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# STREET

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WE DEDICATE THIS ISSUE TO LUIS TEMAJ, A HOMELESS SAN FRANCISCAN  
WHO WAS BRUTALLY SET ON FIRE WHILE IN HIS SLEEPING BAG.  
**REST IN POWER.**

## SPECULATION STOLE OUR CITY...



## BUT WE CAN TAKE IT BACK!

COVER ARTWORK BY FERNANDO MARTÍ



**LISTEN to STREET SPEAK:** Episode 9 explores the importance of Shelter-In-Place Hotels through the perspectives of healthcare workers, who say the program has saved lives. Listen at [streetsheet.org/street-speak-podcast/](https://streetsheet.org/street-speak-podcast/)



# GIMME SHELTER

Brian Edwards

Ooh, a storm is threatening  
My very life today  
If I don't get some shelter  
Oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away

“Gimme Shelter” -Jagger/Richards

Last weekend, San Francisco endured record rainfall during its first major rainstorm of the year, receiving over 4 inches of rain within the roughly 48 hours that it lasted. The storm had been forecast for over a week and was all over television, internet and radio. For most locals, news of upcoming rain was good news, as the Bay Area was in the middle of a lengthy statewide drought. The raging wildfires that razed through entire bone-dry North Bay communities in recent years are still fresh in many people’s memories, and a prolonged drought would likely have multiple negative impacts on a state economy already hit hard by the extended pandemic. We needed the water, and the sooner, the better. The rain was forecast to begin on Saturday and subside by Tuesday, and by Friday afternoon before the storm, most San Franciscans had resigned themselves to prepare for a weekend spent indoors with little fuss or fanfare. Slow cooker recipes were downloaded during lunch breaks, Instacart grocery orders were placed, and Netflix queues were added to.

But the city’s homeless people and advocates, along with staff at the Department of Emergency Management (DEM), the Department of Public Health (DPH) and the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH), were getting nervous. The storm was expected to bring high winds, flooding and near-freezing temperatures to the Bay Area, a combination which can be deadly for anyone caught outside and is always absolutely miserable. The first rains were projected to start falling around noon on Saturday, with the heaviest rains and winds beginning on Sunday morning and lasting through Tuesday morning. Advocates and service providers tend to estimate San Francisco’s unhoused population to be 10,000 or more, though the Point-In-Time (PIT) count offers a more conservative estimate of 8,000. Many of these folks lack access to TV or radio. Internet-enabled mobile phones tend to get lost or stolen pretty easily on the street. Mother Nature was about to blow some serious chaos at SF’s most

vulnerable residents, and many of them might not be aware she was coming. Even those who did had little chance of getting out of her way and members of the Homeless Outreach Team (SFHOT) along with the City’s service providers had already spent days and nights focusing efforts on spreading warnings of the upcoming storm to folks in encampments and doorways all across the City, along with distributing emergency food, water, ponchos, blankets and socks. With the storm less than 24 hours away, City leaders had elected to try to open the first inclement weather shelter expansion in over a year that weekend, but were still scrambling to nail down staffing and logistics. It was almost 9 p.m. on Friday by the time HSH was able to announce the emergency expansion of shelter to their email list, long after most of the City’s service providers and outreach workers had gone home for the weekend.

Shelter from the storm was available, along with hot meals and opportunities to link up with services, but how the hell were people going to find out? The City hadn’t had an inclement weather expansion for two years, and no one outdoors was expecting one to come. HSH’s Twitter feed doesn’t exactly trend, and online efforts to reach folks only go so far. Many of those who weren’t lucky enough to be able to ride the storm out in one of the City’s FEMA-funded hotel rooms, which had been doled out months before, had learned to expect little in terms of meaningful relief from the City over the last year and a half, and few were going to spend much time looking for any. If the City wanted people to know help was available, the City was going to have to bring that message to them in person. They wouldn’t be easy to reach, as years of enforcement against public encampments had taught them to spread and scatter in order to escape the City’s police cruisers and crusher trucks, and many had hunkered down in out-of-the-way places in advance of the storm. The City would have to find them first. SFHOT had the advantage

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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.

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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Reason  
By Tammy Martin

So many people have a reason they didn’t do  
what they promised someone they would do.

Some people have a reason for everything they  
didn’t do. Some people always have a reason  
why they didn’t make it to work, or didn’t go to a  
doctor’s appointment.

But are they really reasons, or just excuses?



