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STREET SHEET IS SOLD BY HOMELESS AND LOW-INCOME VENDORS WHO KEEP 100% OF THE PROCEEDS.

STREET SHEET IS READER SUPPORTED, ADVERTISING FREE, AND AIMS TO LIFT UP THE VOICES OF THOSE LIVING IN POVERTY IN SAN FRANCISCO.

STREET SHEET



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STREET SHEET is currently recruiting vendors to sell the newspaper around San Francisco.

Vendors pick up the papers for free at our office in the Tenderloin and sell them for \$2 apiece at locations across the City. You get to keep all the money you make from sales! Sign up to earn extra income while also helping elevate the voices of the homeless writers who make this paper so unique, and promoting the vision of a San Francisco where every human being has a home.

To sign up, visit our office at 280 Turk St from 10AM-4PM on Monday-Thursday and 10AM-Noon on Friday

ACCION DEL DIA DE LAS MADRES



CUANDO?
8 DE MAYO a LAS 11:00 AM

DONDE?
1 dr carlton B. Goodlett Place San Francisco afuera de los peldaños del ayuntamiento.

"Madres Resilientes, Familias Prósperas: Un Hogar Seguro para Cada Niño"
ACOMPAÑENOS !

MOTHER'S DAY ACTION



WHEN?
MAY 8TH at 11:00 AM

WHERE?
1 dr carlton B. Goodlett Place San Francisco Outside in the steps of City Hall.

"Resilient Mothers, Thriving Families: A Safe Home for Every Child"

COME WITH US!

HELP KEEP STREET SHEET IN PRINT!



coalition.networkforgood.com

COALITION ON HOMELESSNESS

The STREET SHEET is a project of the Coalition on Homelessness. The Coalition on Homelessness organizes poor and homeless people to create permanent solutions to poverty while protecting the civil and human rights of those forced to remain on the streets.

Our organizing is based on extensive peer outreach, and the information gathered directly drives the Coalition's work. We do not bring our agenda to poor and homeless people: they bring their agendas to us.

STREET SHEET STAFF

The Street Sheet is a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness. Some stories are collectively written, and some stories have individual authors. But whoever sets fingers to keyboard, all stories are formed by the collective work of dozens of volunteers, and our outreach to hundreds of homeless people.

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VOLUNTEER WITH US!

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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 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

EVERYONE IS INVITED TO JOIN OUR WORKING GROUP MEETINGS!

KEEPING SAN FRANCISCANS HOUSED AND HEALTHY

PRESENTED BY THE HOMELESS EMERGENCY SERVICE PROVIDERS ASSOCIATION, SAN FRANCISCO

The Homeless Emergency Service Providers Association (HESPA) is a coalition of more than 30 community-based organizations serving thousands of homeless and at-risk individuals and families in San Francisco. HESPA members include City-funded service providers, privately funded nonprofits and faith-based providers. HESPA members include leaders on the frontlines of San Francisco’s homelessness response, behavioral health and workforce development systems.

HESPA’s fiscal year 2025-2026 budget proposal calls on our City partners to prioritize community safety and well-being for all residents, and to make vital investments that shift focus from one-time interventions toward permanent pathways out of homelessness for individuals and families.

The City and County of San Francisco’s economic forecast is dire. Looming threats from seismic funding shifts and dramatic policy reversals at the federal level pose significant fiscal challenges for localities across the country. But downsizing our homeless support will result in greater costs to our emergency management, physical and behavioral health systems, community safety and addiction recovery efforts. The targeted, modest investments reflected here—reflecting HESPA members’ deep institutional knowledge, evidence-based practice, and decades of community-based service delivery—will keep tens of thousands of homeless individuals and households from continued suffering and more costly interventions.

The guiding philosophy behind HESPA’s 2025-26 Budget Proposal is our commitment to investing in and sustaining prosperity, equity and sustainability. This includes investing in racial and economic justice across the full spectrum of housing, behavioral health and workforce interventions, and prioritizing communities of color. In short, HESPA believes that marshaling the resources for longer-term investments—rather than short-term austerity measures—will shorten the economic crisis confronting San Francisco, and seize opportunities to ensure prosperity for communities seeking to rebuild and rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bringing proven strategies and solutions to bear also means recognizing the scale of the problem. More than 1 in 8 San Franciscans receive CalFresh benefits. An estimated 275,000 SF residents have incomes of less than \$18/hour for a family of three, making them eligible for Medi-Cal. San Francisco has some of the nation’s highest housing costs and the smallest child population as a percentage of total population—as well as among the highest child poverty rates. In every SF public school classroom at least one child is homeless. The homeless emergency response system—across populations—is facing a system-flow problem: People are becoming homeless quicker than we are currently able to secure safe, stable housing for those staying in shelters, vehicles and on our streets. Too many instances of homelessness could be avoided with cost-effective prevention interventions. Individuals are languishing in shelters without options for exits into housing. For many, no shelter is avail-

able. Children are sleeping in the park with their parents.

