Mary Howe

In the midst of COVID-19, a community-led encampment in the Haight Ashbury offered an oasis for formerly homeless community members. Thanks to funding for emergency shelter made available by Proposition C, campers had a safe place to stay, daily meals and important services—and most importantly, a say in how the operation was run.

When the pandemic struck in March 2020, Mayor London Breed issued a shelter-in-place order. But that order didn't apply to those who had no shelter. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) told cities they shouldn't move encampments and that tents offered a small amount of protection from COVID spread. The city scrambled to open up shelter-in-place hotels, but it quickly became clear that they wouldn't open enough hotel rooms for all of San Francisco's unsheltered homeless folks. What about those who weren't offered a hotel room?

Those of us with the Homeless Youth Alliance (HYA) in the Haight Ashbury pondered whether that was truly what our community would want. So we developed a simple survey, giving people four options to rate from first to last choice: a "hotel room," a "legal campsite," "emergency shelter" and to "just keep doing what you're doing." HYA polled 50 participants. The idea to include legal campsites as an option was driven by curiosity, as we knew that other cities have employed them to varying degrees of success in recent years—even though the option was not even being discussed in San Francisco yet. The group was interested in how the option would poll, since a congregate camp would offer residents an opportunity to shelter alongside friends and community, rather than in isolation. Perhaps it isn't so surprising that when the survey results came back, 82% of the 50 homeless folks polled prioritized hotel rooms—but 88% of respondents ranked the legal campsite option as their 1st or 2nd choice.

HYA kept thinking about the importance of community, and what people thought about being split up if hotel rooms were indeed made available to them, so the following night we surveyed again to gain more insight. Just 26% of respondents wanted their own room, suggesting that folks' need for community outweighed the benefits of being indoors. HYA shared our findings on Twitter to advocate for the actual people who would be impacted. Other cities took notice and the survey

was replicated in several other states. As San Francisco started to offer hotel rooms to people who were deemed at elevated risk for COVID-19, the younger unhoused population in the Haight was largely not prioritized for access—and so an idea began to take shape.

HYA and community advocates created a plan to turn an empty parking lot at 730 Stanyan St into a community-led sanctioned encampment called Community Action Made 4 People (CAMP). CAMP had space for 40 tents, and when the City allowed HYA to move forward with the encampment in May 2020, there was already a waitlist of local folks who wanted spots. The attraction was clear: bathrooms, showers, access to necessary sanitation during a deadly pandemic, and no more daily visits from local police. The residents of CAMP would also receive three meals, supplied by the Salvation Army. The City encouraged CAMP residents to stay sheltered inside the fenced walls, and wanted to provide meals and bathrooms to discourage folks from leaving, to minimize the risk of spreading COVID—but people were ultimately free to come and go as they pleased at all hours of the day.

Campers welcomed the opportunity to shelter somewhere safer. "I am grateful for this place," said Mister E, 37. "It feels like a cocoon where I'm getting some healing and nurturing. As you allow us to be more humanized, we respond to the opportunity. I am a veteran, and when I'm out on the street I can't sleep because every little sound and potential danger keeps me from relaxing. Being able to lay down and sleep and get rest is really healing for me."

CAMP was allowed to operate for a full year, until June 2021, and it always had a waitlist. CAMP wound down operations after COVID vaccinations became available, and because the parking lot it was on was slated for construction of affordable housing. HYA also wanted to ensure residents had real exits (not back to the street) so we made the decision to close the site and advocate for every single resident to have the most successful placement possible.

CAMP was more than an emergency solution and a pandemic response. It was a successful model for future sanctioned encampments in San Francisco. It was a beautiful and transformative project for the community and home to its residents.

In total, 84 people passed through

CAMP. More than half moved into stable housing exits or other emergency shelters, including hotel rooms, navigation centers and safe sleep sites across the city. Another quarter chose Homeward Bound or Problem Solving funds to leave town.

There were several key ingredients to CAMP's success. First and foremost, CAMP was operated by a service provider with trusted relationships and experience serving homeless folks in the Haight Ashbury neighborhood. Said one camper in their exit interview: "I can't say enough about how different HYA is from other agencies. That memory I had of coming here and having no judgment is something that is what this agency is about. Letting us, the clients, participate in a different way than a lot of other agencies makes us feel involved and that we have a voice in what happens to this organization. We feel like this is our safe place to be, and we all respect each other here. Respect is not something you get a lot on the street."

