



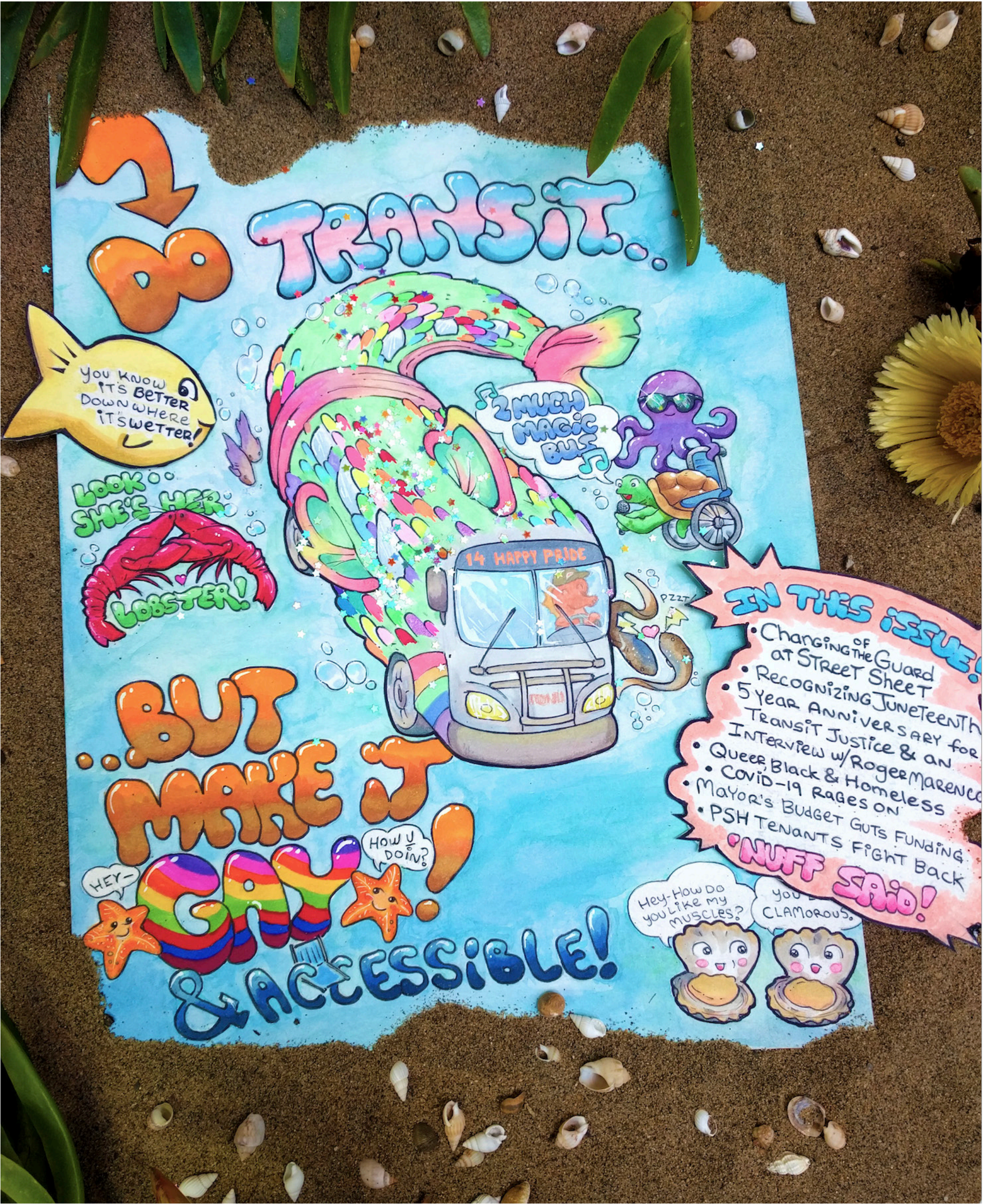
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# STREET



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- 'NUFF SAID!**



# EDITOR’S NOTE: GOODBYE, QUIVER. HELLO, TJ!

So much is changing here at Street Sheet that we are running a rare Editor’s Note to keep you all informed about what is new with the paper!

Starting with this issue, we are so pleased to introduce TJ Johnston as the new Editor-In-Chief of Street Sheet. TJ is a seasoned, San Francisco-based journalist whose written work has been featured in this newspaper—as well as 48 Hills, SF Public Press, Poor Magazine, Street Spirit and numerous other publications—for over two decades. His consistent and thorough reporting brings together the loyalty to truth and storytelling that defines a good journalist along with the insight that comes from his own lived experience of homelessness.

As a longtime volunteer, TJ has led journalism trainings for aspiring Street Sheet writers, contributed articles about countless important political developments and kept our website current. Last year, he joined our staff as Assistant Editor and has led our small team of volunteer copy editors to make sure our copy is crisp and clear, while also creating our very first Street Sheet Style Guide that offers excellent insights for how to communicate about homelessness and social justice.

For these reasons, and so many more, we are thrilled to welcome TJ Johnston as our new Editor-In-Chief!

Quiver Watts, the outgoing Editor-in-Chief, will continue as the paper’s Design Coordinator and volunteer as a writer and copy editor while pursuing a master’s degree in family therapy. They became editor in 2017 after working as the Development Director at the Coalition on Homelessness, the same homeless advocacy organization that publishes Street Sheet. We wish them the best of luck!

In less joyful news, the Street Spirit, our sister paper in the East Bay, is out of print as they search for a new source of funding to revive the project. In the meantime, we are excited to temporarily expand our coverage and distribution into Berkeley and Oakland so that the amazing vendors there continue to have a paper to sell. For the next six months you’ll be able to find this paper in the hands of vendors around the Bay. If you’d like to help save the Street Spirit, you can donate to that newspaper here, [tinyurl.com/SAVESTREETSPIRIT](https://tinyurl.com/SAVESTREETSPIRIT), and remember to write “Street Spirit” in the appropriate field.

Finally, our Venmo program for Street Sheet vendors is now officially closed. We originally started the program to help our vendors take cashless payments before Venmo started offering a way for folks without bank accounts to earn money. Now we are excited to support our vendors in opening their own cashless payment accounts, and encourage our readers to continue to support our vendors in their work by donating generously as you are able!

And now for something completely different, both editors interview each other on their time at Street Sheet and what they observed about homelessness in San Francisco. These interviews have been edited for brevity and clarity.