# As City Closes Hotels, Advocates Say “KEEP HOTELS OPEN”

TJ Johnston

On October 20, the Tilden Hotel in San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood saw more people outside its doors on a damp, dreary afternoon than were inside. About two dozen activists from the Coalition on Homelessness, Senior & Disability Action and other allies and members of the city’s unhoused community rallied outside the nine-story hotel that, until that week, was used as a shelter-in-place (SIP) hotel to protect homeless people from COVID-19.

The advocates demanded that SIP hotels funded and operated by the City stay open, and that they take in more unsheltered San Franciscans while the pandemic persists.

A man who identified himself as the hotel manager told them that the Tilden was now empty: Every resident had already left ahead of the October 22 closing date. The ground-floor windows of the 118-unit hotel were boarded up, but the activists, who brought their own sound system, a brass band and plenty of signs, made their appeal nonetheless.

Freddie Martin, a housing organizer with Senior & Disability Action, spoke to participants and passersby of the City’s pandemic-era homelessness approach—and where it falls short.

“We had an opportunity to house

8,500 unhoused people in San Francisco, and only 2,500 [hotel rooms] got used,” he told them. “Over 600 rooms are vacant right now, and they’re trying to close more. It doesn’t make any sense!”

The City has already shuttered seven of its 30 SIP hotels, despite assurances of continued funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Why doesn’t it keep providing unsheltered people with a roof over their heads—not to mention a private bed and bathroom—as long as the money is available?

Equally mystifying to SIP resident Roberto Hernandez, who also spoke at the action, is what the future might hold when he and other remaining occupants must check out.

“I’m thankful for having a room, but I’m scared of what’s gonna happen,” he said in Spanish, through an interpreter. “I just want to know what’s going on with the City. Nobody knows what’s going to happen to us. There’s some people staying here, sleeping there. They’re not prepared for after because there’s nowhere to go.”

Where will they go?  
Several days after the protest outside the Tilden Hotel, The Chronicle

reported that City officials had announced that the Shelter-In-Place Hotel would be extended by three months, with the final hotel shuttering in September 2022. The Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH) says the extension will cost \$67 million, most of which would be covered by FEMA funding.

But the department announced that two more SIPs will close by year’s end. Residents at the Cova Hotel in the Tenderloin and the Good Hotel in South of Market were notified that both hotels are slated for closure. The department’s policy for SIP closures is to give 90 days’ notice to the hotels and staff from nonprofits operating there.

Advocates still fear for SIP residents returning to congregate shelters, where COVID-19 and its variants could spread much more easily.

Street Sheet contacted the Homelessness Department, which maintained that it’s taking a careful approach to “demobilization,” its term for hotel closures, and rehousing SIP residents.

“As we move into recovery and we’re looking for FEMA dollars to end, we’re doing it in a slow, deliberate and client-centered way so as not to end the program abruptly,” said deputy communications director Emily Cohen.

Cohen also provided the Homelessness Department’s breakdown of where residents of the closed hotels have ended up: 66% have transferred to other SIPs, 23% moved into permanent supportive housing units, 3% are now in noncongregate shelters or “stabilization” sites, 2% were medically discharged, and 2% were presumed to be back on the streets.

Cohen says that only a “very small percentage” of people are likely to be living on the streets again. “We’re making an assumption. We think that’s where we think they went, we’re not sure,” she said.

When pressed on upcoming closures, Cohen said that there will be two more scheduled by December 31, but added that she didn’t know which ones. As of publication time, Cohen didn’t respond to Street Sheet’s questions asking why the City doesn’t keep SIPs open and move more homeless people into vacant rooms.

Supervisor Matt Haney asked a similar question of Cohen and her colleague Noelle Simmons, chief deputy director of the Homelessness Department, at a Budget and Finance Committee hearing on October 27.

Simmons told the panel that intaking SIP guests and adding staff took time, as did waiting for funding from the City budget, which was approved in July. “The reality is that we just had several months of a slow ramp-up,” Simmons said.

Cohen added that SIP residents have the option to view up to three housing offers before exiting the hotel, either into housing or otherwise, and that the City doesn’t want to kick them out if they’ve seen only one unit. “(People are) in mid-process of an ongoing engagement” of being rehoused, she said.