Second, the services offered to CAMP residents provided the necessary support and infrastructure for people to work on personal goals. Some campers were connected to job training programs, and others to therapy and drug treatment services. All campers had a space to themselves where they could get a good night's sleep, take a shower, get new clothes, eat healthy meals, and come and go without worry that their belongings would be taken.

Third, the surrounding community of housed neighbors embraced CAMP, making personal connections and supporting campers by procuring helpful gear like canopies to protect them from sun and rain. Neighbors cooked monthly "feasts," which they shared with campers in an outdoor and socially distanced setting, getting to know one another.

Fourth, HYA said it was critical for CAMP to retain intake control and ensure a cohesive community. Where other campsites around the city accepted people caught up in City sweeps, HYA ensured that the community grew organically, with campers having a role in setting CAMP rules and guidelines.

The Haight Ashbury lacks a navigation center of its own, in spite of decades of people sleeping on its sidewalks and in doorways. CAMP showed the community that services and a safe place to sleep were desperately needed

and desired. While CAMP had to shutter to make room for a new eight-story building of affordable housing, the new building is scheduled to have approximately 40 rooms for formerly homeless youth as well as a drop-in space for Haight Ashbury homeless youth, all of which will be made possible because of Proposition C. CAMP is surely a preview for what's to come at that site in a few years' time. ■

More quotes from HYA CAMP residents:

"It has been a breath of fresh air for me to be here. A respite. I have started school and finally have an opportunity to get on my feet because I'm not sleep deprived and I feel safe."
— Jasmine, 33, resident

"I love having the ability to use the bathrooms and the showers and having a safe setting so I can go take care of things outside of here like food stamps, legal issues, and other things that need to get taken care of. The staff helps us and reminds us of appointments and organizing all of the things I need to do. If I didn't have help I wouldn't be able to accomplish a lot of the things I need to get done. It makes the biggest difference. If I was still out on the street I wouldn't have gotten any of that done."
— Lou, 35, resident

From the first report "Watching how each resident personalizes their space is one of our favorite parts of CAMP. The amount of care and attention they put into a 10-foot space is amazing. Upon moving in, as people get settled and begin to decompress from the stress and trauma of the street, we see how swift people's demeanor and spirit change--proving the power and health benefits of personal space, safety and hygiene facilities. These are human rights, not just chances we take in response to a pandemic."
—Mary Howe

"We set out to create a refuge for people experiencing homelessness that embodied HYA's ethics and practices and that was deeply rooted in Harm Reduction and social justice principles. We started from the place of asking and listening to what people needed and wanted, honoring their autonomy and their expertise in their own lives."
—Eliza Wheeler CAMP's Project Director

WE KEPT OUR EYES TRAINED ON HOME

Jennifer Friedenbach

In 2018, the Coalition on Homelessness worked hard to craft and then pass Proposition C, “Our City Our Home,” to make significant systemic changes to address homelessness. The measure, which taxes the most profitable San Francisco corporations with annual incomes over \$50 million an average of one-half percent, garners around \$300 million for homelessness every year. At least half of the funding must go to housing, and at least a quarter must go to mental health and substance use treatment. At most, 10% can go to shelter, and at most 15% to prevent homelessness. The measure will help stop an intergenerational cycle of severe poverty and homelessness and ensure San Franciscans have the opportunity to flourish. It works to prevent people from entering homelessness in the first place, and when homelessness is unpreventable, the measure works to ensure it’s brief. We heavily invested in the housing piece because we believe it is impossible to address unemployment, health and behavioral issues without stable housing.

With a tremendous people-powered effort we passed this legislation, moving us toward a San Francisco in which every person has safe and permanent housing. But the story of Prop. C started long before that election and reflects years of collective work to finally get here.

