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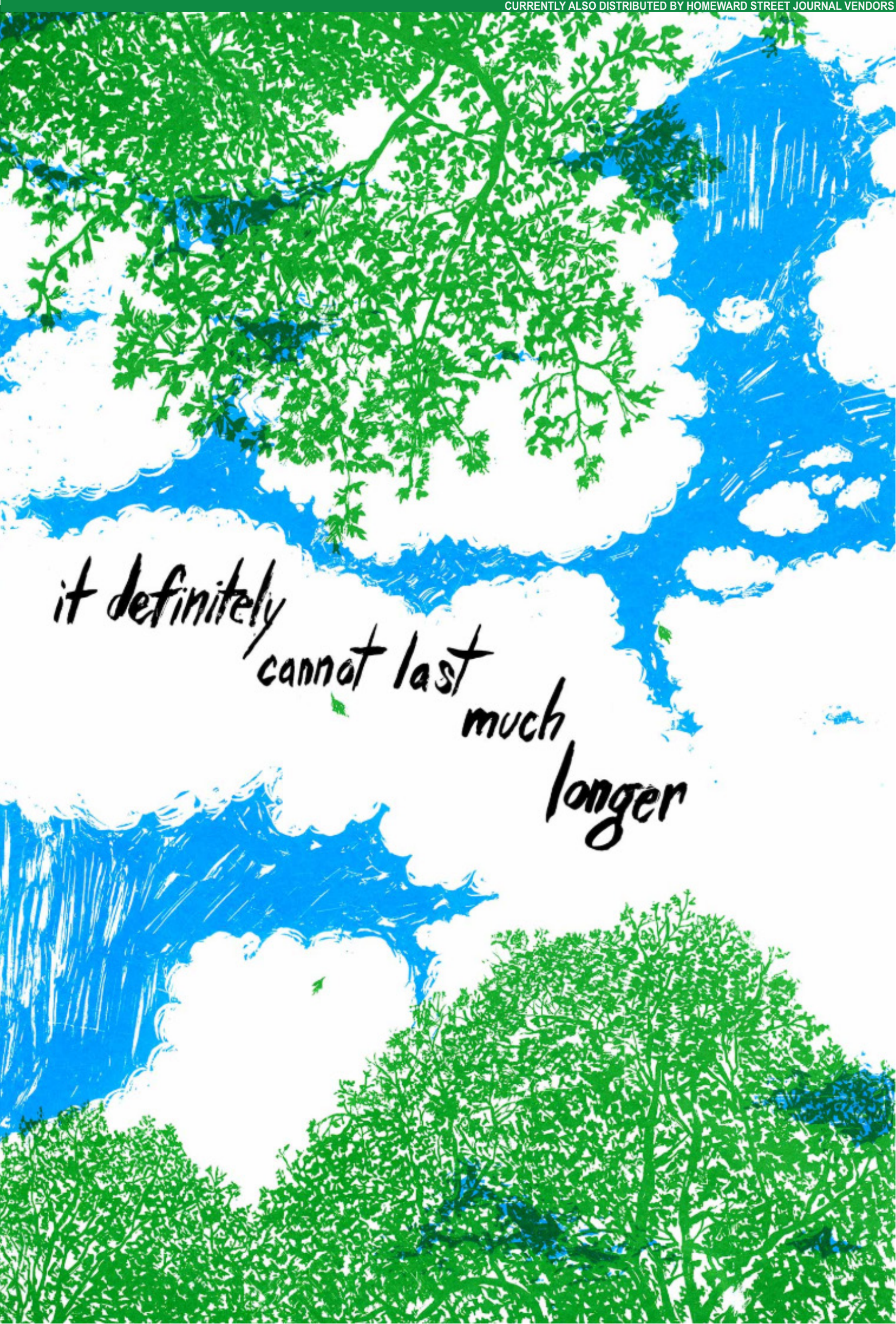
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STREET SHEET



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“NO TOWS WITHOUT HOMES”:

ACTIVISTS DEMAND MORE TIME FOR RV PERMIT REGISTRATION AND HOUSING AS SF ENFORCES NEW BAN. STILL, THE NEW LAW CAUGHT MANY WHO LIVE IN LARGE VEHICLES OFF GUARD

TJ JOHNSTON

At the same time that advocates for San Francisco’s vehicle-dwelling residents charged the City to protect RV and large vehicle residents from displacement by a parking enforcement program, City workers were removing trailers about five miles away.

