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A HUMAN-FOCUSED APPROACH TO RESEARCH

PROP C INTO THE FUTURE

WOMEN RECYCLERS MAKE WAVES IN BOLIVIA

SELF-ADVOCACY

SAVING STREET SPIRIT AND SURVIVAL
EMBRACING HUMANITY IN OUR APPROACH TO STUDYING HOMELESSNESS

CLAUDINE SIPILI

As a board member of the UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative (BHHI) Lived Expertise Advisory Board that played a major role in the design and implementation of the California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness, my participation on the project was deeply influenced by my personal experience of homelessness. Having faced the challenges and uncertainties associated with having faced homelessness instability firsthand, I have dedicated myself to making a positive impact and seeking lasting solutions for those facing similar struggles.

Our board members invested time and effort in preparing for this crucial study. It was important to us that the study go beyond the standard point-in-time homeless counts conducted by cities and counties for federal funding. Instead, we aimed to deliver a report that humanizes the human aspect of homelessness and understand the systemic failures that lead individuals to fall into homelessness in the first place.

One key distinction of this study is the concerted effort to include the voices of those who have experienced homelessness. It was imperative to us that the study included the utmost dignity and respect for the participants. Guided by my own experiences, I helped train the researchers on how to approach data collection with conversational graces, making the participants feel comfortable and valued throughout the process.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on humanizing the individual stories of those experiencing homelessness. These narratives were then tied back to the systemic factors and failures that contribute to homelessness, providing a holistic view of the issue.

One of the most validating findings was that 90% of participants were housed in California before becoming homeless, with 75% experiencing homelessness in the same county where they once housed. This finding underscored the need to address local and regional factors contributing to homelessness, dispelling the misconception that homelessness is solely a result of personal choices or that those who are homeless in our state are not really Californians.

Throughout the study, the board members’ guidance helped create a safe and dignified space for survey participants to share their experiences openly. By involving individuals with lived experience, we gained deeper insights into the complexities of homelessness and were able to challenge prevalent misconceptions surrounding the issue.

It is my hope that this study will foster empathy and understanding among those who have never experienced homelessness. All too often, blame is unfairly assigned to individuals, disregarding the systemic challenges they face. By humanizing the data, showcasing the stories behind the statistics, we aim to encourage a more compassionate approach to addressing homelessness.

People who have been marginalized and deprived of basic services often feel invisible or invisible to society. Leaders, those with lived expertise, have a unique ability to fully see and understand the individuals they serve. They recognize that everyone possesses unique gifts and assets, and through their intimate knowledge of their communities, they can find innovative ways to connect people and address their needs.

As a board member with lived expertise, I firmly believe that people like me can play a pivotal role in understanding the complexities of homelessness. By involving individuals with lived experience into the table, we can evaluate existing systems of care and work towards meaningful recommendations to improve them.

My personal journey through homelessness has driven my passion for change. I am committed to advocating, volunteering and supporting organizations that strive to end homelessness. Everyone deserves a safe and stable place to call home, and I am determined to contribute to that cause in any way I can.

From my perspective, CASPEH has been an endeavor to humanize homelessness and understand its root causes. With input from board members like myself, who have experienced homelessness firsthand, we created a safe and respectful environment for participants to share their stories. By shedding light on the human aspect of homelessness and challenging misconceptions, we hope to inspire positive change in the broader systems serving those who are unhoused. Embracing humanity in our approach is key to finding lasting solutions for homelessness and fostering a society where everyone is seen, understood and supported.

Claudine Sipili is the Northern California Board Co-Chair for the BHHI Lived Expertise Advisory Board.
When Mayor London Breed submitted her budget to the Board of Supervisors on June 1, it had many problematic elements but one in particular stood out for the Coalition on Homelessness: The mayor’s plan would raid $60 million from youth and family housing to pay for short-term housing, subsidies, shelter and other temporary funding for police.

While visiting a tiny home site, Mayor Breed announced her plan that she wanted to fund shelter beds for unhoused San Franciscans. In the announcement, what she did not mention was the source of that funding and that these were already existing and replacement beds for closing shelter sites. All told, the mayor’s plan would result in a net loss of 80 beds. What was quickly discovered was that the Mayor was proposing to use $40 million in existing Proposition C funds to be taken out of the housing category for youth and families, and $20 million in future Prop. C revenue meant for transitional aged youth (TAY) and families housing for the next two years. There was no permanent funding source secured for those adult shelter beds and subsidies. For a point of reference, every $20 million cut is equivalent to losing over 650 permanent housing slots for families and youth.