The history of Proposition C goes back decades and spans years of struggle, failure, victories, learning, building, crying until there were no tears left to shed. But along the way, we never let ourselves

suffering, of the real-life results of unfettered capitalism and collective neglect through inaction. Their early deaths are a quiet reminder of our failure as a progressive city. Homeless people have been used as political scapegoats and wedges for the past three decades. In just about every mayoral campaign since Dianne Feinstein’s, they have been vilified. Voter initiatives called for their jailing for asking for alms, or for sitting or resting during daytime hours, while another called for ripping away their tents in exchange for an offer of one night in shelter. In each of these campaigns, homeless people were treated like pawns in a chess game that sought more power for downtown interests. Other voter initiatives were designed to fail, like “Care Not Cash” or the sales tax initiative that forced the poorest people to pay the most, which were really meant to bring name recognition to an up-and-coming politician such as Gavin Newsom or Mark Farrell rather than truly address the crisis. Year after year, more and more people entered homelessness, while their health deteriorated rapidly, and decades were shaved off their lives. These backwards-pushing forces meant it took decades of work, together with key partners in San Francisco, to create the conditions for lasting change that Proposition C represents. It took decades of leadership work, developing strong alliances with other community organizations and labor unions, protesting, developing policy, engaging in tireless media work and pushing for legal action. We pushed back effectively against the dehumanization of a population and their use as political wedges by hateful forces, while we continued to put out messages of hope and possibility.

About a decade ago, the Occupy movement set up tents in public squares, and many homeless people joined the struggle. But long after housed movement members took down their tents, homeless people kept theirs up. They offered a modicum of privacy and dignity, and also lent a visibility to the homeless crisis that did not exist previously. Mass displacement meant everyday San Franciscans were relating to homeless people for the first time in decades. They saw themselves—precarious and threatened—in the faces of homeless people.

A court ruling on a marijuana dispensary case opened up the opportunity to pass Prop. C with a simple majority of voters, rather than two-thirds. While we knew we would be sued if we didn’t reach two-thirds, it was still worth trying, because the likelihood of success in the courtroom was high. We also needed to make sure there were not a lot of competing measures on the ballot—this had hurt us in the past. We were able to persuade our allies into getting behind our measure instead of offering competing revenue measures. Lastly, a Trump tax giveaway dropped the federal corporate taxes by 40 percent and gave us the opportunity to capture that revenue and use it to bring thousands of San Franciscans inside homes. This was our moment. Learning from the past losses of politically driven measures, we crafted a measure that was big and bold, with an income source that draws only from those who could truly afford to pay.

Meanwhile, the call for a radical change was growing.

Over the course of 10 months, we gathered data, solicited input, held presentations, conducted a poll and hired lawyers to draft a measure. We went through dozens of drafts, soliciting and including input from hundreds of policymakers, elected officials, homeless people, front-line service providers, business leaders, City department heads and every major mayoral candidate. We made sure we had a strong implementation plan and knew exactly what could be achieved and how. We

had inclusive meetings that all stakeholders were invited to attend and honed the language until we were collectively satisfied with the results. We had jumped our first hurdle.

We had some basic requirements: The initiative needed to be big and take a massive bite out of homelessness. We wanted to not just address the needs of those who were already homeless, we also wanted to ensure we kept precariously housed San Franciscans in their homes. We wanted children and young people to have

the housing they need to prevent a homelessness. After careful consideration measure “Our City, Our Home,” cohousing activist and director at the The name was chosen to embrace inclusiveness, as well as the principle of human right.



In May 2018, we invited three amazing people to the campaign: Jacquelynne Evans, a community organizer and mother; Christin Evans, a small business owner and Haight Merchants Association member; and DISH, a supportive housing organization. When the measure was approved we were nervous and recognized that 9,000 signatures was a huge undertaking. At the beginning of July we recruited thousands of gatherers. It turned out that we did not need as many as we gathered a whopping (and potentially overwhelming) number of signatures, which catapulted us over the ballot!

We were riding high on a wave of momentum for a few weeks of the campaign. Before we knew it, we had to expand the campaign. Organizations that had been at odds all came on board, including the Community Housing Organization, the B. Toklas Democratic Clubs, and the various Neighborhoods. We gathered balloons and a host of elected officials. We raised \$450,000 from a variety of donors, including tech workers, unions, community organizations, and started a strong field campaign with thousands of calls. We had successful Chinese American and Latino teams and our campaigns were winning. The campaign spoke to the need for equity that San Franciscans are crying out for. Endorsements of Reps. Nancy Pelosi and Dianne Feinstein. Support just kept coming.

One month before the vote, Mayor London Breed announced her support for the measure, alongside State Assemblymember David Chiu. Just before the announcement, the Our City, Our Home coalition and CEO Marc Benioff crossed paths in a public square. A Twitter exchange between the bill author and Christin Evans. After heated discussion, Benioff came out in favor of Prop. C.