## AN OUTGOING INTERVIEW WITH QUIVER WATTS CONDUCTED BY TJ JOHNSTON

**TJ: If you had to compile a sort of highlight reel of your time at Street Sheet, what would you include?**

Q: I would say, starting with my first issue, the first time that I put the paper together start to finish—gathered submissions, laid out a paper and then got to see it in print—was such a joyous moment for me. I started the job with, you know, no experience with editing, no experience with InDesign, and really had to hit the ground running, teaching myself what my job was.



From there, I feel like there have been a lot of really beautiful high points. We published what I think is the first ever sex worker issue of Street Sheet that compiled art and storytelling and articles from current and former sex workers. It could have been a low point in that it ended up costing the organization \$75,000 in funding from the Catholic Church! But ultimately that moment really crystallized for me why this is my organizing home because, you know, despite that money being a huge part of our budget at the time, I was supported by other staff here to keep that issue alive online and keep promoting it. We ultimately decided that uplifting the voices and perspectives of sex workers was more important than getting funding. So that was a really beautiful moment.

We also had a really wonderful writer training program, in collaboration with a journalist at CalMatters, where we brought together a cohort of about 10 people with lived experience of homelessness who were paid to participate in a 10-session training and who were able to build their writing, reporting and journalism skills.

I’m really happy to say that I’m leaving on a very high note that we just printed a very unique issue of this paper called “The Land Back Issue” that was done in collaboration with the Street Spirit in the East Bay [for] their last print publication (for now), and with Sogorea Te’ Land Trust in the East Bay. I’m happy to be leaving that legacy and also to have included the first land acknowledgement that we’ve ever run in Street Sheet that will continue to be a fixture of the paper.

**What were some of the low points that you experienced in your tenure?**

I guess I would say the reality of how the City government responds to homelessness in San Francisco has been the lowest point. Local policy has been pretty devastating throughout my time here and, as proud as I am of the work that we’ve done to resist it, I think criminalization of homelessness has become an even more consistent problem over time. Even throughout shelter-in-place and the ongoing COVID pandemic, we’re seeing just these really brutal encampment sweeps happening in San Francisco, depriving people of basic necessities. We’re facing criminalization of drug users in San Francisco. We’re facing real abandonment of disabled people and immunocompromised people who no longer have access to ways to protect themselves from COVID-19. So that and a lot of just like visible suffering with mental health and near emergency-level conditions that are present in the Tenderloin on a day-to-day basis. I would just say that the lack of support and resources being offered by the City administration is by far the lowest point.

Internally, we really struggled to keep vendors around to sell the paper and so I think one of the hardest things that we’re currently facing would be just getting our distribution back as we recover from COVID-19. And I’m hopeful that we’ll continue to rebuild that program over time, because the vendors are obviously just the most important piece of the newspaper. We can put out a fantastic newspaper, but it doesn’t matter if nobody’s reading it and nobody is earning income off of sales. I would say that’s our biggest struggle internally as a newspaper.

*Interview with incoming Editor TJ Johnston continues on Page 3*

## HELP KEEP STREET SHEET IN PRINT!



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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.

Editor: TJ Johnston  
Artistic Spellcaster: Quiver Watts  
Vendor Coordinator: Emmett House

Cover Art: Zach

Copyeditors: Kaveh Waddell

Jordan Davis, Julie, Zach,  
Johanna Elattar, Jack Bragen,  
Jazzie O. Gray

*Street Sheet is published and distributed on the unceded ancestral homeland of the Ramaytush Ohlone peoples. We recognize and honor the ongoing presence and stewardship of the original people of this land. We recognize that homelessness can not truly be ended until this land is returned to its original stewards.*

## ORGANIZE WITH US

### HOUSING JUSTICE WORKING GROUP TUESDAYS @ 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! Email [mcarrera@cohsf.org](mailto:mcarrera@cohsf.org) to get involved!

### HUMAN RIGHTS WORKING GROUP WEDNESDAYS @12:30

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! Email [lpierce@cohsf.org](mailto:lpierce@cohsf.org)

## EVERYONE IS INVITED TO JOIN OUR WORKING GROUP MEETINGS!





# WELCOME TO OUR NEW EDITOR IN CHIEF, TJ JOHNSTON

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY QUIVER WATTS

**Q: How did you first get involved with the Coalition on Homelessness, and when?**

TJ: My entrée into the Coalition on Homelessness began with a by taking a free writing class that was given by a Media Alliance back in 2000. I thought it was going to be a class on writing fiction and poetry, but it turned out to be a class on investigative journalism. The whole class project that we worked on was an investigation on poverty-pimping nonprofits that purportedly serve that homeless population but paid their executives six-figure salaries, and that ran in Street Sheet and Street Spirit in January of 2001.

**What made you interested in investigative journalism after you learned that it was not a poetry and fiction class? Why did you stick it out?**

I stuck it out because there was like really nothing else (laughter). And, it's that the project was concerned about issues of homelessness and poverty, it was something that attracted me, I would like to address in my writing, just as far as social justice issues are concerned. And that just gave me something to motivate myself into writing. I'm not a particularly disciplined writer. And, journalism afforded me that opportunity.

**You've been a journalist now for what, how many years?**

Since 2000.

**So for more than two decades, you've been a journalist covering primarily the homelessness beat in the Bay Area, is that right?**

That's correct. I've been doing that for over 20 years now.

**You're certainly not unique in being a reporter who focuses on homelessness in San Francisco, but unlike most reporters who focus on homelessness in San Francisco, you actually have your own lived experience of homelessness. I'm wondering how your experience of homelessness influences you as a journalist and the way that you tell stories, the way you ask questions?**

It was one of life's great ironies that as a reporter who covered homelessness, for as long as I have, suddenly began to experience homelessness himself. I lost my housing in 2011, and then I kind of had to experience the things that a lot of unhoused people would have to do as far as trying to find a way to shelter myself and survive, devoting several hours of the day trying to keep a roof over my head via the emergency shelter system. And, at the same time, also trying to continue my journalistic endeavors, just writing for Street Sheet and writing for other news organizations at the same time. It's quite a challenge, just to keep that part of my life going, when I didn't have a place where I could go at night, knowing that I could come in

and stay there.

**I have not actually realized that you were covering homelessness before you had lived experience!**

The timeline was rather unusual. And I just had this regular day job when I took that Media Alliance class, and then I started submitting to Poor Magazine, to Street Sheet, to Street Spirit, and other news organizations. Then, I became a casualty of the Great Recession and used up my 99 weeks of unemployment benefits, and then found myself going to shelters.