Voters passed Prop. C in November 2018, but corporate and anti-tax groups held it up in court for two years. Prop. C generates approximately $300 million per year, and half of those funds go to the City’s homeless housing units, and the other half is directed to adult affordable housing. The remaining $150 million from Prop. C generates annually is placed in the Mayor’s Office of Housing and Community Development for the creation of permanent supportive housing for families and youth.

"The Mayor of San Francisco can and should fund all of these items without pitting homeless children and youth against families and adults," said Miguel Carrera, a formerly homeless community organizer at the Coalition on Homelessness. "The city has a $14 billion dollar budget. $40 million is a fraction of that budget. To budget priorities are inequitable when the Mayor finds funding for a $300 million wage raise to police, but for homeless adults chooses to take this considerably smaller amount of funding from children."

The mayor justified appropriating Prop. C funds by saying that state funds from Project Homekey could make up the difference. However, the investment plan for housing already considered that funding would matched by state funds.

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

Jennifer Friedenbach—the Prop. C, Our City Our Home campaign director who is also executive director of the Coalition on Homelessness—added that Prop. C was designed to address such inequities. "We cannot solve the problems if our investments are inequitable," she added. "The City must target our investments to prevent homelessness today and in the future," she said.

Last year, just one provider, Compass Family Services, provided shelter from 6,000 different family members in San Francisco, the most for family shelters. Only 14% of the city’s homeless housing units are for families with children. At the same time, on any given night in San Francisco, over 1,000 youth are experiencing homelessness. Over 20% of both youth and families are African American. Most currently homeless people in San Francisco first became chronically homeless as a child or a youth.

As soon as this proposal came to light, community members instantly went to work fighting back. They included families and youth who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness, along with service providers and other concerned community leaders. The Coalition on Homelessness led the way by turning out folks to hearings, organizing a coming City Hall rally, and meeting with policy makers, and reaching out to the media. The Our City Our Home overnight body held an emergency meeting and voted unanimously against the proposal. Two members of that body—Friedenbach and Chair Shanell Williams—along with family and youth advocates, met with the Controller’s Office, Supervisor Hillary Ronen’s office and high-ranking Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing staff to craft a plan.

From the community’s perspective, they wanted to come up with a proposal that would protect the youth and family housing, while funding much-needed housing, and prevention for single adults. They resisted the move to pit these two communities against each other. In fact, they worked to make creative solutions coming from the community, including from the Coalition on Homelessness, work. The plan used interest garnered in the Prop. C fund going back since 2018 to fund for single adults and provide the tailored to cover the substantive proposals coming from the city’s voters. At the same time, the housing for transitional aged youth and families was preserved. The proposal went to the Board of Supervisors on July 18 and passed unanimously.

In the end, this experience demonstrates what the Coalition on Homelessness has known all along:— By working together, we can solve homelessness and protect the progress we have made to date. When the issue isn’t being used as political fodder, or when unhoused people aren’t being used as political scapegoats, homeless people and their allies can find solutions that work. Prop. C is an example of such solutions.

Since this funding was preserved, two more youth housing buildings in South of Market with 65 units between them were approved by the Board of Supervisors. The future is bright for the next generation of San Francisco youth, especially those who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness as a child or a youth.

The initiative is getting attacked from all sides, mostly for political or financial gain. The reality is, without Prop. C, San Francisco would have a massive increase in the homeless population. With rising rents up and down the state, the District has seen a strong increase in the homeless population. After the Board of Supervisors on July 18 and passed unanimously.

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They haul many kilos of recyclable materials on their backs but receive little in return. These Bolivian women who help clean up the environment from dawn to dusk are fighting for recognition of their work and social and labour rights.

The inhabitants of La Paz, Bolivia’s political centre, walk hurriedly and almost oblivious to the women of different ages silently opening heavy lids of municipal garbage dumpsters that are taller than the women themselves.

They use a homemade tool, a kind of hook with a long wooden handle, to dig through the unsorted waste, trying to avoid getting cut by broken glass, and in search of plastic containers, paper, cardboard or aluminium cans.

People walk by on the avenues and squares without looking at them, and sometimes actively avoiding them. The recyclers feel this indifference and sometimes actively avoiding them.