On November 5, at a plaza on 16th and Harrison streets in the Mission District, members of the End Poverty Tows Coalition, San Francisco Latino Task Force and the Coalition on Homelessness staged a press conference with the theme, “No Tows Without Homes.”

Earlier that day in the Bayview neighborhood, staff from several City departments, including police, were already at work towing large vehicles that were not enrolled in the Large Vehicle Permit Program by the November 1 deadline. The San Francisco Standard posted on X videos of a tow on Ingalls Street where a resident failed to prevent the removal.

The tows are part of a citywide two-hour RV parking ban that the Board of Supervisors approved in July. The new restriction allowed vehicle dwellers to enroll in a permit program that excuses them from being ticketed and towed for six months.

However, of the 500-some RV households that the City counted last May, the Coalition on Homelessness estimates that fewer than half registered for a permit sticker to place on their vehicles as the deadline loomed. Advocates for unhoused folk are asking that the City allow more time for the rest of the counted households to register.

These households comprise a subset of the 4,354 San Franciscans living unsheltered, according to last year’s point-in-time count of unhoused people, with 90% of homeless families living on wheels. In a city where affordable housing for working and immigrant families grows ever more scarce, vehicles offer much needed shelter, said Gabriel Medina, executive director of La Raza Community Resource Center.

“While the City targets households sheltered in RVs, thousands more are sleeping on the streets, in cars, parks, (and) school gyms,” Medina said in a news release. “The City should be setting up safe parking and RV parks, while working to get everyone indoors.”

At the press conference, Medina added that RV residents are more sustainably housed than those living on the streets.

Inadequate outreach, language barriers and bureaucracy have plagued vehicular residents, according to RV dweller Zach Bollinger, who has kept abreast of the RV ban’s legislative process throughout the year. For one thing, the

City undercounted inhabited vehicles, Bollinger said—“they count 15 RVs when there would be 20 or 25 RVs on the street.” Also, he said that residents found the permitting procedure too intimidating.

“When the [Homeless Outreach Team] would go around and try to talk to people and inform them of the process, they wouldn’t answer the door because there’s no trust,” Bollinger said. “And so they would talk to me, but they wouldn’t talk to the HOT team because I’m a neighbor providing them with the information about what I know, what I have learned from the City and through a variety of City Hall meetings, through this and through the news, and they have to sit there and digest all this information processing, (and) decide how they’re going to cope with it, what they’re going to do, what they need to do.”

Bollinger added that he was educating his neighbors about the permit process and encouraging them to attend the information meetings up until the registration deadline, but found that they were still unaware of the ban soon to take effect.

“It’s like the city just kind of passed this thing and said, ‘Well, we’re going to pass this. And whatever happens, happens,’” he said.

Permit holders face an impossible choice, advocates say: They must accept any shelter offer, even if it doesn’t meet their needs, or if they refuse, lose their permit and risk towing.

It appears that the City’s supply of housing options outweighs the demand. According to the Department of Emergency Management, “To support exits from vehicles, this year’s budget added 100 new adult rapid re-housing (RRH) slots for people in large vehicles, 100 new RRH slots for transition-aged youth, and 50 hotel vouchers for adults, providing immediate relief and pathways to stability.”

Assuming these figures are accurate, that’s enough to cover the 238 RV households that already received their permit stickers as of October 28, according to estimates from the Coalition on Homelessness, the homeless advocacy organization that publishes Street Sheet. Still, that leaves the majority of counted vehicles—275—without a sticker.