**Well, San Francisco has been lucky to have you as a person covering the homeless beat for over two decades of your tenure, but it's a unique trajectory that you've been on. So as you are moving into this new role as Street Sheet editor, what are you most excited for, And what do you imagine for the future of the paper?**

What excites me as my new role as Street Sheet editor is working with the writers and artists and poets on the pieces of work that they agreed to for the paper. I'm looking forward to these opportunities of collaboration with them. And also, just to continue to have the paper function as a bully pulpit for people who've experienced severe poverty and homelessness, and just make sure that our policy makers listen to us and effectuate policies that, one, reduces the harm that we experience and, two, to actually alleviate and eliminate homelessness.

Read the full interview with Quiver Watts and TJ Johnston on our website, [streetsheet.org](http://streetsheet.org)

## 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!

**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.

**VISIT [WWW.STREETSHEET.ORG/SUBMIT-YOUR-WRITING/](http://WWW.STREETSHEET.ORG/SUBMIT-YOUR-WRITING/) OR BRING SUBMISSIONS TO 280 TURK STREET TO BE CONSIDERED**

# JUNETEENTH: 'BOUT TIME WE RECOGNIZE

JAZZIE O. GRAY

Juneteenth—also known as Jubilee Day, Freedom Day, Black Independence Day, Emancipation Day and Juneteenth National Independence Day—is the annual commemoration on June 19 of the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the United States. President Biden first officially recognized the federal holiday in 2021, but Juneteenth has been celebrated since 1865. So why did it take so long to acknowledge the freedom of all African Americans in this country nationally? Let's look at its 150-year history and illuminate its importance today.

On January 1, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing enslaved people in the Southern secessionist states of the Confederacy. In parts of Confederate territory, this information was met with resistance, was not enforced due to the lack of presence of Union troops, or did not make it to the region at all. On June 19, 1865, 2,000 Union troops arrived in Texas, the last state of the Confederacy with institutional slavery, to deliver the news of freedom. Union General Gordon Granger delivered General Order No. 3 to 250,000 enslaved people and their enslavers in Galveston, stating:

“The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and

slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.”

As this profound news rang across the state of Texas, reactions from the formerly enslaved varied from astonishment, to joy, to confusion. Some lingered to learn of this new relationship between employer and employee, while those with nowhere to go immediately headed North for better opportunities to reunite their families and enjoy the breath of freedom.

To mark this occasion, the formerly enslaved and their descendants gathered annually to celebrate by hosting barbecues with activities such as rodeos, fishing, praying and public readings from African-American writers. Everyone came prepared with a traditional dish. Red foods were commonly incorporated because they contrast with the green, brown, and white foods often fed to enslaved people. The color red was also a unifying symbol among Africans and Carribeans who were shipped through Texas during the slave trade, because all their home countries have the color red in their official flags. People from the Republic of Congo, Gabon, Benin, Togo and the Yoruba of Nigeria place spiritual value on the color red and therefore incorporated red foods such as watermelon, red velvet cake, hibiscus tea, and strawberry pop in honor of their heritage. As traditions continue through time and differ among regions, memories of the past are acknowledged, recognized,

and honored by the descendents of enslaved people—but only for those who are aware of this day.

Although more are aware of its existence today, the history and significance of the Juneteenth holiday are not familiar to all Americans, even within African American communities. Some found Juneteenth more recently, in their teenage or adult years. It is often something heard through the grapevine from a family member or friend but never explored until later in life. Many African Americans are “disconnected from their history and culture,” says Danielle Taylor, a San Francisco resident who celebrates Juneteenth.

Juneteenth is a way of honoring those who have built this country with their blood, sweat, bones and tears. It is a time to “celebrate the freedom of our people,” adds Alexis Rodriguez, executive director of the SF Citywide Black Student Union. Celebrating means recognizing a painful history while honoring the contributions

African Americans have made to this country. Juneteenth is about reconnecting with ancestral lineage by nurturing the traditions and passing down this heritage to the next generation.

While it may have taken over 150 years to acknowledge the actual day of Independence for all people in America, “having a day to celebrate our independence and to bring light to our dark history [is one way to] pay homage to the legacy we have now,” according to Taylor. ■





# CELEBRATING A FIVE YEAR VICTORY FOR TRANSIT JUSTICE!

ZACH

[HTTPS://ZKARNAZES.WIXSITE.COM/ACCESS/MUNI-FOR-ALL](https://zkarnazes.wixsite.com/access/muni-for-all)

Pop the champagne corks—or the apple Martinelli's! It's been five long years of struggle to access buses in my wheelchair and reach a settlement with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) and the City and County of San Francisco. The ink is dry, and it's time to celebrate!

What has this long and arduous litigation accomplished? Actual changes to the rules, training, website access, disability discrimination reporting process, operator incentive programs and so much more! Both passengers and bus drivers are set to benefit from hundreds of hours of work I've poured into this, fighting not just for my rights, but for all of our rights to enjoy the great public transit this city has to offer.

This lawsuit not only creates legal precedent for holding SFMTA accountable to its own policies, it also expands protections for disabled riders and eliminates some alleged discriminatory practices that were previously standard practice. Some highlights are that SFMTA has agreed to incorporate content from disabled people into their operator trainings, they will no longer require ramp users to provide their destination when boarding, and they will explore new disability incentive programs for operators. The lawsuit also coincided with changes to keep camera footage from buses longer—giving riders more time to access evidence, a new ADA-complaint website, as well as complying with the Transportation Workers Union contract to provide annual paid customer service training to drivers. The full settlement text is published on my website, along with lots of videos on YouTube [www.youtube.com/@DisabilityActivismSF](https://www.youtube.com/@DisabilityActivismSF) (my website is linked in the header). There is also a video of the events that lead to the lawsuit in the presentation I gave for Transit Equity Day 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmoQon-6aoA>.

Our unhoused disabled neighbors win the most with this legal precedent, since thousands of San Francisco's disabled are without permanent shelter or without rights and protections. In my travels around San Francisco, they are the most commonly refused boarding or accommodations simply for how they are dressed, look or what medical aids and belongings they carry.

This is also a win for our environment, as public transportation remains the most ecologically friendly solution for travel by far (sorry, Elon) and saves budget, out-of-pocket costs and time over the broken separate but unequal paratransit system.

I started off this journey around 2017, never planning to file a lawsuit or anything like that. As bus operators routinely passed me up, refused to put down the ramp or stop next to

the curb, I learned that there was a different kind of San Francisco than the one I experienced back when I could walk. I thought things could be fixed if our officials just knew about the problem and how bad it was out here.