It does not have to be this way.

When the City does not have enough permanent supportive housing sites, we offer those with few opportunities to grow their income interventions that are better suited for families and transitional-aged youth (TAY). (not sure what this means?) We have the right tools, but a scarcity of resources requires us to consistently triage our resources in data-driven ways. We need targeted resourcing that provides a ladder for individuals and families through marginal housing and towards stability.

Thousands of nonprofit workers dedicate their lives to building better communities. HESPA staff care deeply about our City and the homeless individuals and families we serve. Vicarious trauma affects many working on the frontlines of our homeless response system, who often share similar life struggles as those we serve. Working with the homeless should not cause people to live on the edge of homelessness. These essential workers must be compensated at a living wage and appropriately trained for the profoundly difficult work they do.

Investments in homelessness response programs are efforts to reverse the legacy of racial and gender inequity in our City. Black and Latine communities are overrepresented in the homeless population, criminal justice system, public benefits system, unemployment system, and are also over-victimized by health disparities, child poverty, infant mortality. Women and gender non-conforming people receive very little resources. Families with Black and Latina women heading households are overrepresented in the homeless population, but continually underserved. Investing in comprehensive and holistic solutions to homelessness is critical for our pursuit of racial and gender equity in San Francisco and our efforts to end homelessness.

Finally, we must shift away from punitive responses that decrease trust and penalize homelessness individuals with unmet behavioral health needs. We cannot arrest our way out of this crisis. Those navigating homelessness are strong and resilient, we should center their voices in the days ahead. We need multi-year solutions that build trust, restore pathways out of poverty and center Housing First best practices.

HISTORY OF HESPA FUNDING PROPOSALS AND CONTEXT FOR ASK

Founded in 2012, HESPA is a coalition with deep roots in the communities most affected by San Francisco’s continuing homelessness crisis. HESPA advocates for these needs with a collective voice, focusing on system-wide improvements, and we develop annual funding proposals to fill service gaps and meet immediate needs with cost-effective interventions that can be implemented quickly and effectively.

For more than a decade, HESPA has developed proposals to ensure safe and dignified emergency services, replace expired federal Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing grants,

prevent homelessness among people at risk and create additional exits out of homelessness through subsidies, vacant unit rehabilitation and modest investments in employment and workforce services. HESPA has also championed hidden populations that historically have been underserved within the homeless population, such as families and youth.

These multi-year investments have been indispensable as we strive to alleviate the housing crisis faced by low-income San Franciscans. As a result, by the end of this fiscal year in June, over 3,100 households will exit homelessness, thousands of households will maintain their housing, and thousands of homeless people will receive deeply enriched emergency, employment, and mental health services that enable safety, stability, and dignity.

SUMMARY OF TWO-YEAR BUDGET REQUEST

The goals of HESPA’s 2025-26 and 2026-27 budget proposal are to:

- **Prevent homelessness among people and families at risk of eviction**
- **Provide creative housing solutions to a greater number of homeless San Franciscans, prioritizing people and families of color who are disproportionately impacted by poverty and homelessness alongside domestic and interpersonal violence survivors**
- **Ensure immediate expansion of our emergency homeless services system as well as provide sufficient support services and quality staffing in shelters through staff training,**
- **Meet immediate food security needs for our transition-age youth**
- **Respond to the behavioral health and other basic needs of people in our homeless response system, bringing those services to them in existing homeless programs**
- **Increase workforce support for job-seekers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness by integrating services with housing support, increasing investments in earn-as-you-learn apprenticeships and paid job training for youth and adults**

Despite the successes enabled by the City’s investments in the homeless service system, significant gaps persist that result in long waits for shelter and housing, visible street-based homelessness, unmet mental health needs among homeless people and families with children and a lack of housing exits from the existing emergency shelter system. San Francisco is facing budget challenges, however, new initiatives and expanded programs are needed to keep pace with the scope of the crisis. Funding our proposal for 2025-26 and 2026-27 will provide the tools to mitigate preventable displacement of low-income San Franciscans from rent-controlled housing and relieve our City’s shelters

and streets by providing housing subsidies and expanding shelter and hotel capacity to protect our most vulnerable residents.

This year, we can build on past successes through an infusion of \$59.4 million for FY 2025-26 and FY 2026-27 for new baseline funding to house households and stabilize an additional 2,039 households, provide new and improved emergency services for over 1,745 households, and support job services for 375 unhoused community members and families. This funding can come from November 2018 Proposition C revenues and savings within the current city budget, including litigation reserves. This budget proposal attempts to both prevent homelessness and create exits out of homelessness, while ensuring an adequate emergency, behavioral health and employment services systems for those forced to remain on the streets.