“There was no pathway for people who are unable to navigate the overly bureaucratic, unnecessary process to be able to move forward,” Coalition on Homelessness director Jennifer Friedenbach said. “This is the city of St. Francis, and this policy in no way reflects the values of San Francisco.”

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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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.

HELP KEEP STREET SHEET IN PRINT!



coalition.networkforgood.com

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!

THE LURE OF THE HITCHHIKING MONKEY

JASON ALBERTSON

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Jason Albertson, a clinical social worker and long-time homeless advocate, died on October 25, 2025. Jason was well known to go to bat for unhoused people, stand up to injustice and engage in nonjudgmental care. His work led countless humans off the streets to have an opportunity to recover and thrive. He was so important to San Francisco and will be dearly missed. Below is a story of Jason's that Street Sheet originally published in the April 1997 edition.*

Place and time, says the writing instructor. Set it down the way it was. Just the facts. Haight Street, up by Golden Gate Park end, cross of Stanyan. Matrix II time, Mayor Jordan's cops got the big push to clean folks without a roof outa the park. I'm there some by myself with a video camera and some with StreetWatch, riding the park on a motor bike, trying to spot the cops in their vans and Hondas before they start digging out the encampments.

One of these early evenings I go back to Stanyan to catch up with the others before I go on another sweep and this woman, no, girl, dressed in boots and leathers, skinny as hell, stumbles out of the bushes and falls flat on her face. She can't be more than 14. I've seen her around these past four weeks and go over to her, help her up. She's shitty as hell from the dope, pupils pinned, head lolling around like she's an unhinged doll. She can't stand so I prop her against a tree and her tribe comes up, says they'll take care of her. I turn around,

fulla fury, and ask them, "Who gave it to her? Which one of you got her high?"

I know damn well she didn't put in her arm herself; her arms's unmarked except for one or two spots. It takes time to learn how to hit yourself, especially when you're as thin as this gal. They don't answer at first. One of them steps forward and says he didn't, that it was her boyfriend, who's older and not around.

I look at her and the tribe, all boots, spike hair and leather, things dangling from their necks, dirt ground into each pore, and now I'm no longer angry, and I ask them quietly, "he gets her high, and now look at her. Why do you call him 'friend?'"

There's no response. There isn't any answer, and I don't know which is worse: for her to crash code blue into an OD and respiratory arrest some night from the dope or to wake up some morning, boyfriend gone, and realize she's pretty sick and that the needmo' is big, and wants some breakfast.

I walk away from them in their spiked hair and leather armor looking for all the world like a flock of exotic birds, all huddled around her. There's some places so grim that they turn black and white behind your eyes minutes after you leave.

But I still wonder why she called the guy who shot her up "friend."

* * *

I'm at a party in the Mission, at a friend's house, rode over on a Saturday night for conversation and maybe meet someone. This gig's near Capp Street, and just before I ride the Suzi up the curb, I notice the women on the corner, holding themselves out



Jason Albertson (October 18, 1962 – October 25, 2025)

for the cars as they go by. I've known some of them for years. I go inside and up three flights. I'm not really jumping yet, and I strike up a conversation with a young woman and get the wake-up tingle, hey something could happen, it might be nice.

She starts talking about heroin and Kurt Cobain, and I know where this conversation's going even when she comes out and says it. She wants to know about dope and how to get it and use it and what it all feels like. Really, what she wants from me is to go score for her, this cute woman, maybe 25, and instead, I give her the rap.

"Let me tell you about dope," I say, "Let me ask you this question because maybe it'll help you make up your mind about whether you should get involved with the stuff in the first place, and maybe if you know the answer, you'll save yourself a whole lotta trouble trying to find out later.

"See, you've heard of the monkey that rides around on your shoulders if you've been putting the stuff into your arm long enough to get a habit?" Being a good, little girl well steeped in the vicarious, romanticized junkie culture of William Burroughs and Lou Reed, plus a whole lotta others, she nods. Yeah, she's heard of the monkey.