I started attending dozens of public meetings of every oversight committee there was—Mayor's Office on Disability, Mayor's Disability Council, SFMTA Multimodal-Accessibility Advisory Committee (say that three times fast), SFMTA Executive Board hearings, and more—articulating the discrimination I was experiencing. I posted videos on YouTube and emailed SFMTA staff. I engaged in a broken ADA complaint system and went to hearings. Sadly, every official ignored me; not a single one communicated any desire to work with me and the bus operators to improve things.

Then, I reached out to the Transportation Workers Union (TWU) Local 250A.

One thing I made sure to do in the beginning of this process was to stress that I support the union. Unions are vital to our survival in an economy where the top three billionaires own more than the bottom 165 million Americans. Say what you want about union dues, bureaucracy or anything else—without unions, this country dies. Unions gave us a minimum wage. Unions gave us the weekend (no, not The Weeknd, that's something else). Unions gave us New Deal programs, Social Security, Medicare, Veterans support, and oh so much more. Yes, as the song goes, "There Is Power In A Union!"

But in this scenario, I was facing discrimination from union operators. I had to peel the onion, and look beneath the surface. SFMTA appointed "neutral hearing officers" (they are anything but) and worked tirelessly to blame the bus drivers for my misgivings. I didn't buy it. After all, the city has millions upon millions of dollars to fix this problem, yet City officials were the ones ignoring me.

I began chatting with some union folks and people in the transit activism scene. Eventually I met Roger Marenco; then president of TWU's Local 250A. Roger isn't like your typical office bureaucrat or public official. He's got that OG Mission vibe, if you know what I mean: curt with an often stern expression, ready for action, and always emphasizing the correct pronunciation of his last name, "Roger *muh-rain-coh*." A no BS kinda guy, who won't waste a second of your time with flowery talk or soothing words about the weather. Clearly proud of his heritage, proud to be a transit worker and proud to be a San Franciscan.

Back in 2020, before this legal victory, Roger and I sat down for coffee when he came out to my neighborhood to meet me at an accessible place.

I watched his face as he scrolled the YouTube videos I offered up on my phone; bus drivers yelling at me, passengers cussing at me, closing doors in my face, not pulling up the curb because of my wheelchair. His was a poker face though; he didn't reveal anything. I was expecting Roger to do the same as every other official had: ignore me, gaslight me, or get really defensive.

But Roger isn't every other official.

"Which bus routes are these? Which ones are giving you the problems?" he asked. He wanted to solve this *immediately*. The trouble was, it was a huge problem that spans every bus line in the city, with hundreds of Americans with Disabilities Act discrimination cases coming into 311 every year. Did he want to *look* like he was fixing it, or put in the elbow grease over months and possibly years to make it really happen?

- I learned before long that it was the latter, that Roger was a fighter and a fine example of what I call a "getshitdone-ist." He attended the Transit Justice meetings at Senior Disability Action, hosted by the wonderful Pi Ra. He took my calls and responded to my emails. He even convinced coworkers to attend those disability meetings to learn our perspective. In this whole process, I learned some pretty interesting things:
- I learned that disabled people played zero role in the training of bus operators.
- I learned that less than 1% of the 400-hour new bus operator training is devoted to ADA issues.
- I learned that bus operators are given fixed cutthroat time schedules that penalize an operator for "going slow" to say—oh, I don't know—spend an extra 10 minutes to board a wheelchair or an unhoused person who needs the ramp for their walker or laundry cart.
- I learned that bus operators were being paid a measly \$26 per hour—a shockingly low amount for such a dangerous occupation.

The union was the last place I thought I'd receive help, but there it was. Can you say, "unlikely ally?"

As things progressed, and SFMTA wasn't budging, it became clear that my last resort was to file a lawsuit. The American with Disabilities Act is a severely limited set of laws that provides us no enforcement mechanism except through the courts. It's one of the great tragedies of the disability movement today, as we often see people with disabilities or "serial litigants" as the subject of much hatred and disdain in the news, instead of seeing the constant



bigotries and discrimination that corrodes our society and segregates us from the communities we love. There are also unusually short time windows to file an ADA lawsuit—in some cases only six months! So if you are thinking of talking to a lawyer to protect your rights, I suggest not to wait.

One sobering realization I found was that nonprofits are often useless in these struggles for civil and human rights. Senior and Disability Action (SDA) was in no way interested, despite the great work they'd done for transit access. "It's biting off the hand that feeds them," said the late disabled activist Bob Planthold. Some individuals in the organization gave behind-the-scenes support, but I could not get any kind of official help.

Fortunately, I found a few attorneys that were very interested. Some couldn't take the case due to other trials and such, and gave me free guidance. Others, like David Geffen, helped to make a massive impact.

Credit is also due to SFMTA and the City Attorney's office for coming to the table. While nothing seemed to get accomplished before, once there was a lawsuit in place, I seemed to have the attention of City departments. I finally got to meet Annette Williams, the head of the SFMTA ADA department, who was surprisingly nice. We had

long meetings where we began to flesh out what the issues were, and what some cost-effective solutions might be.

It's hard to describe how wonderful that feeling was, to finally be treated like a real human being by the agency for the first time. It reminded me of Dr. Martin Luther King's famous Memphis picket with striking sanitation workers, holding up signs with the simple yet powerful slogan, "I AM A MAN." I wasn't "speaking truth to power," sometimes a fruitless exercise (as one

friend told me, "power *knows* the score—to them I'm just an obstacle!"). I was *negotiating* with power! Reaching to find our collective humanity, for all of us to get away from legal jargon and develop ways to improve transportation for everyone. To SFMTA and the City Attorney's great credit, they worked with me and we created together some really exciting and positive changes which you can read about at: <https://bit.ly/transitvictory> ■

One thing I made sure to do in the beginning of this process was to stress that I support the union. Unions are vital to our survival in an economy where the top three billionaires own more than the bottom 165 million Americans. ... But in this scenario, I was facing discrimination from union operators.



# AN UNLIKELY ALLY:

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ROGER MARENCO, FORMER TRANSIT WORKERS UNION PRESIDENT

ZACH

Throughout the years of work I put into my lawsuit against the San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency (SFMTA), my most unlikely ally was Roger Marengo—a man who was brave enough to look beyond his immediate needs, to see the struggle of the vulnerable and disenfranchised. While currently on the outs with the Transit Workers Union (TWU) Local 250A, the union he was elected president of from 2018 to 2022, he talks now of starting his own union, and has other plans for making an impact in the future of local politics.