As for backfilling vacant SIP rooms, Simmons said that staff at SIPs are

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# CITY WORKERS SCRAMBLE TO OFFER SHELTER FROM THE STORM

Brian Edwards

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of already knowing where many folks had hidden away, but there were only six outreachers scheduled to work on Saturday, and only four on Sunday. The team members also had survival gear to distribute as well as word to spread, and both tasks seemed daunting.

SFHOT weren't alone. SF's advocates and service providers are long used to filling in the gaps and finding ways to collaborate and complement the efforts of a frustratingly under-resourced City. Many of us also have blurred work-life boundaries and social lives that barely exist, so weekends mean little. By Saturday morning, Signal groups and inboxes began filling up across the City with messages notifying friends, neighbors and co-workers of the additional resources available. Some nonprofits also had staff scheduled to work over the weekend and began to join the efforts. The rains began on time Saturday afternoon, though, and by the time SFHOT ended its shift on Saturday evening and went home, thousands of unhoused San Franciscans hadn't been reached, and fewer than a dozen people had elected to take advantage of a mat indoors away from the rain.

It didn't look good.

"I can't wait until I can shout down whatever City employee says in a Zoom that the empty rain shelters during this storm prove that homeless folks don't want help or resources," I texted a friend on Saturday night. San Francisco has a history of failed attempts at messaging and communication with its unhoused residents, and it looked like this storm was going to add to that pile.

But Sunday was a new day. Case managers and hospital social workers who had been forwarded one of Saturday's emails or text messages began calling and advocating for clients and patients. Unhoused residents and volunteers from Coalition on Homelessness workgroups and mutual aid

organizations joined staff from local nonprofits, including Glide, Mother Brown's and Urban Alchemy in the push to get the word out. The rain and the winds kicked up harder, but SFHOT's skeleton crew of outreach workers battled downed trees and flooded streets throughout the afternoon to connect with more people, and at 5:31 p.m., I got a text message from the SFHOT manager: "Moscone Full." I was going to have to wait for a different opportunity to shout at a City employee on Zoom.

In the end, 100 San Franciscans were able to get relief from the wind and rain at an Urban Alchemy-staffed emergency pop-up shelter located inside the Moscone Center, plus 40 more at ECS's Sanctuary shelter in SoMa. Filling a pop-up shelter to capacity is difficult even outside of a pandemic and with triple the amount of time and resources available. Last weekend, with a fairly sizable assist from the community, SFHOT knocked it out of the ballpark, and Mayor London Breed and HSH Director Shirleen McFadden owe them a round of drinks.

For thousands more, though, last weekend was just like any other during the last 18 months, and they were screwed — left outside to freeze and soak. Dozens of beds at the City's regular congregate shelter sites were empty on each night of the storm and weren't available to be filled. And unless the City makes a major change to the way they allot and fill shelter beds, anyone living outside on whatever day you're reading this has a tiny fraction of the chance of getting a shelter bed that they would have had during any night of the storm.

With multiple emergency shelter sites closing down at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rest reducing capacity by 50% or more, San Francisco's shelter-in-place order almost immediately translated to "stranded in place" for those forced to sleep outdoors. Homelessness is never easy, but it was especially challenging

for anyone experiencing it in 2020. Service providers reduced or eliminated hours, and drop-in facilities closed. Mobile pop-up sites and outreach operations at those providers also halted, sometimes for months. Residential and commercial buildings instituted strict no-visitor policies. San Franciscans were told to limit physical contact and exposure to

a handful of people in their social "bubble." For the better part of 2020, homelessness instantly became a 24/7 lockdown for thousands of San Francisco residents, with no opportunity to escape indoors for even a moment of relief. Last December, it was not at all uncommon to run into folks who hadn't been able to shower for nine months and who had given up trying to find places to charge their phones.

Homeless shelters aren't perfect anywhere and aren't for everyone. They never have been, but they're still an integral part of any community's efforts in tackling homelessness and reducing some of the harm of living unhoused. Before the pandemic, San Francisco's single adult shelter system had the capacity to offer over 2,000 San Franciscans the safety of being indoors on any given night, or a little over 20% of its unhoused residents, according to the 2019 PIT count. COVID-19's effect on the system, along with the safety and respite it offered was almost immediate and has been devastating. New intakes at sites were halted within days of the March 17, 2021, SIP order — if you weren't already in the system, you weren't getting in, and subsequent outbreaks at multiple sites soon showed that "in" didn't necessarily mean "safe." With intakes halted, the City quietly eliminated the single adult shelter waitlist and moved the shelter sites onto a new occupancy management database. Unhoused residents could no longer call 311, drop into Glide, or check in with a County Adult Assistance Program worker for a shelter bed. In fact, all self-referral pathways to a spot at one of the City's alternative emergency shelter sites were gone, and nearly a year and a half later, the City shows little sign of any intent to restore a low-barrier self-directed pathway from the streets into a traditional or Navigation Center shelter bed. The system that could once accommodate 2,000 is now limited to 962 as of this writing.