"People call us dirty pigs (cochinas), that they have a dignified vocation. They should stay in school because it is impossible for them to reach that volume," says Maria Martínez, 50, the recording secretary of EcoRecicladoras de La Paz. "There is no work for us, and they only listen to us when we organize," says Maria Martínez, 50, the recording secretary of the 45 members, who also include a few men.

In Bolivia, trash is not separated into reusable and non-reusable waste in homes or offices. This task is carried out by private recycling companies, who buy the raw materials from informal waste collectors such as EcoRecicladoras.

Martínez, with slightly greying hair, says she comes out every evening. "I was a domestic worker until I was 30 years old. When my daughter was born I couldn’t get a job. I collected plastic bottles, clothes and shoes and sold them to the factories, but the recycling companies who pay really low prices emerged," she complains.

It takes about three months between the initial collection and the final sale of the recyclable materials. Martínez collects the materials, carries around seven kg on her back, walks about three kilometres and patiently stores them until she has enough to sell them to the wholesaler.

"One year I collected 200 kilograms of scrap metal and sold it for 150 bolivianos (about 20 dollars)," she recalls. The recycling companies want to buy by the ton, she explains, with a grin, because it is impossible for them to reach that volume.

She represents a second generation of garbage collectors. Her mother, Leonor Colque, is two years short of turning 80, and has been combing through garbage dumps and trash on the streets for 40 years. On her back she carries a cloth in which she hauls a number of pieces of paper and some plastic waste.

"They should stay in school because this job is not for young girls," she recommends, sadly, because she could not achieve her goal of sending one of her daughters to a teacher training school.

At 58, Chacolla, like almost all women garbage pickers, is the head of her household. Her husband, a former
They haul many kilos of recyclable materials on their backs but receive little in return. These Bolivian women who help clean up the environment from dawn to dusk are fighting for recognition of their work and social and labour rights. Many of them are from Indigenous communities. To fight for their rights, they have come together in an association called EcoRecicladoras de La Paz.

By Franz Chávez, from the International Network of Street Newspapers

AUG 1, 2023

They deliver an exact volume and weight of products and the buyers declare a lower weight in order to pay a lower price. They deliver an exact volume and weight of products and the buyers declare a lower weight in order to pay a lower price. They deliver an exact volume and weight of products and the buyers declare a lower weight in order to pay a lower price. They deliver an exact volume and weight of products and the buyers declare a lower weight in order to pay a lower price.

One sign of the public's recognition of the "grassroots recyclers," as they call themselves, could be the direct, sorted delivery of the waste, which would facilitate the women's work, she said. Redcicla, a platform that promotes the integrated treatment of waste, has been helping since 2017 to organize them and bring visibility to their work, while fostering the delivery of waste from citizens to "grassroots recyclers" and working for the recognition of their work as dignified.

The president of EcoRecicladoras de La Paz, Sofía Quispe, supports the idea of getting help from local residents in sorting materials and delivering them to their affiliates, instead of throwing them into dumpsters where they are mixed with products that prevent subsequent recycling. Quispe is a 42-year-old mother of three. Like most of her fellow recyclers, she walks about two kilometres on foot in search of dumpsters, dressed in the customary indigenous wide-brimmed hat and pollera or skirt.

On the night that we accompanied her, she did not find the dumpster that was usually on Avenida 6 de Agosto, probably because it had been removed and taken to another part of the city.

The impoverished garbage picker was once a skilled seamstress who worked in small family-owned factories in the Brazilian city of São Paulo. Upon her return due to an illness, she was unable to raise the money she needed to buy a machine and raw materials.

She was also discouraged by the lack of interest among local residents in buying garments made in Bolivia, as they preferred low-cost clothing smuggled into the country as contraband.

Leonarda Chávez, another 72-year-old head of household, who collects recyclable materials every day with her daughter Carla Chávez (42) and granddaughter Maya Muga Chávez (25), feels satisfied because she can see her dream come true.

This month, her granddaughter earned a diploma in Business Social Responsibility, with which she completed her university education, in addition to a degree in commercial engineering and business administration, in a country where higher studies do not always guarantee good jobs.

Among the darkness and the objects discarded by people, hope is also alive. Rosario Ramos took the lessons of hard work and created her own goal: "I will study advanced robotics and prosthetic assembly," she says with a confidence that contrasts with the group's sad stories.