I asked Roger what he thought of my recent court settlement with the City and SFMTA.

“It was a great victory, but there are many more victories in front. That’s just one victory out of many,” he said.

I recently had the privilege to sit down with Roger and chat about the recent victory and all things San Francisco public transit. It was a sunny Saturday when we met up for a burger in the Mission—predictably interrupted by friendly faces passing through who know and love Roger. He seemed at home in this environment, waving to buses at the intersection, a show of solidarity with the rank and file. During the entire interview, music blared from the speakers across the outdoor patio hutch we dined in. I thought about how so much noise must be like background noise to the many bus operators that work for years weaving those giant metallic caterpillars through busy city traffic to help us reach our destinations.

The following interview was edited for clarity and context.

**Zach:** *[Speaking on the lawsuit outcome] “SFMTA, they had their own solution originally - or at least during that time period - called The Secret Rider Program...a program where SFMTA would hire undercover agents to monitor bus operators, to try to catch them in the act of alleged wrongdoing.*

Roger: I don’t know if that’s what it’s called, but at this moment, the training department does indeed board the buses in plain clothes, no uniform. And they monitor the operator. So, it’s happening at this moment.

**And..What are your feelings about that?**

It’s a mixed bag of feelings, I completely understand they have a job to do, the trainers, the supervisors. I totally understand that. Unfortunately I feel the way they are approaching that is more of a punishing mentality, meaning, “Aha! I gotchu! You did x, y, and z.” If you ride any bus, any line, any day, every single transit operator in the City and County of San Francisco is committing some type of a violation. Whether they are not wearing safety shoes, whether they are running 26 miles an

hour as opposed to 25, whether they ran the stop sign at 1 mile an hour. Whether they had to leave some passengers behind, for whatever reason. Whether they forgot to use their safety vest. Every single transit operator...is committing some type of violation every single day. That is a fact. It is a fact....

So if you want to discipline someone, you’re going to discipline everybody. But if you want to encourage someone to do better, then I would recommend incentivizing them to achieve the goal of being an expert operator... I like to think and hope that incentivizing and rewarding people for doing good things is a more positive outcome. Cause it creates a better worker.

**...I found this out during the course of the lawsuit that less than 1% of all the training hours goes towards disability training. What do you think about that?**

I think that is one of the many issues or problems... If an operator is only receiving one hour for this type of training per year, maybe it should be one day per year... Maybe they just need more exposure to how and why these problems are just so prevalent and why they need to be addressed. Maybe the operators need more visible, more tangible examples. Meaning, maybe Zach Karnazes could show up to one of the new hire classes or to one of the orientations or to one of the graduations, or to one of these eight-hour classes to explain how and why those problems pertaining to seniors and the disabled are so prevalent, and what can be done to fix it. Because it’s one thing to hear it from a supervisor, and it’s another to hear it from an actual person that suffers these consequences.

**I couldn’t have said it better myself...Do you think that disabled people should be given a chance to be part of these trainings...or lead like a class, or a part of a training?**

Not only do I fully agree and support that idea of senior citizens and people with mobility issues, people with other special needs should be involved and a part of the training, I would say that the SFMTA, the agency, could and/or should hire these people with special needs so that this could be their job, in terms of providing classes to the operators...

...Because I would not want to teach what it’s like being in a wheelchair. Because that would be hypocritical of me. I would want someone who actually lives it, so they could speak on it from real-life experience.

**Beautiful. You had mentioned at one point, If I’m remembering correctly, you spoke publicly at City Hall during the pandemic offering to take a 10% salary cut as the head of Local 250A instead of the proposed austerity measures, if other leaders would join you. Can you say a little something about that?**

I made that public declaration when there was a threat of layoffs to the workforce. I said there’s no need for a layoff threat—I will voluntarily reduce my pay at the top—chop from the top if you, other city and elected leaders and department heads, also take a pay cut of ten percent...That was my challenge, which no one took me up on, except Supervisor Aaron Peskin. But he did not take a pay cut—nobody else did, just to make that clear.

**I’ll tell you this, it was music to my ears, if nothing else. Just the idea, y’know, that somebody was putting that forward.**

**...Of course we’ve seen a lot of tragic mass shootings happening all over the country, and one of these was actually transit operators in the South Bay, as**

**you know. Obviously this is a different transit agency, but do you have any ideas for what led to this tragedy? And do you have any idea of what could be done to prevent, God forbid, anything like that happening in San Francisco?**

I don’t know what the conditions were down in San Jose when this happened but I can tell you what the conditions are up here in San Francisco that might lead an operator to do something like that. The conditions are working under a tremendous amount of stress, working under heavy pressure loads, working under an agency that does not take into account its workforce as humans, as employees, as workers. A lot of the problems that the operators endure come from not being heard, not being listened to, when something bad is happening out there on the road. And supervisors and managers just blow off the operator and say, “Continue in service, operator. Yeah, I know that [someone] just spit on your face, but it’s okay because... it was just a small amount of spit... So yeah, continue in service. Wash off your face.” These types of things, year after year, decade after decade can cause a huge amount of buildup on the inside of stress, pressure, tension, hypertension, anxiety, depression, etc. and eventually can get to a point where the person explodes. And hopefully that never happens here or anywhere else.

**Tell me about your recent victory, your recent contract negotiation in, I think, 2022...?**

That’s correct, June 2022.

**I think you had mentioned it was one of the highest raises operators had received? What are some things that were accomplished?**

I’ve negotiated two contracts [as chief negotiator], and in those two contracts... They are the best contracts that TWU Local 250A has ever experienced; has ever gained... The one in 2022 we obtained the largest wage increase among public sector workers, ever. That was 10% over the next year and a half. I was able to increase the operator awards, and was able to convert them to percentages—which means more money every time that we get a wage increase.

**Because it affects inflation?**

Correct. I was able to also convert the premium of the uniform allowance.. and pretty much all the premiums we have, I was able to convert it to a percentage, which keeps up with the rate of inflation.