This proposal is the result of a careful, data-driven analysis to assess our current housing and homeless system, identify service gaps and tap into the experience and creativity of our providers to determine the most cost-effective solutions.

- **Housing: Fund more than 1,359 new household subsidies to unhoused black and undocumented families, people with HIV/AIDS, youth and domestic violence survivors to allow San Franciscans to move out of homelessness or retain permanent housing, stave off ERAP cuts to ensure emergency rental assistance to 1,550 households per year to prevent eviction, and sustain funding for the critical anti-displacement Tenant Based Rental Subsidy Program through RadCo for 1,121 households.**
- **Emergency Services: Improve quality of shelters and drop-in spaces, continue emergency temporary hotel options to keep families and individuals off the streets,, and fund food security for unhoused people and those struggling to stay housed.**
- **Prevention: Maintain funding for Problem Solving funds to keep over 600 families and individuals housed and out of the homeless response system, and baseline the highly effective Direct Cash Transfer program for TAY so it becomes a permanent program, preventing 33 young people annually from becoming unhoused.**
- **Behavioral Health: Fund clinical support at the new TAY Health & Wellness Center located at the TAY Navigation Center, serving 75 youth annually.**
- **Employment: Fund innovative earn-as-you-learn job training pool for 100 individuals to strengthen our workforce training capacity, and continue vital paid workforce programs for 200 young adults striving to sustain their housing, impacting 300 individuals in all.**

the underbelly p

A GROUP OF SAN FRANCISCO BASED PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTITIONERS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS BEGAN ORGANIZING IN JANUARY IN RESPONSE TO THE CITY'S ATTACK ON DRUG USERS AND HARM REDUCTION SERVICES IN SAN FRANCISCO. THE UNDERBELLY PROJECT, WHICH SYMBOLIZES THE UNDER-REPRESENTED COMMUNITIES OF SAN FRANCISCO, BEGAN COLLECTING INTERVIEWS FROM UNHOUSED PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS AND ACCESS HARM REDUCTION SERVICES. ON MARCH 15, THE GROUP PROJECTED POWERFUL QUOTES GATHERED FROM THE TRANSCRIPTS OF THOSE INTERVIEWS ON WALLS AT THE 24TH STREET/MISSION BART STATION—AS A WAY TO ENGAGE AND EDUCATE THE PUBLIC. WHILE SCRAWLING MESSAGES IN DEFENSE OF HARM REDUCTION IN STREET CHALK, AMBIENT MUSIC PLAYED AND ORGANIZERS SPOKE TO FOLKS, GATHERING CONTACT INFORMATION FROM FRIENDLY NEIGHBORS.

QUOTES LIKE “THAT’S THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM RIGHT THERE, THAT WE SIMPLY DON’T HAVE HOMES, A PLACE TO LIVE...IT’S ILLEGAL TO SLEEP IN THE CITY NOW IF YOU DON’T HAVE A HOME OR EVEN SIT OR LIE DOWN- AND THAT’S EXHAUSTING” FRAMED THE ISSUE OF THE HEIGHTENED CRIMINALIZATION OF POVERTY SINCE THE GRANTS PASS DECISION AND THROUGHOUT THE ELECTION SEASON, AND ITS EFFECT ON EXHAUSTIVE EFFECTS.

ANOTHER QUOTE READ, “THE POLICE ARE NOT ON OUR SIDE. THEY DON’T EVEN LIKE US. I’VE BEEN CALLED SO MANY DIFFERENT NAMES. I’M DIRTY. THAT I’LL NEVER AMOUNT TO ANYTHING. THAT I’M A WASTE OF SPACE. ONE OFFICER TOLD ME I SHOULD GO OVERDOSE,” HIGHLIGHTING HOW SFPD TENDS TO APPROACH COMMUNITY MEMBERS, WHO WOULD BEST BE SERVED BY NON JUDGEMENTAL ACCESS TO COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES, RATHER THAN SHAME AND CRIMINALIZATION. THE GROUP IS CONTINUING TO COLLECT INTERVIEWS AND ENCOURAGES COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO REACH OUT TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW NEAR THE TENDERLOIN OR MISSION NEIGHBORHOODS, AND OR LEAVE A VOICEMAIL AT (415) 763-7485 WITH A SHORT QUOTE OR STORY TO BE SHARED.

