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# STREET

## STOLEN BELONGING

STORIES AND PHOTOS FROM LESLIE DREYER AND THE STOLEN BELONGING TEAM



SF resident Memphis Lamb gestures as if he's looking at his most cherished belonging the city has stolen from him in the sweeps: his altar that he had for six years, which he got after his ex-husband's death. Photo by Leslie Dreyer

## Stolen Belonging: A Brief Introduction...

Leslie Dreyer

*If you see DPW, you see that truck, you know that something's getting got. Yesterday they took my tent and tarp... Why would you take someone's shelter in the rainy season? That makes no sense to me. It's cruel.*

*I really miss the altar they took. I've had that for six years and I'd gotten it the year after my ex-husband's death. That meant something to me. It had pictures, crosses, things that people have given me that you can't get. I had a picture that someone drew of me and my mom, and it was weird because I don't have a picture of my mom whatsoever, and he drew it and it really looked like her.*

*Of course going down [to the DPW Yard] and asking for it, it's probably in pieces, and it really doesn't even make it down to the place that you're supposed to go to retrieve your stuff. I always found that interesting, like they tell you, "Oh well we're seizing your property now so you can have it released later." They want me to use it later? Why, so I get the same ticket? It's one of these catch 22 things... It's a slow genocide, is what it is.*

– Memphis Lamb (pictured above)

Memphis' testimony sum up what so many experience every day: the City of San Francisco is targeting houseless residents, stealing their survival gear, all of their belongings and, consequently, their ability to belong in the city. These actions are

largely carried out by the Department of Public Works (DPW) and San Francisco Police Department, though Parks and Rec and Caltrans workers are also involved. The orders come from the top down.

In December 2018, I started the Stolen Belonging project with the Coalition on Homelessness and a team of houseless or precariously housed residents who represent some of our city's strongest homeless advocates: Couper Orona, TJ Johnston, Sophia Thibodeaux, Meghan Johnson, Patricia Alonzo and Charles Davis. Together, we've been collecting videos, photos, insights and personal history interviews, like the one above, from residents impacted by the sweeps throughout San Francisco – highlighting the loss of survival gear, alongside beloved personal items, which can never be replaced. Using the stories and demands coming from the streets, we're building an arts organizing strategy to hold our city's decision makers accountable for violating human and constitutional rights, while also trying to draw more 'housies' into the fight for #SolutionsNotSweeps.

Through creative actions, public art and story-based campaigns, we're asking housed folks to consider the questions:

What would you do if someone stole your IDs, medication, family ashes,

heirlooms, the last pictures or letters from loved ones, or everything you own, for that matter?

How would you seek justice or hold them accountable?

What if that person was the City?

The project adheres to the guidance and tried-and-true methods of groups like COH, WRAP, and Poor Magazine who know that poor and unhoused people have the solutions to homelessness. In this vein we've asked those impacted by the sweeps to share what they imagine compensation could look like and how they think we should collectively hold the city accountable for the violence perpetrated against them.

Their number one demand is: STOP THE SWEEPS. Let them maintain their survival gear and medication. Let them hold onto the only things they have left in the world that give them some sense of security and stability. Let them hold onto their memories and personal history. Let them exit homelessness instead of driving them further into it. They have a right to decent housing in this city. THEY BELONG HERE.

We call on housed residents or 'housies' to stand in solidarity with your houseless neighbors. The SF adult shelter waitlist is regularly over 1,000 names long, so the city's refrain that it offers shelter before they enact

a sweep is mere smoke and mirrors. Mayor Breed's tactic of escalating the sweeps and increasing the criminalization of homelessness is NOT the solution. SF has the most billionaires per capita, the highest rents, and the highest income inequality in the US. Thousands of people endure homelessness here every year, approximately 70% of which were once housed in the city. The numbers are only increasing. Now is the time to TAKE ACTION!

...