**I would see you at meetings and stuff, and I’d be like, here’s this guy Roger Marengo, he’s not disabled...but he’s coming to our meetings? What made him think this was important enough to come to?**

What made it important is because at some point in time, I might be there. Or I know some people who are there right now, like my parents who use the bus. Or senior citizens who are disabled. So I would want them to be treated fairly, equally. And sometimes being treated equally means that you need to be treated unequal. Now let me explain what I mean by that: If you’re treating everyone equally and you’re saying, “Hurry up, get on the bus, let’s go, let’s go,” and then you see a wheelchair person, you cannot treat that wheelchair person equally. You cannot tell that person, “hurry up, c’mon, c’mon.” You cannot tell the 90-year-old senior citizen with two bags, “Hurry up, c’mon let’s go.” No, you have to treat them unequally, because you have to give them more time, give them more space. Give them a little more appreciation and respect, knowing that they have a special need that needs to be accommodated... That’s what I mean by treating them unequally...in

terms of giving them more.

**What is happening right now, I know you were the head of TWU Local 250A here in San Francisco, there have been some changes. What would you say those changes have been?**

I had been the president of TWU Local 250A from January 2018 until December 2022. Five years. In those five years I was brought up on more charges than every president in local 250A history combined. I was suspended more than every president in local 250A combined. I was harassed, intimidated, bullied, etc. more than every president combined, because of my ideas. Because I read the rules and the contract, because I understood what needed to be addressed. And because I spoke up and because I spoke out, I was targeted since day one. I was suspended the very first moment that I walked into the office. Every one of my suspensions up until April 2023 have been overturned.

**And they’ve been overturned by...?**

They have been overturned by the Transport Worker Union committee on appeals on the East Coast...overturned through the appeals process. At this very moment [April 2023] I’ve been suspended for the fifth time. My name has now been removed from the new election which we are going to be having, and I will no longer be running or seeking a term for Local 250A. Local 250A held an election in December 2022 which I filed an appeal against because I said that it was done incorrectly, in violation of our constitution and bylaws, and that it was conducted illegally. Because they committed many violations under the United States Department of Labor laws...that election was overturned by the TWU international appeals committee. So I have many victories under my belt. What I’m being accused of, charged with, at this very moment is more propaganda against me. I decided not to run for office anymore...

I am working on removing my union dues...because I am 100% in support of unions but I am 100% against corruption. And I have proven beyond a reasonable doubt that Local 250A was corrupt, is corrupt, will continue to be corrupt... I will not be paying a corrupt organization to be bringing me up on more charges and wasting more of our union members money.

One simple example [of corruption] that I will give, is after five or six decades of Local 250A being in existence, I was handed a budget of \$9,400...After less than three years I was able to turn around and provide more than \$500,000 in the bank account...That is progress right there. Where did the money go? I have no idea. But that is one of the many things that I want to do in City Hall as well. Find out where the hell the money is going, and reallocate it to these issues that you and I have been talking about.

**Do you see a day in the future when there might be a different union, without corruption, as a possibility for San Francisco [bus] operators?**

Yes, I do see that as a possibility. Yes.

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It was kind of Roger Marengo to offer up so much for this interview. Someone who turns \$9,400 into \$500,000 without a single penny spent by the workers, simply through smoking out the corruption. It makes me wonder, what this city could be like, and what support services we could have, if all our officials had the tenacity and moral fiber of a Roger Marengo? ■



# QUEER, BLACK, AND HOMELESS: A STORY OF STRUGGLE THAT SPANS CONTINENTS

JULIE

My name is Julie, I am a Black lesbian woman who migrated from Congo to San Francisco in search of sexual freedom and a better standard of living. Back in my country I kept my sexuality a secret until I decided one day to come out of the closet. Little did I know that it would bring me numerous family issues including being cast out by my father.

In my country arranged marriages is one of the cultures. My family had found me an older man who had paid part of my dowry when I was 12 years old. My wedding date was planned without my knowledge and my parents did not consider my preferences. On the eve of the wedding, I told my mother about my preferences and she looked at me with disappointment in her eyes.

She told my father about it and he could not help not hold himself. He gave me a tough beating breaking one of my hands and he banished me from his house and life in the middle of night. I ran to a close friend to seek refuge and she suggested I get a work visa and move to San Francisco where I would be accepted as I am. I took in the idea without a second thought since I was desperate and had no life at home.

Luckily within one year I was able to relocate and I was hosted by her aunt. Being in San Francisco was like a dream come true in the first few months. Her aunt was very harsh and held very strict christian values and wasn't open to any queer life.

I hide my sexuality from her due to fear of being kicked out. I mostly stayed in isolation and avoided too much conversation with her. I secured a job as a caregiver in one of her friend's house. My job was tough but I performed it perfectly.

Everything was perfect and my life had taken a good turn until I met a lady who matched my sexuality and we fell in love. It didn't take long before my friend's aunt came to know about it and she kicked me out of her home.

She shortly after had my employers dismiss me from my job. I stayed with the lady for a while and since I couldn't manage to get a job she also kicked me out due to the huge bill load I was giving her. I became homeless and jobless. Worse of all I was a Black lesbian, a community considered to be minority. These traits never made it easy for me to survive in San Francisco. I had no money and no family or friends to run to for help. I joined a small group of homeless youths who lived in one abandoned warehouse.

I made one friend and opened up to her. She told on me to her male friends who harassed me physically and mentally. One evening it was raining heavily and I was sleeping in one corner when a group of 3 men came by and took turns sexually violating me. I tried screaming and crying for help but due to the sounds of the heavy rainfall one could come.

Life became hard after that incident. I lost my self esteem and became a loner. I would only stay near people when the nearby church brought food for us. In a month's time, I fell sick, nearly dying. I was taken to hospital by well wishers where I was admitted. The doctors said I was pregnant and HIV positive.

I for sure never planned nor wanted the baby. I didn't know where to start nor what to do with my life. I severally tried taking my life but I wasn't successful. Months later I delivered a baby boy who was HIV positive due to lack of proper prenatal care.

My son and I continued living in the warehouse among other jobless and homeless people for some time. We would sometimes go for 3 days without food which affected my milk supply and shortly after my son passed on due to hunger and cold.

I fell into depression and was rescued by one church leader who brought me to hospital to get the help I needed. Am currently undergoing therapy and was put on ARVs. As much as they give me mental therapy, I can't stop but wonder what turn my life will take after here.

I really do regret some of the choices I made even if they were right. It's not easy to be queer some people take it as a disease or shame. If only my parents took it positively, I wouldn't be in this situation. ■

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# THE COVID-19 BATTLE CONTINUES FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE

JOHANNA ELATTAR

As I stand in line at the supermarket, there are two women ahead of me. They're talking about the pandemic. The two women are discussing the end of the emergency food stamps that were given to everyone who's on public assistance during quarantine, and for several months after. Now, communities are lifting requirements to wear masks in most public places, and social distancing has become a thing of the recent past.