For most of the first year of the pandemic, shutting off congregate shelters to self-referral made sense. Outbreaks at shelter sites across the country and in Europe showed that congregate settings were not safe places to be. Through the Healthy Streets Operation Center (HSOC), the City pivoted to mainly offering two new forms of emergency shelter for a while — hotel rooms and Safe Sleep sites, where individuals or pairs of people live in separate tents. Both were wildly popular among homeless residents, with rooms in San Francisco's SIP hotels having a 97% acceptance rate among those who were offered one, according to a presentation made by former HSOC director Jeff Kositsky. But new intakes to the SIP hotels ended earlier this year, and several sites have already closed down, with about 1,400 people remaining inside, according to testimony shared at the Board of Supervisors Budget and Finance Committee meeting on October 27. More sites are scheduled to close later this year, and advocates and providers are currently locked in a battle to get the City to extend and expand the program beyond its September 2022 sunset date. Safe Sleep sites fill up fast, and once filled, reservations at all City sites are now open-ended instead of limited to a maximum of 90 days. That means more security for the folks placed inside of it, but also leads to less turnover, and openings at Safe Sleep sites are extremely rare. These openings are managed directly through HSOC and offered almost exclusively to folks facing immediate displacement during an encampment sweep.

While the lifting of the statewide and local SIP orders earlier this year have allowed providers and businesses to reopen and offer unhoused folks

more opportunities. The day, SF's public hotel rooms are ended after the data on how many exist — the 2020 COVID safety has been focused for years. But even a significant rise the first year of national and local along with urban assistance, the San Francisco and thousands other options than encampments,

That's not to say folks to seek refuge congregate shelter outbreak since has had a 20% at those shelter time, with SF a majority of all unhoused residents HSOC has prioritized and, as with San allotment excluded during encampment over — frequently gets given out priorities to judge of the SIP hotel housing and re distress. One more than 10,000 unhoused outreach force just about 60. Times, but the for SFHOT during and exhausting remains offline community building direct access to shelter sites. Unsheltered or those voicemail with — and early emergency outreach work HSOC makes a commitment to is genuine, and with them success get folks off the many folks have SFHOT hasn't always often have little unhoused people is a voicemail that there will be an unhoused person vacant shelter HSOC targets for one of its best local community partnerships shelter beds go

That's nuts, and a system that could spend hundreds of shelters or wait that night's shelter Local Homeless Seymour told me would often have



Moscone Center West, photo by TJ Johnston



nities to seek relief indoors during rush to get folks off the streets into and sanctioned encampments largely the first 3,000 were placed. Current many people remain outdoors doesn't 2021 PIT count was cancelled due to concerns, and the City's own data based on tents instead of individuals even conservative estimates project rise in homelessness nationwide after of the pandemic. As COVID-related local eviction moratoriums expire unemployment and other financial the number of people forced out onto streets is sure to rise before it falls, s of San Franciscans will have no an sleeping outside at night in tent parks, sidewalks and doorways.

say that there isn't space for more relief from the streets. San Francisco's elter system hasn't had a major e last year, and by my estimate a vacancy rate since July. But spots ers are still offered a handful at a General Hospital often getting the ny day's available placements for idents who are being discharged. ority for much of what's left over, Safe Sleep placements, offers their usively to those facing displacement pment resolutions. Anything left ntly fewer than five beds per day — by SFHOT, who have multiple other gle, including locating folks outside l system who are eligible to receive esponding to calls about people in ight think that a City with more n housed residents would have an of hundreds, but SFHOT numbers he City asks a lot of them in the best e expectations and responsibilities ing COVID can be overwhelming ag to even watch. The 311 waitlist e, and workers at drop-ins and other ased nonprofits are still without o reservations at any of the City's Unhoused San Franciscans seeking e advocating for them can leave a SFHOT, and if they're lucky enough ough —, they can connect with an er to land one of the few spots that available on any given day. SFHOT's o following up on calls they receive d other advocates and I have worked uccessfully dozens of times this year to e streets into alternative shelter. But ve been on the streets for years, and lways been so diligent. Those folks e faith in follow-through, and most ple aren't even aware that there to call. Also, there's no guarantee be a spot. Often, the surest way for person to get into one of the City's beds is to be in an encampment or displacement. SF is burning out key resources, while shutting out its rtners and letting 20 percent of its unused each night.