The final month before the election was a whirlwind. On board and sparring with other organizations, we raised Prop. C, international attention turned to the measure. Of dollars from Benioff, we hired 200 people to make phone calls to over 93,000 voters, and



get lost. We kept our eyes trained on home, and we won a landslide victory.

Social change can only be realized when the right conditions are in place: conditions that grow over time through the hard work of community organizing. Homelessness is where various forms of oppression meet: Racism, homophobia, ableism and sexism are all drivers of the homeless crisis. Homeless people are the living reflection of severe economic injustice. Their faces are maps of

whole new generation of
eration, we decided to name the
ned by Krea Gomez, a longtime
e Young Women’s Freedom Center.
San Francisco’s civic pride and
ple of ensuring housing as a



zing women to be our proponents:
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people power moving into the last
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including community activists,
organizations and more. We
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: deep, ongoing struggle for
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si and Jackie Speier, then got Sen.
t rolling in.

London Breed came out
ite Sen. Scott Wiener and
u. A day after the Mayor’s
Home campaign and Salesforce
, of all places, a fateful late-night
ionaire and Booksmith owner,
ssions with Evans, Benioff came

was a whirlwind. With Benioff
CEOs on Twitter in defense of
ned to our race. With millions
o homeless people to make
nd launched cable, broadcast and

digital advertising. We did innovative things, like skywriting and
billboards.
“I worked on the Prop. C campaign because I thought it would be
beneficial for homeless people—I was homeless for six years and
thought it would be a good use of my time,” said Anubis Daughtery,
a formerly homeless person who volunteered on the campaign.
“Prop. C was different because it came from the Coalition on

Homelessness. It didn’t come from
a politician. Historically, when it
comes to homelessness and homeless
issues, politicians have adversely
affected said issues, and Prop. C was
better because it came from people
who knew better, it came from what
homeless people wanted.”
With the additional resources, we
were able to overcome the cynicism
that so many San Franciscans feel,
a cynicism fueled by decades of
miseducation and false promises.
On November 6, 2018 Proposition
C – Our City Our Home – was passed
with 62% of voter support. In the
end, we won 80% of the precincts
and Proposition C passed in every
supervisory district in the city!
However, our victory was short-lived.
We were sued. The Howard Jarvis
Taxpayers Association, along with
the California Business Roundtable

and California Properties Business Association, filed suit over Prop.
C, arguing that the measure needed a two-thirds majority. However,
City Attorney Dennis Herrera argued against this, citing California
Cannabis Coalition v. City of Upland, which details that if a measure
for new taxes is put on by the public citizens and not the City
government, said measure only needs a simple majority, or 50% plus
one vote.

While we were fighting in the courts, we dedicated ourselves to
contacting folks who have experienced homelessness who could
be on an oversight body that would survey homeless people on
how best to use these funds, and to preparing the projects for when
funding would be released. We engaged in an in-depth study,
working with four different universities and hiring unhoused
peer researchers to conduct almost 600 interviews with unhoused
community members on their experiences within the homeless
response system and what needed to change. The results suggested
a deeply flawed system that sent folks in and out of housing,
treatment, and shelter, but ultimately back on the streets in a cruel
churn. We entitled the report “Stop the Revolving Door.”

While Prop C didn’t get two-thirds of the vote, we built the political
will necessary to bring us to the finish line. The lawsuit only delayed
the release of the funds. We won in October 2020, and the funds
were finally available. While the City Attorney Herrera went to
bat for Prop C in court, it was our legal team that won the lawsuit.
When making our case at every level
of the courts, our side cited the
amicus briefs of our allies. The City
Attorney never used our arguments,
but in the end that didn’t matter.
Prop. C was not only a victory for
homeless people, it was a victory for
democracy in California. Because of
us, special taxes — those taxes that
fund specific things — only require
a simple majority to pass.

We now face the work of making
sure our vision is implemented
in a way that is centered on the
experiences and needs of homeless
people, and is data-driven to ensure
best results. Once the court case was
won, the funds were available and
had accumulated over two years.
The Our City, Our Home oversight
body was seated, and we went

through a process of gathering even more input from over 800
unhoused people and service providers on how best to spend the
funds, examining best practices and data. In the first year after the
release of the funds there have been two major releases of funds at
the Board of Supervisors. Cumulatively they will achieve:

- Over 1,000 adults, families and youth will have rental assistance to afford their own housing.
- At least 1,187 units will be purchased with funding for operating costs for adults, families and youth
- There will be 343 additional behavioral health beds, plus over \$100 million for acquiring facilities to add an undetermined number of treatment beds.
- Eviction prevention legal services and back rent will be available for 7,000 households
- 1,000 new shelter beds will be made available in a variety of settings including organized tent villages, trailers, RV parks, hotel rooms and permanent dignified private room emergency shelter for families.