"Some people," I continue, "can meet the monkey hitchhiking on the road and pick him up, give him a ride for 40 miles or so, and then tell him to get outta the car— and the monkey does, just opens the door and leaves, says thanks for the ride, salutations, goes back to the thumb until the next one.

"But some people, well, they ain't

so good at telling the monkey to get outta the car—in fact, not longer after he gets in they realize it's the monkey that's driving, and now they're riding shotgun. The monkey's put some floorwax down on the bench seat and takes the corners real fast, what we call a C.O.D.—"Come Over, Darling—so you find yourself snuggling up to him. And the monkey, he likes to drive real fast. What you realize then is that if you gonna get out, you gonna do it at speed, hit the ground hard, forget about the car and anything you might have in it. The monkey's gonna eat all that."

I give her the rap like that and finally look at her, as she cradles the beer in her hands on the couch.

"Now I gotta ask you, are you the kinda person who can tell the monkey to get out of the car in the first place? Have you ever put anything down that was extremely pleasurable but was also bad for you?

She doesn't answer, and a few minutes later gets up and says she has to go to the bathroom. She never comes back and later dances with a guy who probably doesn't ask her those kinds of questions. They leave together.

I don't deny that some people can use drugs recreationally. If you can, more power to you. But I see people every day who are consumed by their addiction, by the getting and using, by the needmo', and I wonder what would have happened if someone had asked them the question I asked the hip, young woman at the party. If you can't put it down, you shouldn't take it up—and each of us knows the answer to that deep inside before we ever take a hit.

SNAP CRISIS: A TIMELINE

LUPE VELEZ

The last three weeks has been a large-scale humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands of low-income Bay Area residents and millions of Americans being locked out from accessing food.

In mid-October, federal officials announced that the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits funds would be halted starting November 1 due to the government shutdown, potentially leaving 48 million Americans without access to governmental assistance for groceries. By October 28, over a dozen states had sued the Trump administration for withholding SNAP benefits. By late October, two federal judges in Massachusetts and Rhode Island ruled that the Trump administration must restore SNAP benefits using emergency funds.

The Trump administration asserted that SNAP benefits could not be restored due to the federal government shutdown; the U.S. Department of Agriculture corroborated this claim by stating, “Bottom line, the well has run dry.” But by November 3, the administration conceded to the courts and announced that they would use emergency USDA funds to partially restore SNAP benefits.

BAY AREA AND SAN FRANCISCO

More than 644,000 Bay Area residents, and 112,000 people in San Francisco rely on CalFresh, California’s equivalent of SNAP benefits. On October 29 the city of San Francisco announced an \$18 million private-partnership to aid cuts to SNAP with the funds coming from the City’s \$400 million emergency and Crankstart, a foundation founded by venture capitalist Michael Moritz and his wife, Harriet Heyman.

On November 6, the Supreme Court ordered the Trump administration fully restore

SNAP benefits.

As of Friday November 7 demand on Bay Area food banks have increased since the administration delayed benefits during the first week of November, the San Francisco Chronicle reports.

This is unprecedented and inconceivable in one of the world’s richest nations. The Trump administration’s callous regard for the American people and human suffering signals our further descent into a fascist regime that has embraced cruelty towards the working class and impoverished people. The future remains uncertain even when the government shutdown comes to an eventual end, Trump’s tax and policy megabill passed earlier in the year made significant changes to the SNAP program, threatening hundreds of thousands of Californians.

San Francisco has managed a temporary fix to cover SNAP benefits to recipients this month, but we look to our city officials to find more permanent solutions and stand up to the Trump administration in its pillaging of social safety nets and social aid. We cannot rely on venture capitalists and billionaires who hoard the wealth to come to our rescue. We have to ensure there are safety nets and protections for families, seniors, disabled people and all San Franciscans.

UPDATE: THE SAN FRANCISCO HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY HAS ANNOUNCED THAT, AS OF NOVEMBER 10, CALFRESH BENEFITS FOR NOVEMBER HAVE BEEN FULLY RESTORED. FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, GO TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELESSNESS AND SUPPORTIVE HOUSING’S PAGE.