*A bit of history and gratitude: In 2016 Scott Nelson, a long-time COH member, uncovered that for the thousands of people swept for the city's Super Bowl party, DPW had only 'bagged and tagged' a handful of items, which meant millions of personal items had been stolen and trashed with no regard or adherence to the law or basic human dignity. This was the key moment that sparked the idea for this project. THANK YOU SCOTT NELSON!!!*

*It took many years to find funding so that we could compensate the team, assisting artists, and participants. Huge thanks to the San Francisco Arts Commission for supporting this first phase of the project and to Creative Work Fund for helping us continue this year.*

*Stay up to date with future art, stories and actions at [StolenBelonging.org](http://StolenBelonging.org) or on FB and Twitter @StolenBelonging. ■*



# STOLEN BELONGING: POETIC TEXT

By the project’s core team members: TJ Johnston, Shanna Couper Orona, Meghan “Roadkill” Johnson and Sophia Thibodeaux  
Performed at the Stolen Belonging: A Public Reclamation action at the DPW yard, June 22, 2019

Edited by artist Jadelynn Stahl in collaboration with the Stolen Belonging team through a series of creative writing workshop, using interviews taken by Leslie Dreyer of each team member.

TJ: My name is TJ Johnston. I work as a reporter and assistant editor of the Street Sheet at the Coalition on Homelessness, and I’ve been living in San Francisco for over 24 years now.

Couper: My name is Couper Orona. I’m a San Francisco resident and a disabled firefighter. I’ve been an unsheltered resident for 13 years of my 46 years in existence, and right now I’ve been unsheltered for almost three and a half years.

Roadkill: My name is Meghan Johnson, and I go by Roadkill. I’m f\*\*\*ing Roadkill. I identify as a San Francisco native, born and raised in the Mission. I’m 25 years old and I hope to have another 25 years in the city without being displaced.

Sophia: My name is Sophia Thibodeaux. I am a volunteer at the Coalition, and a former shelter monitor for Dolores Street Shelter. Off and on, I’ve lived here about 20 years. I’m looking for my own place and it’s hard with two kids in the city. I’m happy to be a part of this project so we can make beautiful change.

Couper: The Stolen Belonging Project is documenting people’s stories of things that they’ve lost due to the city’s negligence. DPW and the police, they do these things called sweeps where they go along and they take people’s stuff. They throw it in the trash. People have lost some things that can never be replaced.

TJ: We’re talking about prized possessions, family heirlooms, personal mementos that are being snatched by the Department of Public Works, aided and abetted by the police department.

Sophia: They got their belongings taken and there was no bagging and no tagging. And there were things that they couldn’t get back, like their parents or kids ashes and the photos and all those things that you get to hold dearly in your homes, housed people.

Couper: I’ve seen them cutting tents. I’ve seen them ripping things out of people’s hands, who are trying to save

the little bit of belongings they have left.

Roadkill: This project is really important to me because I have faced homelessness since I was 17, and I understand the feeling of having my sh\*\* stolen. So that’s why this hits heart.

Sophia: It’s a really hard thing, you know, trusting in the city that your stuff will be safe and now you don’t have anything.

TJ: For one thing - for a start - no one should have to live on the street to begin with. Something that a lot of people don’t realize is that 70% of homeless San Franciscans used to be housed here until some event had happened, whether it’s an eviction, a loss of a job, end of a relationship, or hospitalization.

Roadkill: Housie people need to understand that there are a lot of unforeseen circumstances that cause us to become homeless, and that it can be any one of them at any given time.

Sophia: Homelessness isn’t a crime, so you shouldn’t treat us like we’re criminals.

Couper: San Francisco lies. They’re lying to the public. They’re lying to the people out here, you know, the bag and tags, the taking the stuff to the DPW yard. When we’ve gone out, there are stories upon stories, stories, stories, stories. No one’s ever gotten their stuff back. Ever.

Roadkill: People are afraid to come forward with things for fear of having some form of retaliation - from not being believed to getting arrested.

Sophia: It’s hard dealing with everyday city cops and how they look at you, just profiling you, assuming you’re on drugs and things like that, you know.

TJ: What the city workers are doing is a human rights violation. This is the kind of thing that you hear about in a dystopian science fiction setting, not San Francisco 2019... or maybe we have become that dystopic science fiction

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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 agenda to us.