And that’s just the start. In the coming years, the system will be transformed with budding capacity to turn around the homeless crisis, especially if leveraged with state and federal investment. For decades we have struggled through a system built on the idea that if you make homelessness undignified and miserable for people, they will simply. Prop C moves us toward a new system that keeps people in their homes and quickly moves people out of homelessness before deep harm sets in. This will take decades to build. The harm done to unhoused people who have been homeless for decades will not be easy to turn around. Building out the system, acquiring buildings, training and hiring staff will take time. But once the system is up and running, we can stop the inflow into homelessness, and have enough turnaround in our system so people don’t have to wait years for housing.

There is a lot to learn from this campaign, and one of the biggest lessons is that in order to succeed we must inspire the hearts and imaginations of our allies. Together we can end the plague of apathy. This was an uncompromising measure that directly corrected some of the severe inequities that concern so many of us who love this city. The measure taxes only the wealthiest corporations and houses the very poorest people. There is a simple beauty in that. A beauty that inspired thousands of San Franciscans to support this campaign.

We can never take back the harm that has been done to the thousands of unhoused San Franciscans by an affluent society that allows its poorest people to suffer so severely. But we can make sure that the next generation has a safe and decent place to call home. Someday we’ll look back from a future in which everyone has a home and shake our heads in wonder at how we ever let things get so bad. Our heartfelt thanks to San Francisco and all those wonderful warriors who poured their sweat and tears into lifting us towards justice. Hasta la Victoria! ■



COME AS YOU ARE:

Mental Health Care and Drug Treatment, Prop C Style

Helen Redmond

Make a left from Harrison onto Merlin Street in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood and you enter another world. Past two low-slung, industrial buildings and under a noisy freeway is a scene that has come to define San Francisco: Tents line the sidewalks, and a collection of household items tumble out onto the street. There are cardboard boxes, coolers, overflowing garbage bags, containers of food, grills, chairs, and a pile of bicycles. A huge clock is attached to a chain-link fence and on top of it sits a red toy truck. A makeshift clothesline dries shirts and pants in the dusty air. An elderly man sits in a wheelchair. Parked on the street is a black pick-up truck and several large, rusting RVs. Merlin Street is a mini homeless community just one block from luxury condos that cost millions. The streets of San Francisco tell a brutal story of wealth, poverty, and the pursuit of profit over the housing needs of human beings.

Thanks to the advocacy of the Coalition on Homelessness which worked to pass Proposition C, a low-threshold drop-in harm reduction mental health center operated by the Harm Reduction Therapy Center (HRTC) will soon open to serve the homeless folks living on Merlin. While HRTC does not have Prop C funding yet, it has managed to secure a site in SOMA. While there will be a competitive process to decide who gets the funding, the hope that Prop C funding will be secured provided the final impetus to open the site, which is a dream come true for HRTC's founders, Jeannie Little and Patt Denning. People in need of high quality therapy will be able to walk in and feel welcome.

HRTC's harm reduction services coordinator, James Pollet, provided a tour of the cinder block building. From the outside, it looked like just another abandoned warehouse with a garage door next to an entrance with a locked iron gate. But as I stepped inside, I saw a huge, modern space. I was immediately struck by the amount of light bouncing off the white walls from several skylights. Part café arthouse hangout, part living room, and part "maybe get some help because it looks like there are some therapy offices here" vibe, Merlin, as the staff like to call it, was welcoming and intriguing. Pollet, who is also an architect, used his skills to create a beautiful and inviting space, and installed acoustic panels that hang from the ceiling to dampen sound and create intimacy. In the main living room area large, comfortable couches and chairs rest on Persian rugs surrounded by lamps that spill butter-colored light. Around the perimeter are private therapy offices,

meeting rooms, a kitchen, computer workstations, and an accessible bathroom. A second-floor mezzanine holds administration and harm reduction supply assembly spaces. Art is everywhere, murals are dreamed-of, and a timeline depicting the history of the harm reduction movement, HRTC, and its staff occupies an entire wall. Although the space is still under construction, it projects a sense of dignity, respect, freedom, and comfort.