THEFT OF OUR LA THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT STARVE US AND THE EMERG OUR OWN SELF-DETERMINE

SNAP or no SNAP

These weren’t life sustaining plans

Only bits and pieces of a wealth hoarding trap

To make us feel like we had a life raft

An option to dying of hunger even tho we all pay their pinche tax

What’s happening republiCRAPS - you don’t even need to hide behind the lies of neo-liberal crum snatch

Let’s go back

The new deal - brought in when we were starving on the streets cuz the wealth hoarders were starting to feel

a little scared cuz there are more of us poor than any of you billionaires who kill and trash and endlessly steal -

And yet here we are again- not so many years later in the time of an orange tinted cartoon criminal man

And we po folks face racist, classist theft of our last crum yet again

Where do we go? They stole our tents, they created the lie of rent, they create false borders and guns to keep us on the run and now our WIC cheese our EBT crum and our homes - this evil sys is moving as fast as it can for the last trace of food stuck to the inside of my bones

They want us in terror , stripping our tiny shred of safety in their scarcity poverty

But snap or no SNAP - we have solutions, based in facts, that are real not based on more scarcity crack

Stay strong - walk closer together - grow any space into micro-farms, reach out to comeunity already lifting up solutions like charms

Poverty and krapitalism had Me and mama on the street - where we would still be - poltricks didnt save us) we saved ourself with radical sharing and revolutionary ComeUnity...

“Mama, we don’t have any more money on the EBT card.” This sentence often spoke somewhere between the 20th and 30th of the month, depending if we spent too much on the luxury items like fresh veggies, fruit or meat, was always filled with dread cause there really was no answer or option

Everyday under the orange tinted criminal- wanna b king- there is another violent act being waged against poor people, houseless people, indigenous peoples, Black and Brown peoples and arguably just people, who don’t have access to billions of blood-stained dollars .

Now the violent republCRAPs have waged war on our most basic of crumbs - the tiny bit we receive from the poltricksters for food assistance aka EBT, food Stamps, or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The funny, not funny thing about this SNAP theft is the wealth-hoarders have begrudgingly “granted” those meager food crumbs off their feudal tables since the New Deal and its subsequent scarcity model was passed into law in the 1930’s. Created allegedly to support the amerikkklan people in poverty but on the real, created because there were more angry poor people than there were wealth hoarding hoarders- just like there is today.

The New Deal and its “support” programs were also raced and classed and set up in a scarcity model. Originally only designated for “white, widows of war veterans,” falling in line with the hetero patriarchal, racist, classist hate of anyone else not in these categories, enhancing the criminalization, and pathologizing of peoples of color, indigenous peoples, unmarried women, single parents, disabled peoples, etc.

The scarcity model comes from the place of how little can we give people to keep them silent and alive, rather than how much do people need to thrive?

FAST CRUMB

T'S ATTEMPT TO

GENCY NEED FOR

ED SOLUTIONS

TINY

This means we poor folks are constantly making unhealthy choices with our grocery shopping, like not buying too much , if any, organic fruit or vegetables, never considering grass-fed meat, much-less meat or chicken at all, hormone free milk or cheese and rarely if ever, dreaming of healthy cereals or less fat-filled foods.

But these haters are also taking our food crumbs and our emergency food crumbs, aka Women, Infant and Children's food program (WIC). Cause with the orange criminal and his Good Ole Boys (GOP) it actually seems like they want us to die.

BUT SNAP OR NO SNAP....

Bottom line is the scarcity model crumbs have never been enough to feed , clothe, house and truly support poor people. It was a deep struggle for my mama to survive on those crumbs and raise me right when she relied on the state for support and it was equally hard for me and my son.

This scarcity also led and still leads to so many of us poor families being forced into underground economic strategies, which then often leads to our increased criminalization and incarceration. But hey the wealthhoarders make money on their private prisons and sick detention centers so that has always been a win win for them.