Shelters are
like jail, but

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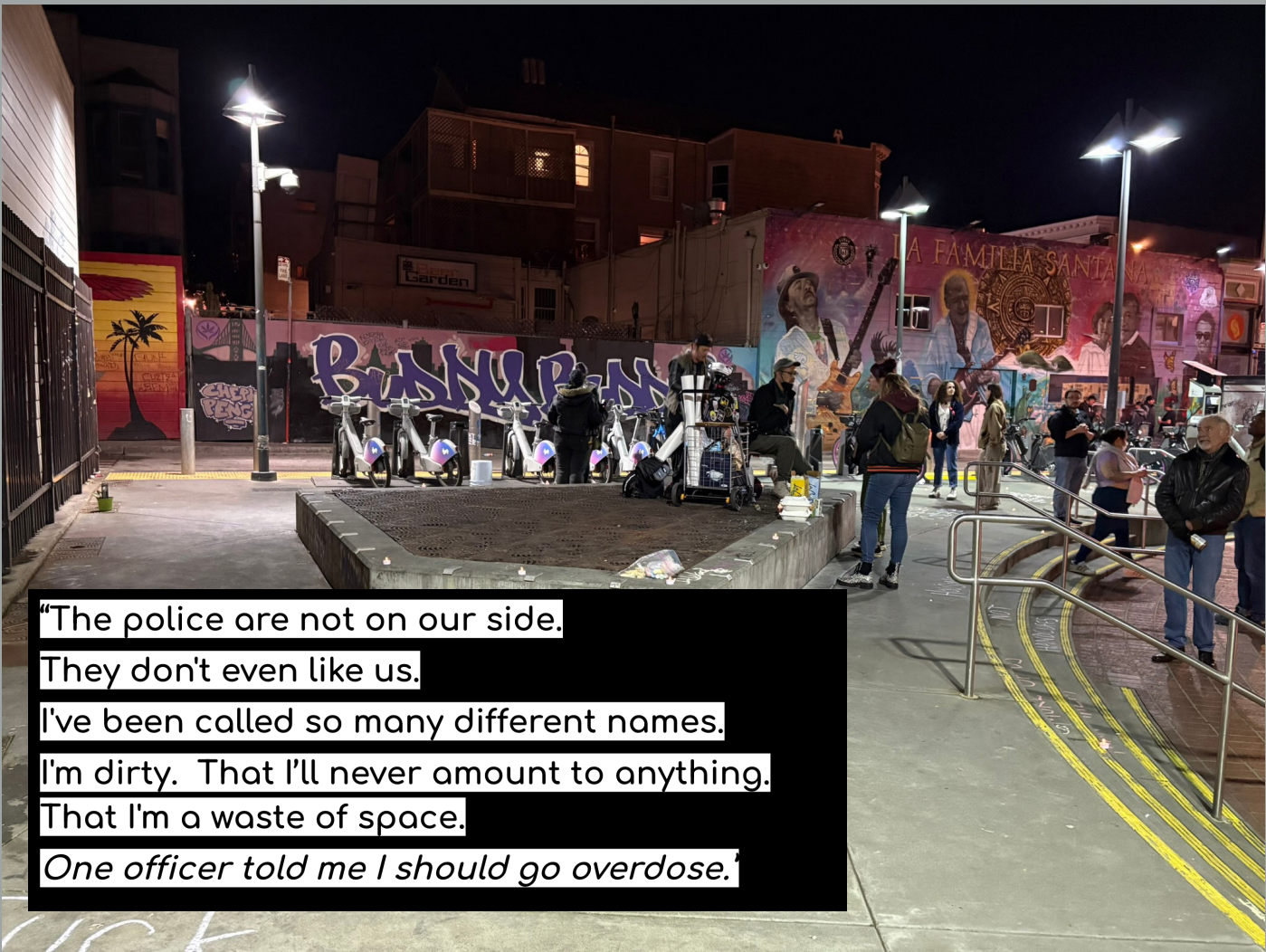
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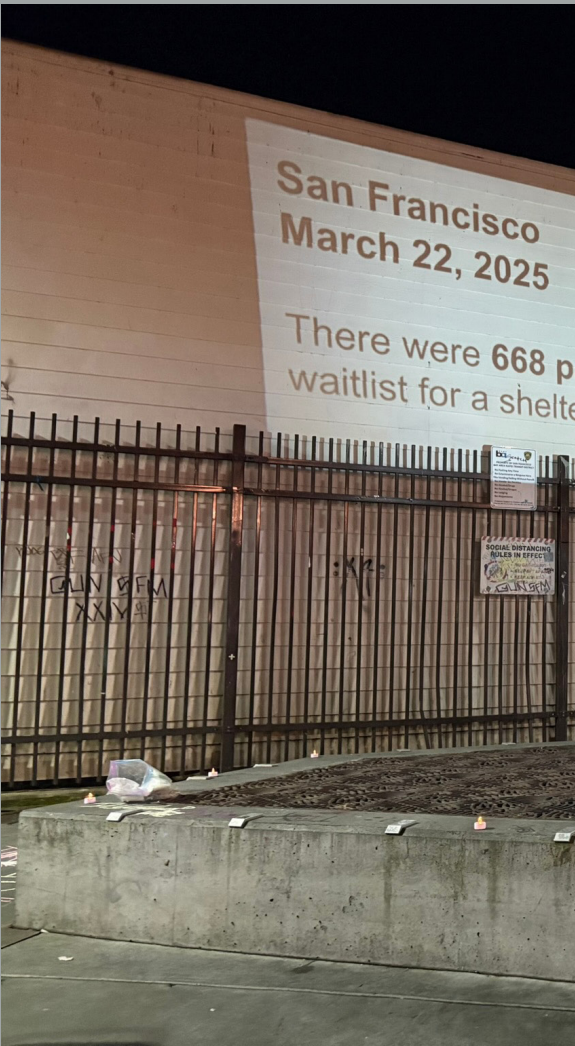
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"The police are not on our side.
They don't even like us.
I've been called so many different names.
I'm dirty. That I'll never amount to anything.
That I'm a waste of space.
One officer told me I should go overdose."