"Our job is to let people know that they are loved and that they matter."
Corey Drew, HRTC therapist.

"Merlin is the physical embodiment of HRTC's vision to provide mental health services to all people who suffer emotionally, physically, and who are stigmatized and excluded because they use drugs," Pollett said and he showed off the space.

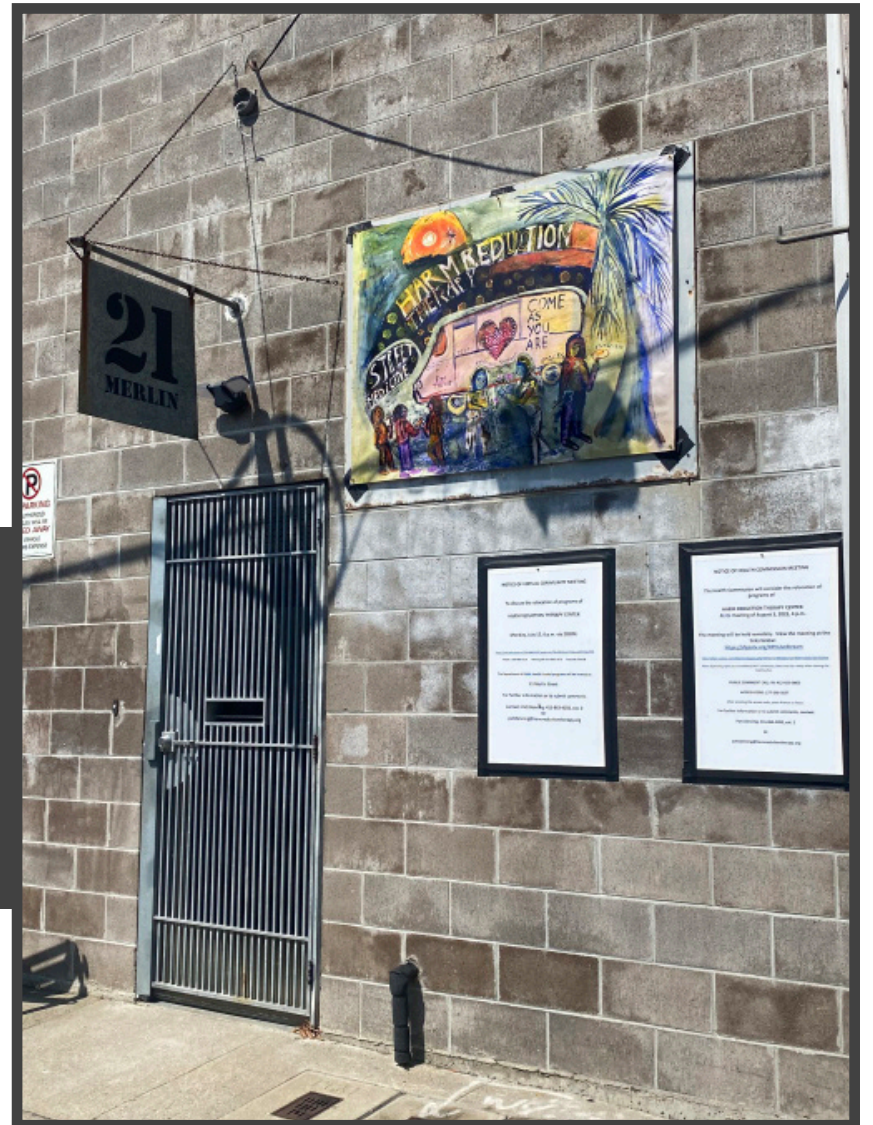
A NEW KIND OF MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

People might believe that therapy is a luxury, that other needs should be met first for people who are homeless and marginalized. That is just wrong. Harm reduction therapy was created for people who have multiple issues, overwhelming life demands, and a strong desire to make their own informed decisions about how to cope with stress and live their lives. HRTC brings together a sophisticated understanding of mental health, total acceptance of drugs and drug use as a way of living and coping, harm reduction, case management, and other necessities – food, harm reduction supplies, massage (from the non-profit Care Through Touch Institute), and love – in a therapy package that can happen sitting on a sidewalk chatting or in a private office having your typical 50-minute session. You can have therapy and work all the other things you need and be actively using drugs, all at the same time.