THE PANDEMIC CALLED POVERTY

Long before the so-called pandemic and the dire lack of food , medicine or support when it first hit all of our low-no income communities, POOR Magazine - a poor /houseless people led movement of art, media, education and solutions by us for us and everyone else, had instituted free healthy food giveaways, organic produce, that privileged, housed people donated to us, free diaper programs, hot meals and more that we poor folks constantly were distributing to our fellow impoverished bay area comeunity.

In 2011 when conscious, housed wealth-hoarders who had attended Peopleskool and formed the solidarity family at POOR Magazine, raised the money to purchase a small part of Mama Earth in occupied Huchiun so us poor and houseless peoples could build our own solution to homelessness we call HOMEfulness. It was ON! We officially launched the sliding scale cafe/mercadito de cambio (little market of change), the Po Mamas Panale (diaper) program and more - all aimed at redistributing everything we received from housed relatives and other revolutionary orgs, away to fellow poor folks.

In 2020 when COVID hit, we just gave more. We increased from just diapers to medicine, from just hot food to organic fruit, and veggies, from some groceries to entire bags of groceries, clothes, shoes, bougie, organic baked goods and more. And have kept this consistent every week through today where we radically share all of this with over 500 babies, youth, adults and elders every week at Homefulness Sliding Scale Cafe.

YES, I'M SCARED

So yes as a formerly houseless, no-income, single parent EBT recipient myself, I'm scared for this coming Saturday, when they take these crucial crumbs away from me and my family and comeUnity, but SNAP or no SNAP, I have come to realize that politricks is nothing but a trick and is always pulling some Sheeeit. And in this time of so much hate, lies and wealth-hoarding evil from Turtle Island to Palestine, we have to walk even closer together. We have to all practice these visions of radical redistribution and Comeunity reparations. We are all connected and our shared humanity is all we have as humans. No politrickster or wealth-hoarder will "Save us" And people who have , as my mama would put it, "Never missed a meal" need to participate in this moment



with love not scarcity, radically sharing with those of us facing missed meals, empty refrigerators and scarcity fear, now more than ever. And they are already doing it.

Look at all the restaurants standing up with offers of free food and love - WahPepahs Kitchen, Monster Pho and Understory in Oakland to Tony Alba's Pizza in San Jose to name a few.

Look at the already here grassroots movements already doing this radical redistribution like The Self-Help Hunger Program, Wood Street Commons, Love and Justice in the Streets, the SLiding Scale Cafe/Market of Change/ Homies Empowerment, Deep Medicine Circle and so many more

We can't rely on a government that is already targeting us as the "The enemy inside" and hunting down 1st grade children, mamas and papas and elders to arrest and anyone that doesn't look like Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos.

Self-determination is liberation. Liberation is the medicine of love we need now. Not more reliance on government structures that sweep, incarcerate, murder, kidnap, profile and destroy every poor person they can.

Originally published in poormagazine.org

FREEDOM IS FUNDAMENTAL: RESISTING THE NEW POOR FARMS

CAT WILLIAMS



Freedom of movement is a fundamental right of residents on American soil. The right extends to all, including people who live outside on our streets and open public spaces.

It's a bedrock principle, embedded in our consciousness and our culture, deeper than any law or legal decision. In a 1958 Supreme Court decision, Justice William O. Douglas phrased it this way:

"Freedom of movement across frontiers in either direction, and inside frontiers as well, was a part of our heritage . . . It may be as close to the heart of the individual as the choice of what he eats, or wears, or reads. Freedom of movement is basic in our scheme of values..."

As Justice Douglas observed in a 1972 case freedom involves independence, self-confidence, a sense of creativity. It is, in fact, essential to "the right of dissent...the right to be nonconformists and the right to defy submissiveness, [encouraging] lives of high spirits rather than hushed, suffocating silence." Now, these very rights, which members of marginalized communities enjoy, are in peril.