San Francisco
March 22, 2025
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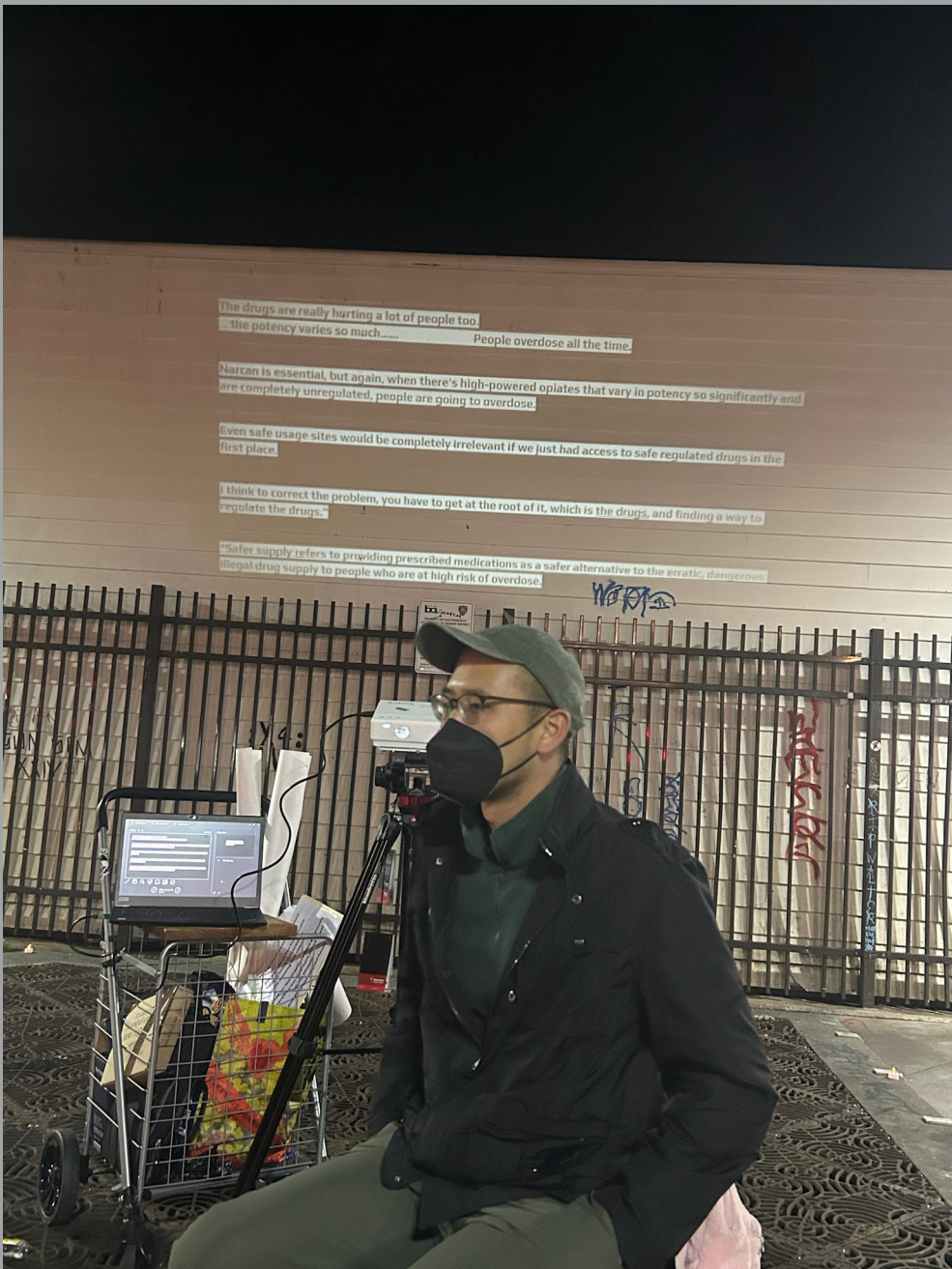
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ve never been through that in