"Our job is to let people know that they are loved and that they matter."
Corey Drew, HRTC therapist.

This is the heartbeat of harm reduction therapy, to do ANYthing and EVERYthing to make sure people know they are loved and valued. From there all else flows.

Readers of Street Sheet might recognize HRTC as the group behind a couple of therapy vans, weekly pop-up drop-in centers, and a mobile kitchen in 5 SF neighborhoods in



2019. While they had to downsize their pop-ups when COVID hit, they're still there – at Victoria Manolo Draves Park off Folsom, at 15th and Mission, at Armstrong in the Bayview, and walking the TL with Street Medicine – just smaller. Some staff went to work in Shelter in Place hotels and Safe Camps and are still there, too. Readers might also know them as the therapists at Hospitality House and at Homeless Youth Alliance's Needle Exchange. Every week HRTC's therapists can be found in 20 different locations.

COMING IN 2022

Prop C has provided the inspiration—and hopefully soon the funding—for HRTC to open its own drop-in mental health center. Once funding is secured, HRTC will open that garage door to everyone who wants harm reduction therapy. When that happens you will find our harm reduction services around the city as well as "at home" at Merlin.

So why is HRTC's mental health treatment different? We're different because you don't have to apply to benefit from our programs. No intakes, no waiting lists, no diagnosis necessary. We welcome people who use drugs with open arms and no conditions at all. You decide what you need, you decide how much and for how long, you tell us what mental health care means for you.

The HRTC mantra is:

Come as you are
Take what you need
Leave when you want

HRTC on Merlin Street is taking a stand for the right to unconditional, truly client-serving, and time-unlimited mental health care for people who have long been denied these services. ■



EVICTIION DEFENSE COLLABORATIVE USES PROP C MONEY TO KEEP TENANTS IN THEIR HOMES

The Eviction Defense Collaborative (EDC) has been putting Prop C dollars to work keeping people in their homes as more and more households are swept up in the wave of evictions that has followed the roll-back of the moratorium imposed at the beginning of COVID. The money is being used to supplement federal and state money that is helping tenants catch up on rental debt, and is currently being disbursed to cover three months of back rent and three months of future rent for tenants impacted by the pandemic.

For many years EDC has provided rental assistance to very low-income tenants facing evictions. This is a critical part of preventing homelessness, keeping long-term tenants in their homes and preserving affordable housing in San Francisco. The program assists tenants who owe back rent, and tenants who have been served with eviction lawsuits who need assistance to preserve their housing.

With Prop C funding EDC has been able to expand its rental assistance program, offering more money to tenants to cover unpaid rent and covering a longer period of unpaid rent. Unlike the state and federal rental assistance programs launched during the pandemic, EDC funds can pay back rent that tenants owed before the beginning of the pandemic, which is important for tenants who were already behind in rent. Importantly, funds can also be paid directly to tenants whose landlords refuse to participate in relief programs.

“At its core, the big thing we’re doing is that as the federal and state programs begin shutting down we’re still providing rental assistance directly to tenants,” said Laura Hernandez, Interim RADCo Program Director at EDC. “This helps the community see that we care, and it gives folks who are struggling a few months to catch up.”

San Francisco tenants can seek rental support from EDC’s program to prevent eviction in the immediate and buy time as they apply for state funding for rental relief. After the state funding runs out tenants can return to the EDC program for further assistance.

Readers interested in seeking support with rent can call the intake line for RADCo—(415)470-5211— on Monday-Wednesday and Friday from 9am to noon, or email EDCRADCo@evictiondefense.org. ■

INNOVATIVE AND MUCH NEEDED NEW PROGRAM LAUNCHING IN SOMA!

SoMa RISE is an innovative program that will provide low barrier services to people who use drugs in and around the SoMa and Tenderloin areas, with a particular focus on individuals who are marginally housed or are experiencing homelessness, starting this winter. The SoMa RISE Center at 1076 Howard St. will welcome people under the influence of drugs into a safe, indoor setting. We will provide a space for people in crisis to stabilize and get connected to care, services, and housing. HealthRIGHT 360, in partnership with Mayor London Breed and the San Francisco Department of Public Health, will be operating SoMa RISE in a manner that treats all participants with compassion, dignity and respect.