WORKGROUP MEETINGS

AT 280 TURK STREET

HOUSING JUSTICE WORK GROUP

Every Tuesday at noon  
The Housing Justice Workgroup is working toward a San Francisco in which every human being can have and maintain decent, habitable, safe, and secure housing. This meeting is in English and Spanish and open to everyone!

HUMAN RIGHTS WORK GROUP

Every Wednesday at 12:30 p.m.  
The Human Rights Workgroup has been doing some serious heavy lifting on these issues: conducting direct research, outreach to people on the streets, running multiple campaigns, developing policy, staging direct actions, capturing media attention, and so much more. All those down for the cause are welcome to join!

EVERYONE IS INVITED TO OUR WORK GROUP MEETINGS.  
Our new office has an elevator for anyone who can not use the stairs. Simply call up and someone will come escort you to the elevator. We also have an all gender bathroom available.

To learn more about COH workgroup meetings,  
contact us at : 415-346-3740, or go at : [www.cohsf.org](http://www.cohsf.org)

SPECIAL ISSUE CONTRIBUTORS

This is a special issue because all of the content was created by the Stolen Belonging team, coordinated by Artist/Organizer Leslie Dreyer. Stolen Belonging is a multifaceted arts organizing project which documents the belongings taken from homeless residents during the City’s sweeps, revealing the ways in which such thefts steal a person’s ability to belong in their community and the city. Using narrative-based strategy, art, and action, the project amplifies the call to STOP THE SWEEPS, asserting a RIGHT TO REST, and demanding HOUSING NOW.

Dreyer has been working with Coalition on Homelessness and a team of houseless or precariously housed residents who represent some of our city’s strongest homeless advocates: Couper Orona, TJ Johnston, Sophia Thibodeaux, Meghan Johnson, Patricia Alonzo and Charles Davis.

This issue was created in collaboration with the *Street Sheet* program:  
Editor, Quiver Watts (they/them)  
Assistant Editor, TJ Johnston  
Vendor Coordinator, Emmett House

setting.

Couper: You see people with a lot of stuff. Well, we’re unsheltered residents, so, yeah, we have stuff. That stuff isn’t trash. That’s people’s lives. The last little bit of hope, their structure, their stability, that’s who they are.

Roadkill: Housies need to understand that everyone has a human right to housing. Everyone has a human right to mental health services. Everyone has a human right to medical.

TJ: I mean, if any of this happened to a housed person, you can be damn sure that there would be some kind of consequence.

Couper: San Francisco doesn’t realize they’re destroying people from the inside out and they’re not giving a f\*\*\*.

And they wonder why people aren’t going into navigation and they wonder why people aren’t going into shelters. For what?

Roadkill: A lot of people end up suffering from depression and mental illness after a sweep, because the things that were stolen from them used to keep them grounded.

Sophia: I would just like to ask a housed person: how would you feel if I go in your house and just take something, not even of value, but something that’s been in your family for ages and eons? How would you feel, you know, if I just opened the door and took it?

Couper: City of San Francisco - what you’re doing is some f\*\*\*ed up sh\*\*.

You’re treating people like they’re

...continues on page 3







# STOLEN BELONGING: “MY DAD’S ASHES ...”

Thief: The City of SF – DPW, SFPD and Caltrans

Interview with Crystal by the Stolen Belonging team, January 31, 2019, Bayview District, San Francisco.

Crystal: My name is Crystal and I've been here since 2002, but I grew up in the North Bay. I've been in every district and neighborhood in the city at one point or another.

The sweeps really suck. It's happened a few times in the last month or two. The last time... they just came in and they just wiped everybody out. My stuff was down there as well, so they got my backpack, my ID, my birth certificate, my dad's ashes.

It was the highway patrol and SFPD and Caltrans down there. And there's this one cop, every time he'd see me he's like, "I'm going to shoot your dog. I'm going to shoot your dog," for no reason. My dog is so super friendly, dude. He doesn't harm people.