CALL US

*We want to hear
your stories!*

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED OR ARE CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS? ARE YOU INTERESTED IN TALKING ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH SWEEPS,DISPLACEMENT, HUMAN RIGHTS, DPW, ARRESTS?

HAVE THOUGHTS ABOUT SF'S MASSIVE INVESTMENT OF RESOURCES TO ARREST PEOPLE FOR DRUG OFFENSES AND MANDATED DRUG TREATMENT IN THE NAME OF OVERDOSE PREVENTION?

LEAVE US A MESSAGE AT

(415) 763-7485



Coalition on
Homelessness
San Francisco

AN ALTERNATIVE PILOT PROPOSAL:

EVIDENCE-BASED EFFECTIVE SF STREET RESPONSE

“Their tactics, what they're trying to do, they're just using force. I think they can turn it down a notch, not be so forceful.

They come up and tell us we're detained right off the bat.

Then they dig into our pockets and put everything on the ground. Then if they find drugs or anything, they take us to jail. We'll get out in a couple days.

But you know, I think there's better ways to do it.

A lot of us don't want to keep getting high. We are looking for help or housing.”

—Anonymous unhoused person residing in 6th street area

On March 25, Mayor Daniel Lurie introduced some details around his plan to reengineer San Francisco’s street response. The model coordinates City departments to deliver one unified street outreach team model focused on geographic areas. The new street teams model combines teams from across seven departments—Police, Fire, Sheriff, Public Works, Public Health, Homelessness and Supportive Housing, and Emergency Management—into a single team that focuses on five specific geographic areas and a citywide unit. The areas are organized according to police districts: Tenderloin/Northern, Mission, Southern/Central, Park/Taraval/Richmond and Bayview/Ingleside. Previously there were nine service-oriented street outreach teams, alongside Police- and Public Works-managed street responses, including service calls made to 311. Under Lurie’s proposal, each team will be led by Department of Emergency Management (DEM) personnel acting as a team conductor, focused on addressing resident complaints. SFPD would lead enforcement with Public Works.

There is good news about this approach along with some bad news. The new operations combine enforcement with social services across the board, which is bad. Mixing every street team with enforcement, and putting DEM at the helm—despite its leadership of the unsuccessful and often trauma-inducing Healthy Streets Operation Center (HSOC)—is not a great choice. However, there is some good stuff in there in terms of coordination between departments that help folks.

THE PROBLEM WITH AN ENFORCEMENT-LED RESPONSE (A REALLY EXPENSIVE WAY TO EXACERBATE HOMELESSNESS)

“That's the fundamental problem right there: We simply don't have homes, a place to live... It's illegal to sleep in the city now if you don't have a home or even sit or lie down—and that's exhausting.”

Policing typically results in move-along orders, citations, confiscation and often destruction of property. A 2020 study found that enforcement-first approaches “systematically limit homeless people’s access to services, housing, and jobs, while damaging their health, safety, and well-being.” Rarely does a police response lead to ending an episode of homelessness, yet millions of dollars are spent on this same response—those millions could be better used to invest in long-term solutions. A 2016 report from the City found that “current enforcement measures are too expensive” and that SFPD had “limited results from enforcing quality-of-life laws against the homeless.” Beyond its ineffectiveness, policing is a punitive and harmful response to homelessness that exacerbates racial inequality. Police encounters often leave those who are unhoused, disabled, and experiencing poverty feeling as if they are unwanted and disposable. Unhoused individuals have repeatedly fallen victim to police violence, such as Luis Góngora Pat, who was fatally shot by SF police on April 7, 2016. National experts have unanimously weighed in that criminalization hurts efforts to address homelessness, from the National Alliance to

End Homelessness to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness.

WHERE THE STREET RESPONSE SHOULD LIVE

The Lurie Administration proposal tasks DEM with providing services during street response. This department handles emergency response, dispatching fire and police to put out fires, transport accident victims and respond to crimes in a timely manner. It also oversees complaints coming in through the 311 system. DEM is charged with quickly responding to emergencies, but it’s not equipped for ongoing care, engaging people in services and addressing long standing inequities.