SoMa RISE (Recover, Initiate, Support and Engage) was the top recommendation of the Methamphetamine Task Force report two years ago and is in alignment with Mental Health SF. Mental Health SF is a comprehensive plan passed by the SF Board of Supervisors to address mental health and substance use disorder challenges throughout the city. The plan focuses on serving unhoused people with serious mental illness and/or substance use disorder and prioritizes getting people off the streets and into care. Opening a drug crisis response center was the number one recommendation of San Francisco’s 2019 Methamphetamine Task Force and SoMa RISE will be part of San Francisco’s system of the care continuum.

This program will be staffed with EMTs, a wellness team including health workers, site support staff, and safety monitors. The program will operate a 24-hour, welcoming, compassionate, trauma-informed, culturally attuned, space that is responsive to participants’ individual needs and focuses on the principles of harm reduction. SoMa RISE will be run in a way that ensures that staff creates a human connection with clients and that connection is without judgement. By acting in this manner, it allows clients to participate incrementally in their own

recovery at a level they find comfortable. All staff from janitorial workers to EMT’s undergo rigorous training before they start working at SoMa RISE in order to meet these goals. This includes training on radical hospitality, how to practice client centered care, information on trauma informed systems, harm reduction, and anti-stigmatizing language. Alongside providing a safe, comfortable space for clients, our emphasis is on supporting people at increased risk of substance use-related high-risk behaviors and trauma, homelessness, and death due to overdose. Priority will be given to clients’ safety, and all staff will be trained in OD prevention, recognition, response and Narcan administration.

SoMa RISE will also offer options such as: hot showers, clean bathrooms, beds, laundry, snacks and hydrating drinks, Counselors to support clients with service needs, and transportation to other organizations and service providers.

This sobering center will be open for Self-Referral/Walk-ins if we have sufficient capacity, and does not require sobriety for entry. Referrals will also be made from SCRT, EMS6, and SF HOT. Program participants must be 18 and over adults who are under the influence of substances and need short-term care and support.

We want the community to Understand what we can and cannot do at SoMa RISE. SoMa RISE is not a shelter, medical facility, withdrawal management program, psychiatric facility, or a substance use treatment program. SoMa RISE is also not a Safe Consumption Site for people who use drugs. SoMa RISE is a low barrier entry point to the system of care, able to provide short term support, and offer basic services. SoMa RISE serves as a bridge, providing linkages to a host of other services that our participants would like to be connected to. More information about this program can be found at <https://sf.gov/soma-rise-center>. ■

ANNUAL VIGIL

Join us—people of all faiths, or no faith—to remember our neighbors who have died this year while living on the streets and on the margins of San Francisco.

Watch the Vigil live online on 12/16 starting at 5:30 PM (PST) at:
facebook.com/sanfranciscofaithministry/live/

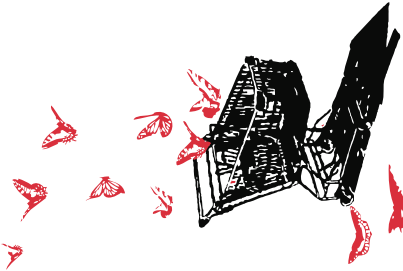
Join the Vigil live in-person, with pandemic protocols, at Civic Center plaza by City Hall starting 5:00 PM on 12/16.

In silence, in prayer, in song we'll remember them, honor them, mourn our loss, reach out to each other for comfort and hope, and show our solidarity in working for change.

Share this event, spread the word, and join us!

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STREET SHEET ANNUAL POETRY ISSUE

Send your poetry submissions
to qwatts@cohsf.org by
December 20th to be included
in our annual Poetry Issue,
celebrating the poetry and
creativity of unhoused San
Franciscans and their
neighbors. All are welcome to
submit!

STREET SPEAK

EPISODE 10: WHAT IS THE OVERDOSE CRISIS AND WHY SHOULD I CARRY NARCAN?

The overdose crisis claimed the lives of 700 San Franciscans in 2020—twice the number of COVID-19 deaths during the same period. We speak with Ashley

Fairburn—a harm reduction worker at the San Francisco AIDs Foundation—about what the overdose crisis is, the disparate impact it has on homeless San Franciscans, and how we can practice harm reduction in our own communities.

Learn more!

The San Francisco AIDs Foundation has so much helpful information about the overdose crisis and many programs to help keep people who use drugs safe. <https://www.sfaf.org/>

Support for Street Speak comes from our listeners!

Please donate to us online at <https://coalition.networkforgood.com>



SCAN ME