d it's also a step backwards towards worked for no one. Before a phone rve beds went live in 2014, people ours each day lining up outside of iting in drop-ins hoping to secure elter. Code Tenderloin founder and s Coordinating Board co-chair Del me that when he was homeless, he ave to waste half a day in one spot

waiting, just to see if there was a spot available for him that evening. Many evenings there wasn't. "It was bullsh\*t," he said.

That system changed in 2012 when former SF homeless czar Bevan Dufty convened the Shelter Access Workgroup, which included providers and unhoused residents from across the city. "With extensive input from unhoused shelter users, lines and waiting rooms were eliminated, and the system changed to the 311 call-in system that made it simple to request a bed that fit your needs," said Coalition on Homelessness Executive Director Jennifer Friedenbach. "Just a few years later, there is not even a line to wait in, let alone a toll-free number. There's no way to get in beyond the sheer luck of being in the right place at the right time when a City outreach worker happens to both run into you and have a bed to offer. Unhoused people absolutely must have a way to request shelter themselves."

The good news is the City already has that way — it's simple, has worked before and can work again — which brings me back to the storm at the beginning of this article. During the storm, folks were able to walk up to the sites at Moscone and Sanctuary without a reservation, and as long as there was space available, they got in. That's key. Homeless folks should have as much agency and authority over the resources they accept as the city employees and nonprofit workers who offer them. When you give folks the ability to get into a bed without having SFHOT handle the reservation, you allow folks to make their own decisions at their own speed and on their own terms, and that leads to better outcomes for everyone. Beds fill up fast. The City already has some of the best nonprofit, public health and outreach workers in the world — seriously, they fucking rock. And it has shelter beds. By unburdening SFHOT from being the lone gatekeeper and including community and provider nonprofits in the shelter allocation and distribution process, everyone involved can better use their own resources to complement each other's efforts, and beds end up being occupied by folks who want them, instead of folks being pressured into them under the shadow of an SF Public Works crusher truck.

Most things aren't this simple, but this is. I doubt that Mayor Breed or Director McFadden will read this, but just in case:

Restore the single adult shelter waitlist. Let folks call 311, or walk back into Glide or Mother Brown's to get on it, and start filling those vacant beds, and give 'em shelter like The Rolling Stones advise. Let service providers and SFHOT each do the things that they're best at, so they can collaborate and function together as a true community/government partnership. Bring unhoused residents back to the center of the policies and procedures that impact and service them and restore a bit of the sanity we all lost during the pandemic back to the system we live, work or advocate in.

And buy those outreach workers from last weekend a beer.

If you don't listen to me, listen to Hospitality House director Joe Wilson: "There's no excuse for people being without shelter in San Francisco. None. We should make it easier — not harder — for people to come inside from the cold. We can do better, and we must, in the City of St. Francis."

Cheers, Joe. ■

# ADVOCATES FIGHT BACK AGAINST SIP HOTEL SHUTDOWNS

continued from page 3...

so focused on current residents that taking in new people and connecting them to services would stretch workers thin. She added that the process would put the plan to close hotels behind schedule.

"The effect of that is that our timeline would be blown up," she said.

In reality, Homelessness and Supportive Housing is already far behind in their efforts to place people in housing.

"Right now, HSH is has only reached about 50% its SIP hotel resident rehousing goal, which is why they are reserving vacant rooms for hotel residents being displaced from the hotels they are closing when they should be using them to get people off the streets," said Coalition on Homelessness director Jennifer Friedenbach. "In other words it is due to their own bureaucratic tangle that they can't take full advantage of the federal funding."

Healthy community "Housing is health care" has become a mantra for homeless advocates throughout the pandemic, who cite cases where SIP residents finally received treatment for chronic conditions. Friedenbach noted that access to healthcare and the ability to maintain one's well-being are almost impossible while unhoused, while SIPs offer healing for unhoused folk.