He was a big, tall guy who goes down under the bridge over there by the car

wash and he jacks everyone up. He zip ties everyone up, throws them in a line and takes a picture on his phone and writes down their name, and then, "If I ever see you here again..." yada yada. He can't arrest me because I'm on a public sidewalk. What the f\*\*\* is wrong with you? Really? I mean, you can take me in and detain me for some bullsh\*\*, but you can't arrest me. It's not going to stand. It's not going to hold no water.

So yeah, I don't know. But, you know, cops do whatever the f\*\*\* they want to do anyway.

Stolen Belonging team: Tell us about some of the items that were stolen, particularly the ones that you use day-to-day to survive.

Crystal: My laptop and my phone, my portable chargers and my power banks, clothes, drawers, my toothbrush. I mean, you have to start over fresh every time they do it because they get everything. And you know, going to DMV and

going to the Social Security office and doing all that is a pain in the a\*\* after awhile. Really, how many IDs or driver's licenses does one person need in a year? They really need to find a way to fix that.

Stolen Belonging team: What was it like living without those things?

Crystal: Well, I can't get a job and can't work, right? But it's hard to work when you're on the streets anyway, because you can't shower every day and can't sleep all the time because you got people who steal your shit. It's just a big fucking circle. Everyone knows the story. It's the same story. It's been tested time and time again.

San Francisco used to be all right. You used to be able to go to Golden Gate Park and have a spot up there for a few months or whatever, or go out to the ocean, pop your tent up every night, pull it down.

You can't even do that anymore. It's like they just want everybody out. But see, I think ... by trying to push people out they're making it seem like they're trying to do something, which they're not.

Stolen Belonging team: Can you tell us about the items that are more of personal significance that were taken?

Crystal: My dad's ashes. They were in an urn, a marble urn. My brother gave it to me years ago. My dad died 15 years ago and I've been carrying them around. They were at my friend's house. My friend said he was going to toss them because he didn't have the space for them or whatever. So, I went down and got them and I've been lugging them around, and it's a heavy a\*\* urn. I was thinking about just taking them out and keeping them in a bag, putting them in a paper bag or something, but it's your dad. You can't really do that... I really miss him.

Stolen Belonging team: And the agency who took it again?

Crystal: It was the highway patrol or Caltrans, SFPD and DPW, of course, or “Doing People Wrong”.

Stolen Belonging team: Were there any other sentimental items that they also took?

Crystal: My phone, pictures, SD cards. They destroyed all the letters and notes that me and my husband wrote back and forth and posted on the walls and sh\*\*. You know? Like, really?

Stolen Belonging team: Reflecting back, how do you think that the city should compensate you for the loss of all your possessions, or how could we hold them accountable?

Crystal: I don't think they should just go and grab people's sh\*\*. I mean, really, I think that they should have a training program to instill some type of morals or some type of system for these people. I mean, especially people that work with DPW, and everyone knows that the cops need more psychological evaluations and stuff like that before they come on the force.

But, I really think that a training program for the city workers ... I mean, because there was a lot of yelling and screaming when that was going on and they didn't know how to handle it, so they just zip tie people up and throw them in a car, throw them on the sidewalk, tell them to shut up. No, that's not cool. You don't do that to people that are mentally unstable anyway. Come on. And probably up for a few days or whatever the case is.

I think there should be some type of mediation or some type of resolution program or something in place for those people. That, I think, would be really cool.

But my dad's ashes, those aren't replaceable. And as far as going down to that agency to collect your property, it's a crock of sh\*\*, because you go down there and they don't really label it. They'll put the street address and the agencies, they may bag and tag it, but they don't say, "Oh, this bag belongs to so-and-so..." You know what I mean? So, everything's kind of just jumbled up and everybody's stuff is as mess.

But you don't even really see that. You see a dumpster and all your shit going into the dumpster anyway. You could have \$50,000.00 worth of stuff and everything will go in that dumpster or compacter or whatever. So, I don't know, compensation-wise I would want ... If it was a dollar amount... I mean, my dad's ashes alone and those pictures and stuff ... I don't know. It's crazy.