Better suited for long-term response are the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH), which oversees services such as shelter and housing, and the Department of Public Health (DPH), which oversees medical and behavioral health treatment. A key to a successful street response—especially when considering the needs of individuals at severe medical risk—is ensuring continuous care, which requires developing trust. A good street response doesn’t just respond in the moment—it works with people over time to identify appropriate placement, address their immediate needs, enroll them in benefits, clear barriers to care and advocate for them. “Over time” is key, because shelter and housing placements rarely become available immediately. Keeping in close touch is crucial so that placement can happen swiftly when a bed opens up. We recommend that DPH collaborates with HSH in overseeing the street response.

WHAT A DATA DRIVEN STREET RESPONSE SHOULD LOOK LIKE:

We propose the City replace all the current teams plus other street response expenditures. These new teams should be deeply trained and clinically supervised, collaborative, geographic-based, peer-based teams. Furthermore, they should be centered on unhoused people with whom they would collaborate in developing exit plans with clear objectives and measurable outcomes. These teams could be a mix of City employees and contracted out to nonprofit organizations.

Components:

A. Training
A newly designed street response would be made up of extensively trained community members with a support system for troubleshooting and updating strategies. Staff training will deliberately be much more intensive than for a typical street outreach team. Key to the success with Eugene, Oregon’s CAHOOTS program is the 500 hours of field training that staff undergo, along with 20 hours of classroom training and regular follow-up training sessions. For San Francisco, prioritizing hiring those who have lived experience with poverty and homelessness, including Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and transgender individuals, as well as others with lived experience with homelessness.

B. Collaboration
A newly designed street response team should have deep levels of collaboration with other City entities and providers to ensure that individuals receive the care they need. For example, if medical situations arise, the team should collaborate with street medicine for urgent street-based care and follow-up. For individuals with substance use disorders, it should collaborate with the behavioral health center for placement, or the Dore Alley Urgent Care Clinic for crisis placement. It could also address legal needs, such as assistance with benefits in collaboration with Bay Area Legal Aid or the Homeless Advocacy Project. The team should develop a plan for each individual with the collaboration of relevant agencies.

C. Peer-Based Teams
We propose two-person teams made up of people who reflect the community they are working in and have lived experience with poverty and homelessness. Teams would provide services including first aid and non-emergency medical services, substance use/addiction referrals or resources, psychiatric hospital transportation services, de-escalation intervention and interpersonal conflict resolution, street counseling and mental wellness referrals or resources, suicide prevention, housing referrals or other resources.

Geographic areas would be divided up, and different organizations could be responsible for a particular geographic area to ensure cultural competency. The team would be dispatched to low priority 311/911 calls in their geographic area, but would also be responsible for caring for all unhoused people in their assigned zone, regardless of whether the call originated from a 311/911 call, or if the unhoused person is living in a tent. This more comprehensive approach would increase equity and move away from the piecemeal approach that a complaint driven approach represents.

D. Clinical Supervision
The peer-based teams would receive clinical supervision both on site and after reviewing incidents in the field. A clinical supervisor would spend time with each team, observing and engaging in dialogue with the team, reflecting on specific cases and giving technical advice on what worked well and which other tools and approaches the team might try. The clinicians would coach peers on motivational interviewing and assertive outreach, among other skills. Lessons learned in the field would be brought to training as examples of approaches that work and don’t work.

E. Geographic areas
Impoverished neighborhoods in San Francisco would be divided up and a two-person team assigned to that area. In areas with high density of unhoused individuals, the team would be assigned fewer blocks. This would allow for cultural competency in specific subpopulations. For example, teams assigned to Castro and Polk Gulch should include members of the LGBTQ+ community, and Bayview teams should be made up of members of the Black community, while a Mission team would have a Spanish-speaking, culturally Latinx makeup.

F. Expected outcomes and accountability (including ongoing care)
The teams would be expected to track placements for each unhoused person and have a plan in their geographic area that is co-designed by the unhoused person. This plan would take into consideration any family members—related or street-based—they rely on and would like to stay in community with. It would also look at addressing potential barriers, appropriate placements, necessary steps and timeline of securing placements and securing needed documentation to complete the paperwork. A key ingredient of successful data-driven models is respect for the autonomy of the unhoused individuals. This also has the parallel benefit of addressing concerns of local businesses and housed community members who are looking for successful exits from the streets, not just shuffling folks from corner to corner.

G. Budget
There are currently multiple teams with multi-million dollar budgets. For example, the Homeless Emergency Assistance Resource Team is budgeted for \$3 million, while the Street Crisis Response Team has a \$13.4 million budget, and the Street Wellness Response Team has a \$9.6 million budget. Meanwhile, HSOC’s budget is estimated at about \$20 million. This allows plenty of room for a new pilot project without expending new resources. In fact, this model would save unnecessary police deployment, lessening the need for police overtime.