THE OLD POOR FARMS

For centuries, profit-driven early capitalists built filthy, cold, crowded ramshackle dormitories for poor people where labor was compulsory. They were called "work houses," "poor houses" or "poor farms." The economic revolutions of industrialization broke up peasant livelihoods, took the land, and drove masses of dispossessed people into industrial centers. They were not allowed to loiter. The ruling class of that day forced any one who seemed "idle" or "vagrant" into these locked facilities. They forced them to work. As journalist Erin Blakemore wrote, "These facilities were designed to punish people for their poverty and,

hypothetically, make being poor so horrible that people would continue to work at all costs."

The class war of the Victorian age has persisted through the 20th and 21st centuries. Until the 1940's, Los Angeles maintained a vast poor farm where old and disabled workers were locked up, put to work, and punished with abuse.

EXPULSION

Today's powerful billionaire class is moving ever more rapidly toward imprisonment of the poor, initiating "a sweeping campaign to make homelessness itself a crime." The highly technological digital automated economy of the 21st century has displaced millions of working-class people, disproportionately people of color. They cannot pay the rents that are increasingly demanded as the price of a home.

This poverty, a sign of vast and widening wealth inequality, results in expulsion of many workers from living space. Once evicted and expelled from housing, they risk breaking the law if they live outside on private, and even public, land. According to one expert, expulsion isn't limited to physical space alone. Social scientist Saskia Sassen points out that "low-income workers and the unemployed [have been expelled] from government social welfare and health programs as well as from corporate insurance and unemployment support."

THE NEW POOR FARMS

As president, Donald Trump now leads the billionaire class and represents its interests. In July, he issued Executive Order 14321, which calls for unhoused people to be forcibly transported into camps on cheap land far from cities. The new

poor farm is here.

Gov. Spencer Cox of Utah is only too happy to oblige, and the state has now proposed a detention campus for some 1,300 unhoused folks on the outskirts of Salt Lake City, miles from the nearest bus stop. "Stern measures" will be used to arrest and sweep unhoused folks from the street. Then "beds" in the facility will be "offered" to unhoused folks as an alternative to jail. Nearly two thirds will be placed there involuntarily for "psychiatric" or "substance abuse" "treatment." The remainder will be required to live in "work-conditioned housing" where forced labor is envisioned as a means for "rehabilitation" and "moral development." It will cost untold millions. Its promoters are in a position to profit.

"FREEDOM IS A CONSTANT STRUGGLE"

Utah's plans follow a high-cost push to incarcerate working-class people who have lost their housing across the country. For example, in California homeless-related arrests have soared since the Supreme Court's ruling in the Grants Pass v. Johnson case, which lifted any restraints on the police.

In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom brought to fruition "CARE courts" as a means of removing unhoused and mentally disabled people from the street. Under the law, CARE courts may enforce involuntary treatment of schizophrenia or related conditions. As of 2024, only a handful of potential cases—42 in San Francisco alone—have already cost tens of

millions of dollars without creating any services or housing.

Last year, California voters approved Proposition 36, known as the "Homelessness, Theft Reduction, and Drug Addiction Act", creating a new category of crimes labeled "treatment felonies." The claim on the ballot was that certain offenders charged with drug offenses and other minor crimes like petty theft could opt for "treatment" instead of jail or prison. Statewide, only 771 people have been ordered to treatment under Prop 36, out of a reported 8,895 cases. The availability of quality treatment is minimal.

According to one jail reform expert, Claire Simonich from the Vera Project, "It promised mass treatment, but instead, the increased incarceration rates are siphoning local funding" from existing programs that help people, and have been proven effective in keeping them out of jail.

Justice Douglas long ago pointed out that freedom is fundamental to our society, especially freedom of movement.. Without it, as he said, we are doomed to lives of "hushed, suffocating silence." It's a sentiment that Jessica, a Street Sheet vendor who lives outside in Sacramento, agrees with.

"I cannot live without freedom," Jessica says. "And I will not live without freedom. I will stand my ground."