The women's conversation makes me think about the homeless couple that I often see outside of the Walmart, and the many others like them living in the streets across America. COVID-19 may seem like it's no longer a danger, but for many of the homeless, it is, and will continue to have a lasting impact. For this marginalized population, COVID-19 remains a threat in so many ways.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, its impact on vulnerable communities remains a pressing concern. Among these communities, the homeless population in America has been hit particularly hard. Despite efforts to mitigate the effects of the virus, the homeless continue to face numerous challenges.

The homeless population is highly susceptible to the health risks posed by COVID-19, says Michael Rodriguez,

an expert in homelessness and public health."The homeless face an increased risk of contracting and spreading the virus due to living conditions that often lack access to clean water, handwashing facilities, and safe shelter," says Rodriguez. "These factors contribute to the spread of infectious diseases within this population."

While vaccination efforts have made significant progress across the country, disparities in vaccination rates between the general and homeless populations persist: Figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that almost 70% of U.S. residents completed a primary series of vaccinations, compared to just with up to fewer than half of those who report being homeless. Sarah Collins, a nurse practitioner providing health care to the homeless, says, "Limited vaccine availability, difficulties in scheduling appointments, and vaccine hesitancy are significant barriers that prevent many homeless individuals from receiving protection against COVID-19."

Homeless shelters across America have grappled with overcrowding, impeding effective social distancing and putting individuals at greater risk. John Anderson, a shelter coordinator, elaborates, "The pandemic has

strained our resources and capacity, forcing us to reduce the number of available beds to maintain distancing guidelines. This has resulted in increased street homelessness, exposing vulnerable individuals to additional health and safety risks."

The pandemic has exacerbated existing mental health challenges among the homeless. "Isolation, fear, and uncertainty have significantly impacted the mental health of homeless individuals," says Jennifer Ramirez, a social worker specializing in homelessness. "The closure of drop-in centers, limited access to counseling services, and disrupted routines have made it even more challenging for this population to access the support they desperately need."

The economic fallout from the pandemic has compounded the challenges faced by the homeless, straining access to essential support services. Robert Thompson, a director of a homeless outreach organization, emphasizes, "Job losses, evictions, and limited financial aid have resulted in an influx of newly homeless individuals seeking assistance. However, resource constraints and overwhelmed service providers have created barriers to accessing critical support services."

COVID-19 has further highlighted existing racial disparities within the homeless population. Dr. Maya Patel, a researcher focusing on health disparities, points out, "Communities of color are disproportionately affected by homelessness and COVID-19. Systemic inequities, including limited access to health care, housing discrimination, and poverty, contribute to higher infection rates and poorer health outcomes among minority homeless individuals."

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to cast a long shadow over the homeless population in America and throw further obstacles in their path towards stability. It is imperative for policymakers, community organizations, and individuals to prioritize the needs of this vulnerable group, ensuring equitable access to health care, vaccinations, safe shelter, and support services.

As the human race navigates the ongoing recovery, addressing the impact of COVID-19 on the homeless must remain a central focus. By fostering collaboration and implementing targeted strategies, we can strive towards a more inclusive and compassionate society, where the homeless are not left behind in our collective efforts to overcome this unprecedented crisis. ■



# MAYOR'S PLAN TO EXPAND SHELTER GUTS HOUSING FOR HOMELESS FAMILIES AND YOUTH

Mayor London Breed announced plans last month to fund shelter for unhoused San Franciscans. What the mayor did not mention was where that funding would come from. The Coalition on Homelessness supports the plans to replace and continue the announced 594 beds, not just for two years but permanently, and at the same time vehemently opposes that same plan to pay for some of these adult beds by gutting housing for homeless youth and families in Proposition C.

In a last minute move, the Mayor is proposing to raid \$60 million from Prop. C Housing fund allocated for transitional aged youth and families, taking \$40 million from 2022/23 fund (and spending it in fiscal year 2024/25) and then \$11.7m from transitional-aged youth (TAY) and \$8.8 million from family housing in FY23/24 to be spent the same year. This funding is being moved over to primarily adult interventions such as housing, prevention and shelter, items the Mayor should have funded within the city's \$14 billion budget.

Voters approved Prop C deliberately to set aside funding for families and youth because they are hidden populations that have been historically ignored. Currently, the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing budget underfunds these two populations creating disparities and inequities. Only 7% of their budget goes towards youth yet they make up 20% of the population, while only 9% of the budget goes towards families yet they make up 27% of the homeless population.

The measure was also deliberately crafted to have a community oversight body to ensure the vision of Prop C was realized. Community members led by Coalition on Homelessness spent hours poring over budgets, getting input from hundreds of unhoused people and front line service providers to ensure just that. These last minute plans did not go through Our City Our Home (Prop C) Oversight Committee.

For every \$20 million cut from the housing fund it is equivalent to a loss of over 650 permanent housing slots for families and youth.

Prop. C generates approximately \$300 million per year, and half the funds must go to housing and a quarter to behavioral health. Over half of homeless people on these streets today reported becoming homeless before the age of 25. Of

the housing funds, the intention was to ensure families and youth experiencing homelessness were no longer ignored, so 20% of the housing funds are allocated to youth, and another 25% to homeless families. The total annual funds set aside for housing for these populations is roughly \$67 million combined.

The fund is overseen by the OCOH committee in the Controller's Office. The mayor's plan to gut family and TAY housing funds was not presented to the oversight body.

According to Miguel Carrera, a formerly homeless organizer at the Coalition on Homelessness, "The Mayor of San Francisco can and should fund all of these items without pitting homeless children and youth against homeless adults. The city has a \$14 billion dollar budget—\$40 million is a fraction of that budget. The budget priorities are inequitable when the mayor finds funding for a \$180 million raise to police, and pays 130 Sheriffs to patrol the Tenderloin but for homeless adults chooses to take this considerably smaller amount of funding from children."

The mayor is justifying the use of these funds by saying there are extra dollars given the new state funds from the Project Homekey program. However, the investment plan for housing already considered that funding would be matched by Homekey, and single adult housing was also matched by Homekey. Prop. C was never meant to provide comprehensive funds necessary to address homelessness, but was meant to supplement state, federal and local funds.

According to Leticia Grijalva, a formerly homeless mom, "We need support for many people who need decent and permanent housing. We don't want to be a public charge but sometimes the need is great. Having support from our government is our last hope. Many of our children have to watch their parents struggle to keep them in housing many of the times making them think of quitting school to support their family."