Stolen Belonging team: What would you say to a housed person or city worker to help them see this from your perspective?

Crystal: I think that maybe if they just took a breath and maybe opened their mind a little bit, got another perception or something, I don't know, maybe they'd figure it out that life isn't easy and most people are one f\*\*\*ing step away from being homeless too. ■



Crystal, a long-time San Franciscan, gestures as if she's holding the most beloved possession that the city has stolen from her in the sweeps: her dad's ashes. Photo by Leslie Dreyer



## STOLEN BELONGING



## STOLEN BELONGING:

### “PICTURES OF MY DAUGHTER ...”

#### Thief: The City of SF – DPW & SFPD

Interview with Angel Amador by the Stolen Belonging team, January 4, 2019, Soma District, San Francisco.

ANGEL AMADOR: My name's Angel. I've been in San Francisco since 1998. I ran away from home at 15, and San Francisco was one of the first places on my things to do, places to go list. [The sweeps have been] an ongoing thing where they've taken my belongings over and over and over and over. Thousands of dollars worth of stuff over time has been stolen from me by either DPW or SFPD. Throughout that time that they've been basically robbing me continuously, I've lost things that I'll never be able to get back. I've lost pictures of my daughter that I don't get to see. I had three pictures that were my... everything, basically.

When I had these pictures, I would wake up and I would flip through them. One of them, she's posing. We were at a concert, and she's posing, doing a peace sign, trying to be hip. That's the one that that I see in my head whenever I think of her, that I could still remember really well. But yeah, I would wake up every morning and I would take the pictures out, and

they would be my strength to get up that day and do whatever it is that I had to do that I didn't want to do. It's raining, the cops are telling me I got to move, and I pull out my pictures of my daughter and be like, "I got this," and I'd get to doing whatever I had to do. Now, I still do that, I'm trying to remember what she looked like in those pictures, but it's... Just the fact that they're not there, it makes me want to rebel against anything that they're saying or anything that they're... I don't want to even comply whatsoever. It'll be raining or whatever, and they'll take your sleeping bag, your blankets and your... I don't know. It's very, very hard to deal with.

STOLEN BELONGING TEAM: What do you think the city should do to compensate you for that loss?

ANGEL AMADOR: If my loss were to lead to that stopping, if my loss were to actually have value and to lead to whatever laws being put in place so that they can't continue to do this, then I would be happy with that. It'd be cool if they could help me, because with a little help, I can do it for myself, I can help other people. But more than anything, I don't think that people

should have to go through that. I think that [city workers] should protect and serve. They should be asking us what we need to help and how... There should be things in place for them to assist us to get out of this position that they don't want us in. Versus just trying to bully us and rob us, they should be coming to us like, "Hey, we can't have you here, but we have this here for you, and you can store your things here."

STOLEN BELONGING TEAM: Do you think that people believe that this is happening to us? That DPW and the cops are coming in, taking our stuff?

ANGEL AMADOR: They see it happening and they don't comprehend that that's everything we have, period. Some people, let's say they lost their house recently, they got all their belongings, everything they've ever had in their whole life that they could pull out of the rubble, and they get to here and they're thinking, "Okay, I can do it. I'm going to..." Then DPW and the cops come and steal all their stuff. It's real easy to lose all hope, really, really, really easily.

STOLEN BELONGING TEAM: What would you say to someone that was at that point of losing hope because of what is done to them? What words would you give them?

ANGEL AMADOR: I feel like words aren't really what that person needs. I would just try and be there for them.

SF resident Angel Amador, gestures as if he's holding the most beloved items that the city has stolen from him in the sweeps: pictures of his daughter.  
Photo by Leslie Dreyer

Continuously stop by and make sure they're doing okay, and ask them if they're all right. Not just that day, but every day maybe, or religiously. Have a way where they can call me if they need some help. Give them hope, be the hope. Like a neighbor or tribe – leave no man, woman or child behind – and we wouldn't have this problem.

STOLEN BELONGING TEAM: What would you say to a “housie” or a city worker, so they could see this incident from your point of view?