Courtesy of Inter Press Service / International Network of Street Newspapers
Most people can appreciate the value in having a good advocate on your side during life’s challenging moments. I have personally experienced a situation when an advocate was either not there or would have come in handy. In certain circumstances advocates are not only just a matter of life or death if there is money involved—but that’s not always the case. Sometimes your troubles are so personal that you don’t need money, or they are something money just can’t fix. Life can throw some curveballs and you never know when. Usually when it does, when you most need a team on your side, all you can hear are crickets on the field, as though everybody packed up quick and went home, leaving you alone at the bat. Now, it’s just you and that curve ball. Let me tell you how to round the bases, make it home and win the game when the only person you have to rely on is you.

Sometimes you have to be your own advocate.

I became homeless in April of 2021. With practically no services available where I lived, I thought my chances would be better in San Francisco. I had dreamed of living here for more than 20 years. So, I came and walked into a housing office, I was 56 and living apart, and with nothing left to lose, I decided to make a leap of faith and I came to San Francisco. Of course, that's exactly what it did. It isn't in my nature to lash out at others, but the drug took control. It wasn't but two days later when I was told that I'd have a referral to an SRO in the Tenderloin. I was so happy that my homeless days were finally over. I went and looked at the place, accepted it, and set a move in date. A date not too far off. I couldn't have been more grateful. I mean, sure the place was small, but at least it had four walls, a roof and a door. I spent the next week sleeping on the streets, even though it was a little more bearable knowing that it wouldn’t be for long. Finally the day came for me to sign my lease, and the next day because the person I was there to see had a personal appointment.

Now here's what I haven't told you so far about this new apartment. What's more is that at that time I was not on my usual regimen of medication. Being new to the city and without a primary care doctor yet, I was still taking a very strong anti-depressant that I was not prescribed and that I purchased on the streets. What I didn't know was that this medication can do wonders, it can produce mania and even rage. And that's exactly what it did. It isn't in my nature to lash out at others, but the drug took control. I was big and the staff was afraid of me. That’s what made that worse was that she was on the toilet. What's a mall cop doing in a women's bathroom any- way?

A friend of mine overheard our conversation and commented that there had to be more to the story than meets the eye, but the woman insisted she was telling the truth. I asked her if she was in pain, or at least embarrassed. She replied that she was insulted and that she was going to sue the security company.

Another person with whom I was talking wondered what would be her best course of action. I sug- gested to him that he escort the woman back to the store, so she could gather enough information she would need to take legal action.

About 30 minutes later, she re- turned and told me that the staff was cooperative with providing the needed information. Obviously, she was disappointed, but not dev- astated. So, I suggested that she file a police report, and agreed that's what she should do.

Are we as secure as we think we are? If not, why so? And what should we do? If we knew our decisions are made based on what we consider to be facts or based on myths?

Should we be held to the rights of the individual citizen or to the universal powers. It wasn’t but two days later when my case manager came to me at the shelter and told me that I had a referral for an SRO and an appointment the next day to go and view it. My case manager and I went to the shelter and told me that I was supposed to get me the referral. She advised me not to, that it would not help my case. I would just make things worse. I was beginning to wonder if this person was not really on my side at all. Months went by and eventually I was reluctant to even ask about a referral, knowing that I’d get the same answer. I was beginning to lose hope.

One morning I woke with a new determination though, I was not being treated fairly and I knew it. No one seemed to be on my side, so I decided that I must act on my own behalf. I must speak up for myself or stay in the shelter forever. I contacted my primary care doctor, for she had one, and asked for a statement explaining my behavior on the wrong medication. I searched the internet and found supporting medical journals also. I looked up just who was in charge of the housing clinic where this nightmare began and found the director’s email. Finally I typed a letter explaining my case and sincerely apologized for my behavior. I sent the email and turned the matter over to the universal powers.

But it was seven days later when my case manager came to me at the shelter and told me that I had a referral for an SRO and an appointment the next day to go and view it. My case manager and I went to the shelter and told me that I was supposed to get me the referral. She advised me not to, that it would not help my case. I would just make things worse. I was beginning to wonder if this person was not really on my side at all. Months went by and eventually I was reluctant to even ask about a referral, knowing that I’d get the same answer. I was beginning to lose hope.

One Saturday, I was sitting in front of the Safeway on Church and Market streets when a petite Black woman came up to me and told me that a store security guard just struck her over the head with a broomstick from behind. What made that worse was that she was on the toilet. What's a mall cop doing in a women's bathroom any- way?