"Prop. C was deliberately designed with these inequities in mind," said Jennifer Friedenbach, executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness and a member of the OCOH oversight committee. "We cannot solve homelessness if we continue to force poor families and youth to experience homelessness" ■

for a Homelessness Oversight Commission was sent to the ballot. When the article came out, many PSH tenants were determined to not lose control of the issue to opportunistic members of the Board of Supervisors.

We brought the matter to Supervisor Dean Preston and after some really broad conversations, we settled on holding a hearing before a committee of the Board of Supervisors to discuss the PSH eviction crisis, and as we continued to discuss the matter and to devise solutions, Supervisor Preston introduced the hearing in December of 2022. The work continued for months, and the hearing at the Land Use and Transportation committee was scheduled for March of 2023.

Many tenants, including two LGBTQ+ elders who have faced or are facing eviction from permanent supportive housing spoke out concerning how the system has failed them. We had another PSH tenant do a presentation on several solutions that tenants have devised over the last months. Fred Sherburn-Zimmer, during public comment, spoke of several solutions that the Housing Rights Committee proposed, which were in line with our goals. During the de-

## IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS ON TRANSITIONAL AGED YOUTH AND CHILDREN

### Why the focus on youth and families?

As science is determining, traumatic events of early childhood are called "adverse childhood events" and the impacts are debilitating for a lifetime. This move will ensure few to no new interventions for youth and families with children and will result in a net reduction in interventions for youth and families, thus failing to take the necessary steps to avoid these impacts.

A YES vote on this budget proposal will increase homelessness for TAY and families now, and increase adult chronic homelessness later.

Last year, just one provider, Compass Family Services, supported more than 2500 families needing/seeking housing support/housing stabilization. Only 14% of the City's homeless housing units are for families with children.

On any given night in San Francisco, nearly 1,100 youth are experiencing homelessness, and more than HALF are African American. Nearly 1,000 new youth fall into homelessness each year. Raiding TAY housing funds will mean that only 15% of youth seeking housing resources will receive them, leaving 850 youth each year out in the cold.

These cuts to TAY and Family housing will set us back in terms of equity goals. Families and Youth have even higher racial and queer disparities. For example, almost half of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ and 61% are BIPOC. Over half of families are African American.

2018 Prop C Our City Our Home was intentionally designed to go upstream and stop the inflow into homelessness. Homeless children are five times more likely than their peers to become homeless as adults. Homelessness among children has also been found to have a negative impact on education, with lower academic achievement, and disrupted schooling due to higher absenteeism. Less than half of homeless children nationwide met state proficiency requirements in reading, math, and science. As a result, over 50% of homeless children are held back for one grade, and 22% for multiple grades. At the same time, homeless children have an 87% increased chance of dropping out of high school.

50% of people experiencing homelessness in San Francisco had their first episode of homelessness before they were 25. Ending homelessness for families and children prevents these young people from becoming the city's next generation of homeless adults. Divesting in housing for TAY and families now will increase adult chronic homelessness later.

This is a matter of life and death. A six-year research study of youth experiencing homelessness in San Francisco showed that young people without a safe place to call home die at rates ten times higher than their housed peers. Research from Chapin Hall found that youth who are homeless, Black, and LGBTQ+ experience the highest rates of assault, trauma, and early death.

San Francisco has a lack of vision for ending youth and family homelessness. In their strategic plan, they left these populations out and dramatically undercounted the actual need. As a result they did not get badly needed programs out the door, nor planned for them, and are now stating they have unspent funds. The capacity in the department instead focused on the single adult population.

Once these funds are swept, they will not come back to the TAY and family systems--they will be used to sustain other priorities. This divestment is not one-time, it is a long-term shift away from TAY and families.

partment presentations, Preston raised the issues of coordinated entry, funding for rent forgiveness and "stipulated agreements" where tenants forfeit their rights if they're found to have violated a rule came up.

However, it was after the hearing that an opportunity for tenant activism came up. Supervisor Preston had to cajole the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing to produce a document that they were working on concerning eviction prevention. Lo and behold, it was totally inadequate: 1) It only featured guidelines and not firm requirements, 2) It only addressed non-payment evictions and only briefly touched on nuisance evictions and, 3) it assumed that landlords, case management and tenants are on equal footing.

When we received this document, we spent April and May amending a redline of the document, most of it involved changing "should" to "must," but also touching on the following issues: substantial nuisance toward other tenants in the building, the right for tenants to move if there's a problem in their unit mobility, enforcement of stipulated agreements going beyond the scope of the original issue, right to pay rent by

check or remotely, right to organize, and arbitration, among other issues. At the June 1 meeting of the Homelessness Oversight Commission, myself and several other tenants asked for the PSH eviction issue to be agendized. We have been working with Commissioner Christin Evans on the issue for over a month, and we are hoping that chair Jonathan Butler agendizes it at the July 6 meeting.

This is an issue that is long overdue to be addressed in a meaningful manner and with us PSH tenants as equal or even senior partners. We hear the concerns about safety, however, this can be balanced with making evictions a truly last resort. Furthermore, during these tough budget times, it makes fiscal sense to prevent evictions from PSH as much as possible, as displacing low-income people will lead to more use of emergency services. Our success in staying housed is the city's success, even if it is just a place to live. ■

*If you are a permanent supportive housing tenant who has been evicted, had an eviction case filed against you, or has been threatened with eviction, we would like to hear from you. Contact 30rightnow@gmail.com for more information.*

# TENANTS AT WORK ON PSH ISSUES

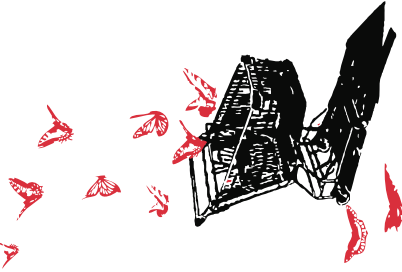
JORDAN DAVIS

In early August of 2022, I wrote a piece for Street Sheet on the eviction crisis in permanent supportive housing—or PSH. Later that month, the Chronicle published their second article for the Broken Homes series, focusing on issues around PSH evictions. The main focus of the story was Robert Bowman, a Black disabled queer man who was evicted from an SRO run by Episcopal Community Services for non-violent visitor policy violations. At the time, two major things were happening in the world of permanent supportive housing: tenants—including myself—were working on a broad permanent supportive housing tenants bill of rights as a long term project (which included eviction protections), and a very flawed proposal



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