ANGEL AMADOR: For one, it would take somebody with an open mind to be able to comprehend it, because I've spoken to “housies” about this situation and some people just have no comprehension whatsoever. A lot of people are like, "Okay. You have two legs, you have two arms, you can speak, what's stopping you from having whatever I got, or from going out and getting a job, or going and doing this?" or whatever. For some of us, it's not that easy. Some of us have psychological, mental, physical issues that you can't see or just things that make it really difficult. If given the proper assistance and the proper options, everybody can actually get to the point of being a “housie” or whatever, but it takes some extra special attention. ■



# STOP CITY EVICTIONS AND THEFT: Let's Move Along to A More Just Society!

TJ Johnston

In all senses of the word, there has been a lot of movement from homeless people on the West Coast.

There have been move-along orders issued by cities to unsheltered people, as well as unhoused people moving to advocate for themselves.

But they have a long, tough road ahead. San Francisco police and other city workers continue to seize the property of unhoused and unsheltered residents, as we've documented in the Stolen Belonging project. Unfortunately this inhumane practice is being carried out in cities across the country. Oakland recently evicted and trashed the possessions of over 100 people from a vehicle lot despite resistance from locals. An unhoused Denver man sued the city when the police ticketed him for sleeping outside even though they knowingly had no shelter for him. And Las Vegas just passed additional laws banning homeless people from public property.

As cities throughout the western U.S. ratchet up police-centered responses to homelessness, unhoused people and their housed allies are awaiting a decision on a potentially precedent-setting case in Boise, Idaho.

The implications it would have can't be overstated. For performing what are largely survival acts, homeless people are often punished by the criminal justice system. They also often lose their belongings in sweeps and are displaced from their communities. Yet, recent developments in several cities suggest that the arc for unhoused people might be bending towards justice, as the momentum for Stop the Sweeps and Right to Rest campaigns build across regions.

## SAN FRANCISCO

What has grown to become commonplace on San Francisco's streets was captured on video on October 19: an unhoused woman in the Mission District returned from a trip to a public restroom only to find no fewer than two police officers and four Department of Public Works sanitation workers using three City vehicles to take away her tent.

What differed from other incidents was that the video went viral. As Taylor Ahlgren taped the incident in progress, he asked the police officers, "Is this legal?" It turns out that the City workers disregarded policy stating they can't take away property without determining who it belongs to and whether it's abandoned or not. Public Works staff are also obliged to "bag and tag" seized items and issue a receipt so that owners can reclaim their possessions.

A woman heard offscreen said she was sending the video and wanted to arrange a meeting with the Police and Public Works departments and "the supervisor." It wasn't clear if she meant any of the department supervisors or Hillary Ronen, who represents the Mission District on the Board of Supervisors.

## OAKLAND

On a larger scale, an encampment of up to 120 vehicle dwellers on Wood Street in West Oakland was cleared last week. Several of the inhabitants were moved from the 4.5-acre site to curbside. The City of Oakland first issued "notices to tow" in October,

but the residents rallied against the eviction on November 5, said Dayton Andrews, an organizer with United Front Against Displacement.

"This slowed down the city until [the City] ran out of money budgeted to pay the tow companies," he said. "Now [the community is] writing a letter to the city of Oakland demanding this not happen again, that adequate housing alternatives be found for all residents, and for services to be expanded in the area until that time."

Ironically, the site is reported to become a sanctioned parking site for vehicle dwellers, though will likely only have room for 60 vehicles - half of the number present before the eviction.

## BERKELEY

Elsewhere in the Bay Area, unhoused Berkeley residents marched to their city hall on October 23 after weeks of roadside camps were continually evicted by Caltrans. A row of tents by the University Avenue I-80 exit with the words "Where Do We Go" has become a symbol of the lack of resources — and perpetual dislocation — for Berkeley's unsheltered population.

"We don't have cell phones, we don't have electricity, we don't have toilets, we don't have trash cans," advocate Andrea Henson said into a bullhorn. "We are the most vulnerable. We're going to be swept up, and we're gonna stand here until someone speaks to us."