"Having the dignity of a door to close, the stability of a bed to sleep in, access to a bathroom and hygiene, being able to hold on to medications and not have them confiscated, getting enough sleep: These are things that don't happen on the streets or in shelters, but do happen in SIP hotels," said Friedenbach.

These anecdotes of people reporting improved health outcomes after moving into hotels now have numbers to back them up and validated by lived experience, thanks to Naomi Schoenfeld.

Schoenfeld, a nurse practitioner at the Department of Public Health and

a medical anthropologist at UC San Francisco, worked in SIP hotels from October 2020 to May 2021. Along with colleagues at UCSF, she conducted an independent study of residents' health by analyzing DPH data and interviewing residents. She presented her findings at the October 27 Budget Committee hearing.

Schoenfeld found that compared to the residents' time on the streets, their hotel stays produced fewer deaths, fewer emergency and inpatient hospitalizations and greater connection to outpatient medical care.

She noted the disproportionate impact of homelessness on Black residents. While Black people comprise only 5% of San Francisco's population, the City's homeless figures show they make up 37% of unhoused people.

The study also showed how Black residents "bore the brunt of racist housing and environmental practices," Schoenfeld told Street Sheet before the committee meeting. She added that Black men in the Western Addition neighborhood are historically pulled into the criminal justice system at a young age, which acts as a precursor to homelessness.

"The criminal justice system sets you up to be perpetually homeless" if you're a Black man, she said.

If only one statistic jumps out to the Budget Committee, it should be the Homelessness Department's own estimate that only 23% of SIP residents enter permanent housing. Any public agency would be hard pressed to sell a program that only successfully houses one out of every four people. The balance of San Francisco's homeless population could have a fighting chance if the hotel program were to continue, or even expand. But what would the supervisors on that panel make of closing SIP hotels before transitioning tenants out of homelessness? Maybe the words of Freddie Martin, the housing organizer who was at one time unhoused, would echo in their ears: "It doesn't make sense." ■



# THEY HAVE MILLIONS WE HAVE WHAT IS RIGHT

Fernando Martí

I've been fighting an eviction since 2019. After living in my apartment for 20 years, always paying the rent on time, never bothering our landlords, they sold the two-unit building. The two rent-controlled units paid off their mortgage (maybe several times over), and now in retirement they cashed in on San Francisco's nouveau riche market.

The new buyer, of course, wants to kick us out. They are exploiting a legal loophole that allows for "owner-move-in" evictions—meaning that they can legally force us from our home as long as they or members of their family intend to live in it for 36 months.

The new owners knew our family intended to stay, intended to fight. We made sure of that.

We hung the posters I had designed for the Tenants Union on the front door and all over the apartment. Those posters are still here. "This is our home," they say. "We are organized. We will fight. We are not leaving." We handed each buyer a letter as they came in, before they tramped through our living room and kitchen and bedrooms: "Welcome, new landlords. We know our rights. We intend to stay."

But the system teaches these people that the only thing that matters is money. As though our homes are just play pieces on a Monopoly board. They are used to a world where everything can be bought. As our friend told us, "Doing tenant counseling, you get a window into all the ways that greed manifests in our society."

The buyer's parents, Peter Omran and Tanya Omran, run a Christian missionary organization, Heart of Mercy International, offering aid to people in Palestine and Jordan. Her brothers, Michael Omran and Christopher Omran, are partners in a supposedly "socially responsible" coffee plantation in Ethiopia, Abana Coffee Plantation, selling to fancy coffee roasters in the Bay Area and elsewhere. Tatiana Omran, "Tatters" to her friends, is the one who saw our house and decided she wanted it for herself.

I want to give them the benefit of the doubt. I don't think these people are evil the way serial evictors who buy buildings full of seniors to clear

them out and flip them at a profit are evil. The Omrans' actions are the banal sort of evil, caught up in the ways capitalism and colonialism molds all of us, everyday injustices ingrained into a system that tells them it's all right to do this, even if they are religious people, even if they think of themselves as socially responsible, even if they have their own historic ties to the impacts of colonial dispossession and displacement. The system tells them that it's alright to buy people's homes

and force them out just because you want their homes. The system tells them money makes it alright.

They're probably confused by us. They are probably thinking, "Why won't they just take our money? Are they just trying to negotiate for a bigger buyout?" To them,

our fight is simply a negotiation for a buyout, a line item in their financial calculations.