A friend of mine overheard our conversation and commented that there had to be more to the story than meets the eye, but the woman insisted she was telling the truth. I asked her if she was in pain, or at least embarrassed. She replied that she was insulted and that she was going to sue the security company.

Another person with whom I was talking wondered what would be her best course of action. I sug- gested to him that he escort the woman back to the store, so she could gather enough information she would need to take legal action.

About 30 minutes later, she re- turned and told me that the staff was cooperative with providing the needed information. Obviously, she was disappointed, but not dev- astated. So, I suggested that she file a police report, and agreed that's what she should do.
The human organism is designed to survive as long as it can, to procreate when possible, and to contribute to the success, the survival, and the prestige of the group.

Human consciousness could be a product of the human body. It gives us by allowing us to think, to reason, to feel. Where I live, I'm not going to go outside and smoke when it is too cold. None of this should imply to you that I'm insignificant. Terror can feel queasy and dizzying. It can feel like I'm at the edge of my impossibly efficient work graveyard. Trauma, even if not necessarily getting worse, is a continual butterfly in the stomach. I have health issues and I'm not going to ignore them. The harder I work, the more the threat resolves. As I said, you use it as a continual source of anxiety. This was like terror would not know what to do to get through a scenario. I'm not the biggest man, but I have stood up to bigger men, and sometimes it is they who have backed off. A physical threat in the moment goes away the next day unless I'm injured and need medical care.

I have health hours and I'm not young. If I were to become homeless now, I would not last more than a few days.

Thus, when a threat to my housing or to my public benefits arises, my body assigns great importance to the problem, and this forces me to act to get the threat resolved. I can't ignore terror. There is such a thing as appropriate fear, and you use it as a guide. It is the basic gut feeling that powers actions.

The Contra Costa Section 8 Housing Authority, in my past, was a substantial, chronic source of anxiety. This was like a continual butterfly in the stomach. Employees often did not follow through with their jobs, making errors or creating other problems for me. When the government isn't doing its job, it is I who suffers, and not the government.

In some emergency situations, I have been very confident. I've been unafraid when, in some instances, other people would not know what to do to get through a scenario. I'm not the biggest man, but I have stood up to bigger men, and sometimes it is they who have backed off. A physical threat in the moment goes away the next day unless I'm injured and need medical care.

At one time, I was very afraid of getting my arm caught in the lift at the Berkeley Bowl West, but I acquired bravery, and sometimes it is they who have backed off. A physical threat in the moment goes away the next day unless I'm injured and need medical care.

When you are dirt poor like I am, you must heed certain things. You need to keep your body fed and medicated. You need your coffee. If you are a hardcore smoker, you can't just stop and pretend that you don't need it. That's too hard. Of course, smoking is something we should all be rid of—but how?

If you don't at the very least keep your body fed and hydrated, you will soon become dehydrated. Getting hungry doesn't work if you need to function. On an empty stomach, everything is impossible.

None of this should imply to you that I'm enough of a fool to take unnecessary, careless risks. Where I live, I'm not going to go outside and smoke when it is too late in the day. I have nicotine gum.

There is a big difference between being confident in the presence of a would-be attacker versus facing homelessness, incarceration, starvation, or becoming mentally ill. Men I've met who have been incarcerated really, really don't want to go back to that, and some are willing to kill so that they won't.

At 19, when I was a janitor, I worked in a store in East Oakland. In that store, I was threatened by two gunmen for ten hours every night. I was forced to wait for the store management to show up so that they could rob the store. They spared my life because I was young and an innocent bystander. But they wanted to be certain that I could not identify them. That was very terrifying. My terrified reaction was suspended during the incident and made itself known later.

Soon after that, I became unable to work graveyard. Trauma, even if not the most efficient of emotions, seems to serve a purpose. My body didn't want me to work. nights anymore. It wasn't good for me.

Anyone who has been incarcerated does not want to go back. And the same probably applies to someone who has been homeless. Homelessness must be hell, and I'm very glad I have not been homeless. I could have been, but my family has protected me from that.

Now that I'm older and know how to think more clearly, I'm attempting to put together a good career. This is not easily accomplished. But if I can succeed at consistently earning money, it will serve to give some sense of security, even if that security is all in my mind.

Jack Bragen lives and writes in Martinez, California.
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