Another speaker said, "We're supposed to be a sanctuary city? Well, I want sanctuary."

Caltrans, the state agency tasked with maintaining the highway, was heavily criticized a couple of years ago when its crews displaced a San Francisco encampment beneath an interchange.

## DENVER

Meanwhile in Denver, homeless activist Jerry Burton is challenging the city's camping ban. Earlier this year, he was ticketed after he and other residents of the Jerr-E-Ville encampment moved twice in the same day.

By fighting the citation in court, Burton seeks to overturn the local ordinance on the grounds that it violates his right against cruel and unusual punishment and his right to equal protection under the law.

Several weeks of hearings and testimonies have already ensured, and the judge is expected to rule whether the ordinance is constitutional. If the case isn't ruled in Burton's favor, he could very well appeal.

## LAS VEGAS



TJ Johnson with Coalition on Homelessness and the Stolen Belonging team at the Nov. 10th Music City event encouraging attendees to join the campaign fighting for #SolutionsNotSweeps. Photo by Leslie Dreyer

On November 6, the city council of Las Vegas passed a tent ban and sit-lie law covering the downtown area. Setting up a tent or resting on the sidewalk has been made a misdemeanor, punishable by a \$1,000 fine or six-month jail term. The action drew national attention when Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Julian Castro denounced the ordinance as criminalizing homelessness.

Before the council passed the ordinance on a 5-2 vote, about 50 people spoke against the measure to the body — compared with 15 from proponents. Unhoused resident Ron Moore joked that his housing status made him a repeat offender.

He was on a "four-city, three-state crime spree this year," he said. "I confess that during my homelessness, I found myself tired, and sat down and even slept on the street."

## PROBABLE COURT ACTION

The flurry of cities' and counties' legislation imposing restrictions on homeless people's activity could come to a head at the U.S. Supreme Court. At issue would be the Martin v. Boise case, where the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals have upheld previous court rulings stating that clearing encampments in cities without available shelter is unconstitutional. If the highest court in the land declines to hear the appeals of the City of Boise, or decides

to hear the case and rule in favor of the homeless petitioners, all previous rulings will stand.

But several cities have also signed on to amicus briefs supporting Boise against the rights of unhoused residents. Nine member counties of the California State Association of Counties, including Los Angeles and Sacramento counties, endorsed Boise's ordinance. So did 25 municipalities, including the City of Los Angeles.

Some local jurisdictions are creating temporary shelters, while at the same time crafting legislation that would comply with Martin v. Boise should that case be upheld.

As cities grasp for a quick fix to the decades-old problem of homelessness, community members and organizations are joining together to fight unjust laws and hold cities accountable for illegal confiscation and theft of unhoused folks' property. That includes litigation — Fresno settled a lawsuit with community members in 2008 — and community organizing.

Stolen Belonging is an example of such organizing: It is joining with the #SolutionsNotSweeps campaign, which is working in solidarity with the Services Not Sweeps coalition out of Los Angeles. For more information, visit [stolenbelonging.org](http://stolenbelonging.org) or follow Stolen Belonging on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. ■



# SOCIAL JUSTICE CALENDAR

**\* 30 \* YEARS \* CELEBRATION!**

**December 12th**  
**@ 5:30-8PM**  
**280 TURK ST**

**= FREE EVENT =**

**OPEN MIC \* BAKE OFF \* STORIES**

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## CITY SWEEPS RETRAUMATIZE WOMEN AND SURVIVORS

Meghan "Roadkill" Johnson

Sweeps in San Francisco have been keeping many houseless residents cautious and afraid at the looming uncertainty, "Is today the day? Am I going to be targeted again?" We are seeing a hike in the number of women and queer folks slowly coming forward. Revisiting open wounds surrounding their traumatic encounters of sexual harassment and assault while on the streets and at the hands of the city.

As fellow team member of the Stolen Belonging project I've been working with several housing justice advocates including many who've experienced homelessness, to gather and examine testimonies of unhoused SF residents and the impact of the city sweeps. During our work, we noticed a troubling pattern: several women mentioned the theft of their medication, sexual harassment and abuse they were subjected to on a regular basis by city workers, which adds unnecessary trauma to the violence they regularly endure on the streets.