As I write this, I'm sitting on my couch, observing the "for sale" sign across the street in the unit under my neighbor Richard's house. Why don't they buy that unit? Three doors down, above an architects' office, is a two-unit building that has been empty for the 20 years I've been here. I hear the owner has finally decided to sell. Why don't they go for that building? We know there are ten to forty thousand vacant units in the city. We know the Omrans ran corporate rentals out of one of their buildings that would have made a fine home for Tatiana. We know they inherited other properties. Tatiana could live in any of those. We joke with our 12-year old about the empty apartment for sale across the street, "Tatters could buy that unit, and then we could just walk across the street to hand her our rent."

I would hope as people of faith, as people who have suffered under colonialism and displacement, that they would do the right thing. But in a system that tells the owners of property that they have all the power, we have to organize, we have to fight back, in the streets and in courts, to remind them of what's right.

Now they and their money are taking us to court. We don't have their millions, but we have community and we have what's right on our side. This process has

been all-consuming: meeting with tenant counselors and lawyers, researching our options, organizing with our community, preparing for depositions. Going to trial takes over your life, your time, your mental space, your reserves. The rich count on that. The system is built on that.

It's no wonder tenants rarely take it this far. Who has the time or the energy to keep going? There's the fear of deportation or harassment or how an eviction affects your future prospects, of losing your job, of losing precious time, of how it affects your mental health. I've started waking at 3 a.m., mulling over all the angles, or how I will get my work done.

We are tremendously lucky to be part of a community that has our backs. I can't imagine doing this alone. Whatever happens, we will land on our feet, we will survive, even if it means losing our home and maybe losing our city and losing our schools. We will adapt. Many others are not so lucky: They end up in far-flung locations, separated from community and social networks, or end up on the streets, in tents or in cars or RVs, by no choice of their own.

But we have choices. The Omrans have choices. They can choose to harden their stance. They can choose to act as though our lives and livelihoods are simply commodities to be bought off. Or they can consider the ethical and social consequences of their actions, make connections between our common histories of colonialism and choose to do the right thing. It's their choice.

We weigh our options, not alone, but with our community. Our choice, our community's choice, is to fight this.

Even if these particular people do the right thing, the system will continue to condone this behavior, one after another, in workplaces or home places, treating people as currency. There's a system built on greed, built on displacement and dispossession. From Palestine to Ohlone lands, colonialism follows us. The fight is for all of us tenants, who believe we have our own right to the city, a right that doesn't depend on how much wealth we have. The fight is to change the system and build a more ethical structure where this kind of banal evil is no longer a pillar of the system. ■

## THIS IS OUR HOME.

## WE ARE ORGANIZED.

## WE WILL FIGHT.

## AND WE ARE NOT LEAVING.



**Sign the petition!** We are asking the community for support: respectfully ask the Omran family to end this unethical and unnecessary eviction of this family with a child. Scan this QR code to add your name to support the Foy-Martí family.





# CONTRIBUTE TO STREET SHEET!

**WRITING:** We are always looking for new writers to help us spread the word on the street! Write about your experience of homelessness in San Francisco, about policies you think the City should put in place or change, your opinion on local issues, or about something newsworthy happening in your neighborhood!

**ARTWORK:** Help transform ART into ACTION by designing artwork for *STREET SHEET*! We especially love art that uplifts homeless people, celebrates the power of community organizing, or calls out abuses of power! Cover dimensions are generally 10x13 but artwork of all sizes are welcome and appreciated!

**POETRY:** Our annual poetry issue is every January, but we try to include a poem or two in every issue. We're especially interested in poems that explore issues related to poverty, homelessness, and community power, but all submissions are welcome!

**PHOTOGRAPHY:** Have a keen eye for beauty? Love capturing powerful moments at events? Have a photo of a Street Sheet vendor you'd like to share? We would love to run your photos in Street Sheet! Note that subjects must have consented to being photographed to be included in this paper.

## What are your hopes for 2022?

**SUBMISSIONS:** You can email your work to [qwatts@cohsf.org](mailto:qwatts@cohsf.org) or submit in person or by mail at the Coalition on Homelessness at 280 Turk Street, San Francisco CA 94102. Paid opportunities may be available to contributors who are experiencing homelessness. Ask the editor to find out more!

# THEIR ORIGINAL FACES

Jesse Mentken

I have not been homeless in almost a decade.

But my homelessness was deeply influenced by the fact that my mother was homeless before me, for many years.