Sacramento readers of the Street Sheet can subscribe to this newspaper by going to streetsheet.org

HANDLE WITH CARE

THE RISKS INVOLVED WITH ‘LIVED EXPERIENCE’

DAVID PENTLAND

In recent times, the integration of “lived experience” into homelessness services has gained considerable traction, lauded for its potential to offer authentic insights and empower people with a homelessness story. But while the intentions behind this movement are undeniably noble, a critical examination reveals a complex array of dangers and ethical dilemmas that, if unaddressed, can undermine the very services that they aim to improve.

The following article is part of INSP’s Changing the Narrative series. It has been written as the result of the new journalism training academy, established in 2025 by INSP to provide people with direct experience of homelessness and poverty the opportunity to learn about journalism and the media, and to enhance their storytelling and written abilities. The training academy has two ambitions: to challenge media and public misconceptions about homelessness; and to tackle the lack of representation and diversity in newsrooms. The training academy will run again in September 2025 in INSP’s hometown of Glasgow, Scotland.

Real life stories are flavour of the month. In fact, in recent times, the integration of “lived experience” into homelessness services has gained considerable traction, lauded for its potential to offer authentic insights and empower people with a homelessness story.

While the intentions behind this movement are undeniably noble, a critical examination reveals a complex array of dangers and ethical dilemmas that, if unaddressed, can undermine the very services that they aim to improve.

There are significant risks associated with an uncritical embrace of lived experience, including the potential for tokenism, the burden of emotional labour, the challenge of maintaining professional boundaries, the risk of generalising individual narratives, and the imperative to balance lived experience with professional expertise.

The people most at risk in this space are the people whose developmental years were overshadowed by trauma and adversity. They are often marched out onto the frontline, with little training or education and expected to fulfil a role in a space that was once reserved for degree-educated multidisciplinary workers.

The near certainty of vicarious trauma and the impact on people (who only a few short years ago

were the client) is massive. As they connect with other people’s trauma on multiple levels, the science says that they are releasing toxins into their own bodies that will dramatically shorten their lifespan.

Maintaining professional boundaries presents another significant challenge. People with lived experience, particularly in peer support or outreach roles, may find it difficult to navigate the complexities of professional relationships while simultaneously drawing on deeply personal narratives. The inherent vulnerability in sharing one’s own story can make it challenging to establish and maintain a professional distance, potentially leading to over-identification with service users, blurred lines in advice-giving, or an inability to enforce necessary rules and regulations.

While empathy is crucial in homelessness services, shared experience without professional frameworks can lead to a lack of objectivity, making it difficult to make impartial decisions or set appropriate boundaries for service users, which could ultimately hinder their progress towards stability.

The danger of focusing on individual narratives is a pervasive risk. While personal stories offer invaluable qualitative insights, they are by their very nature subjective and specific to an individual’s unique

circumstances. The lived experience of one person, however compelling, cannot be universally applied to the diverse and multifaceted homeless population.

Factors such as gender, ethnicity, mental health status, addiction and the specific circumstances leading to homelessness create vastly different journeys and needs.

Over-emphasising individual narratives without a broader understanding of sociological, economic and systemic factors can lead to misinformed policy decisions and service designs that fail to address the root causes of homelessness for a wider demographic. It risks creating a “one size fits all” approach based on anecdotal evidence rather than robust research and data.

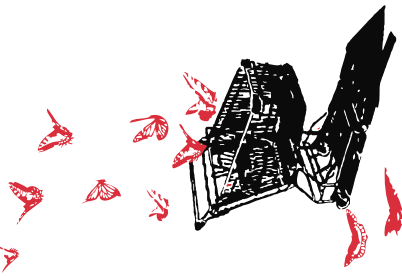
We must move beyond symbolic gestures, provide robust support systems, establish clear professional frameworks, embrace a nuanced understanding of diverse experiences, and, critically, ensure that lived experience works in concert with, rather than in place of, vital professional expertise. Only then can the invaluable contributions of people with lived experience genuinely enhance and transform homelessness services for the better.

Courtesy of INSP.ngo



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