Patricia Gonzales, who regularly stays in the Mission, described one sweep she had been through. She had been very ill when DPW came to clear her belongings. She reported that they took many things including a small

camper stove and medication bag, both essential for her survival. She jumped up, "You took my stove, just give it back!" she pleaded with the DPW workers. They looked at her and began laughing and recording her. By this time Patricia, frantic, managed to get in the back of the DPW truck to try and retrieve her things, but the workers threatened to call the police.

"I don't steal and I don't do anything to you guys [DPW] and you just record me and actually throw me in jail for taking my own stuff back," she recalled saying to them. "After that, DPW kept my medicine and continued to laugh in my face, recording me. Even after I told them I was sick. I need that." She explained to them that she is diabetic and makes little to no money. The likelihood of replacing stolen medicine is nearly impossible for houseless folks like Patricia, and merely trying to hold onto survival gear thrown into the back of a truck like trash, means jail time.

Veronica Ocampo, another unhoused woman surviving on SF's streets, told us about escaping a dangerous man only to return the next morning to find the city had stolen everything she owned. "That night when I was by myself and he

was trying to start problems, I was scared so I left and when I came back, everything was just gone. My friend told me that the police and DPW had took everything. It really sucked because my friend had just gave me a brand new tent, clothes, jewelry, female hygiene products. My phone was gone. I was real shaken up."

Fabiola Lopez, a Trans Latina Woman, says she has trouble advocating for herself because of the speech barrier between herself and city workers. She said DPW sweeps her regularly and throw away everything she owns and don't allow her to retrieve her essentials like her ID, her work permit, and immigration related papers. They throw it all away. On another occasion, DPW workers suggested she get to a place where she could take a shower. The shelter denied her entry for being a trans woman, and when she returned to her tent, the workers had stolen and trashed everything. She was left with nothing.

Heather Lee, an unhoused resident of the SoMa district, described her makeshift tent being torn open by DPW workers while she and other females were undressing. She says they came without warning. She vividly recalls, "A DPW worker

ripped our tarps and blankets off of us, even as we told him that there were females changing underneath. One of them said something about pimping me and the other girl out. They continued to throw everything I owned away and wouldn't even let me get my medication, my survival gear or anything sentimental... Start opening your eyes, [housed people]," she exclaimed. "These things are happening out here to us and nobody is believing it or doing anything about it. It's ridiculous the abuse that's going on. It needs to stop because it's happening from the people that should be helping us the most."

These stories are mere examples of the reality homeless women go through living day to day, under Breed's administration. Sometimes a tent or a tarp is the only thing keeping women safe from the violence of the open streets at night. These women deserve better, the city needs to take accountability for their forced trauma and bring the sweeps to a halt. As of now, there is no real effort by city officials to stop the sweeps.

No more sweeping their lives away San Francisco! ■





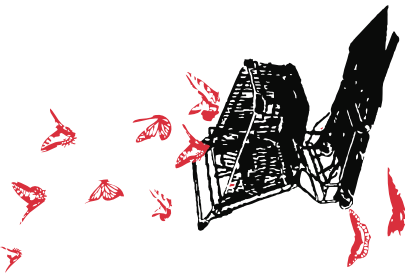
"I'm homeless. I'm 46 years old. I'm on very expensive medication and DPW, for the fifth time came and took my stuff: my tent, including my backpack with all my medicines and all my clothes, my whatever shelter I had. Last Monday they took all my meds. It was a 90-day supply. And just to get it back for a 30 days supply, the pharmacy is charging me \$3,500 for one of the medications. I can't afford that."  
- Patricia, SF Resident

[Excerpt from interview with Stolen Belonging team. Photo by Leslie Dreyer of SF resident Patricia holding most valuable belonging stolen by DPW during the sweeps: her medication.]

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Stolen Belonging team hanging project story tags in the Mission District. Photos by Meghan "Roadkill" Johnson