I loved her so much. When your own mother hits the streets, you learn something. When she was homeless, a part of me was homeless.

That is actually how the Buddha sees homelessness: If you suffer, I can embrace that. This is not an embrace as if it is a burden. I remember just wondering why the world did not do a good job of showing love to my mommy.

I am not Buddha, but I do spend time reminding myself that there really is not all that much of a difference between self and other. I do not think of people as homeless; I think of people as having been betrayed. I think of it this way because when someone has been betrayed, you try and not betray them. You do not see them as walking failures or losers.

I want to write about a man or a woman. I want to write about a soul and not a homeless person. I want to write about my friend Sam. I want to write about the fact that his mother died and he feels lonely. Yes, he is on the street, but his loneliness bothers me even more. I want to write about the fact that I gave him my old laptop because he is a writer. I want to write about the fact that after that, he invited me to breakfast at a nearby McDonalds. And I want to write

about the fact that I loved that man as well. And that was the only thing that I thought about: love.

I think that is because my mother was homeless, and when she was, I would sometimes meet up with her at a cafe in New York City. And I remember adoring her. And I remember feeling a very simple beingness that was based on seeing that my mommy was sad and tired and needed love. Often she would yell and scream at me during these visits, and I would go home crushed.

I never really thought much about the politics of poverty or homelessness at the time. I still don't. This was the woman who held me in her womb. This was the woman who would bake banana bread for me. And now she was hurting. And I wanted her to be loved and I wanted her to be held and I wanted her to be held enough to be happy enough to hold me as well.

I'm still that young boy just wanting to wrap my arms around my mother. Innocent clarity, I call it. Why would anybody not want to wrap their arms around another lonely, tired, angry, scared human being? Is there any reason not to?

I don't think anybody is homeless in the lap of God. And I do not think anybody is homeless in your lap if your lap is the lap of compassion as well. Do you see that the lap you hold another in is the same body that you sit within your solitude? The presence you have when with yourself is the same presence you are able to give to others. And so when we sit we are in our own laps. And so when I am with myself I am with you and when I am with you I am with myself. For in the embrace of love the fact that you woke up behind a cardboard box and I woke up in a one-bedroom apartment means little and our shared humanness means a lot.

To liberate the "homeless" is to embrace them so radically that we destroy the very "themness" we used to find "them."


I still talk to my mom. She is still a vibrant living presence in my life and soul and heart. She was my first home. A womb with a view, I tell myself.

We fumble around trying to love and free and fight and champion and rescue only because we are not Buddha. We can not yet look at a tired man who is filled with feelings of misery and hatred and liberate him with a glance. And so we give people blankets or money or a cup of coffee.

I guess there are no homeless people. There are just endless souls, each one who had a mother and each one who had the original face before they were born. ■

Jesse Mentken

@Jesse-Mentken



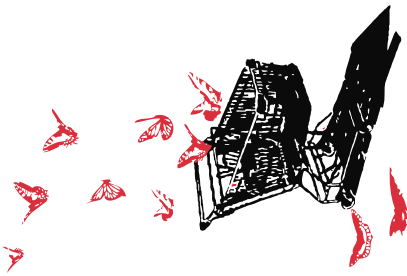
venmo





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# 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 12/17 starting at 5:30 PM (PST) at:  
[facebook.com/sanfrancisconightministry/live/](https://facebook.com/sanfrancisconightministry/live/)

Join the Vigil live in-person, with pandemic protocols, at Civic Center plaza by City Hall starting 5:00 PM on 12/17.

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!

## STREET SPEAK EPISODE 9: Keep SIP Hotels Open

At the height of the Delta variant spike, the City of San Francisco announced plans to close down the Shelter in Place Hotels that had kept about 2,000 people safe and off the streets over the course of the past year.

We spoke with Lina Khoeur, a fourth year medical student at UCSF, and with Naomi Shoenfeld, a medical anthropologist and nurse practitioner who has been working and researching in the SIP hotels. Both of them shared what they have seen of the benefits the SIP hotel program has offered to tenants, and why they are asking the City to #KeepHotelsOpen.



Get Involved!

Sign up for the Coalition on Homelessness ACTION ALERTS here: <https://www.cohsf.org/take-action/>

Weather report brought to you by Bella Hangnail, off her new album Mask Era. Listen to the full album here: <https://bellahangnail.bandcamp.com/>



SCAN ME