LOVE ON THE RUN:

POLITICAL OPPRESSION HAS PUSHED MARIA, JUAN AND THEIR DAUGHTERS FROM VENEZUELA TO COLOMBIA TO THE UNITED STATES, WHERE THEIR FUTURE REMAINS UNCERTAIN.

GILES CLASEN

Maria and Juan’s life together began in a shrimp processing facility in Venezuela, where they worked long hours to support themselves. “We peeled and sorted shrimp until the early hours of the morning,” Maria said. “It wasn’t much; it was stinky, but we made it work because we had each other.”

Their bond, forged in the face of poverty, political turmoil and violence, carried them through unimaginable challenges that brought them to the United States. Juan and Maria asked that their real names be withheld for safety reasons under the current political climate.

Juan joined the Venezuelan special forces at a young age because the military was the best opportunity for poor Venezuelans with little education. He retired from the military because he was being ordered to subdue violently those in opposition to President Nicolas Maduro.

“When I joined the army, it was to defend my country,” Juan said. “But after the death of President Hugo Chavez, the military was turned against its own people. I couldn’t reconcile my oath with what I was being asked to do – repress unarmed civilians. I left the armed forces because my conscience wouldn’t allow me to stay.”

Juan eventually joined the protests because he felt there was nothing to lose. He saw his Indigenous Wayuu community under attack by government forces and felt that he had to act.

During a peaceful 2016 demonstration, Juan was captured by colectivos, armed groups loyal to the Maduro regime that kidnap, torture and kill opposition. “They beat me, and one of them grabbed me and hit my back with a baseball bat, causing a fracture and compression in the spinal cord. I was left for dead, lying on the street,” Juan said.

Doctors Without Borders saved Juan, but he will use a wheelchair for the rest of his life and is unable to move his left foot. Colectivos pursued Juan and threatened to kill any friends or family caught supporting him. “Leaving Venezuela wasn’t planned. [Maria] was threatened with death, she was pregnant, and the few things we had, we had to leave them,” Juan said. “We left for Colombia because it was the only country that was giving us security.”

Eventually, political tides changed in Columbia, making it unsafe for Juan, Maria and their three children. They made the hard decision to travel to the US. “We did not want to leave Columbia. We were happy there,” Maria said. “But it wasn’t safe. We had no choice.”

The two saved money for six months to prepare for the trip. They were afraid that they would die during the journey. It seemed impossible for a disabled man using a wheelchair, his wife and their three young children to cross the dangerous Darién Gap.

They explored every other option but felt that their only path forward was the arduous journey. Juan enlisted the help of a sergeant who served with him in the military. The sergeant carried Juan for miles across the wildest jungle terrain. Maria shepherded the children. “At one point, I almost drowned with our youngest daughter while crossing a river,” Maria said. “But Juan’s sergeant saved us. We wouldn’t have made it without him.”

Every leg of the journey included paying gangs to pass often lawless terrain. After months of danger, hunger, and exhaustion, the couple reached the US, determined to build a safer, more stable life for their children. Though their future remains uncertain as they await work permits, their love and commitment to one another remain unshaken.

“For us, love means sacrifice and teamwork,” Juan said. “We’ve faced every hardship together, and we’ll keep fighting for our family’s future.”

When the family reached Denver, Colorado, the city offered them a one-month stay at a hotel near the airport. They feared that they would end up homeless once the voucher ended, and Maria immediately tried to find any income she could. They saved just enough to afford a small one-bedroom apartment but have been near eviction multiple times. They are now navigating the challenges of starting over, seeking asylum, and adapting to a

new culture. “We want our daughters to have opportunities we never had. That’s why we’ve endured so much, because we love each other and believe in a better tomorrow,” Maria said.

Juan said that his love for Maria has never wavered, and that the two have been committed to each other and their daughters through it all. “I wouldn’t want my daughters to go through the same thing because I went through a lot of need and hunger when I was a child,” Juan said. “That’s why I try to make my relationship work, and when I feel like something is failing, we talk about it together as a couple.”

But the two see the growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the US and fear once again for their future and safety. Juan said that he believes that the immigrant community shares many values with Americans and should be a welcome addition to this country’s melting pot. He and Maria are driven by their faith, family and hard work.

The couple also urged Americans to consider the struggles of migrants. “We are not here to harm anyone,” Juan said. “We want to work hard, contribute, and build a better future – not just for our children, but for this country as well.”

No matter what their future holds, Juan and Maria are certain that they will go through everything together.

Courtesy of Denver VOICE / INSP.



