

Homeless advocates discuss shortage of affordable housing in Cincinnati

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with two housing advocates from the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless about the housing crisis in the city and how it contributed to April's riots.

Pat Clifford said, "The politicians believe if you get rid of the housing for the poor then they will move somewhere else and you won't have to deal with the problem. But just moving the problem doesn't solve the problem. They're talking about moving the drop-in homeless center out of Over-the-Rhine. You can move poverty anywhere you want, but if you don't deal with the root causes of poverty and look at the bigger issues, you still have the same problem, if not worse. It can't be positive, just to move something to get it out of sight, out of mind.

"What they did was eliminate hundreds of housing units—all public housing. They are taking that all out and replacing it with a segment of public housing, a segment of middle income and a segment of yuppie housing.

"More and more the majority of people among the city authorities are buying into this philosophy if we just move the poor out the problem would be de-concentrated. There is this idea that you have to disperse the poor, because they say the problem with being poor is that you don't have enough good role models. It's this kind of moral problem with the poor—if you only moved into this white, middle class neighborhood, you would pick up all these wonderful role models from the middle class and you would not be poor anymore.

"The city does not support the non-profit organizations that are doing work in the area. They view them as the negative. By having a shelter we encourage homelessness, they claim. It is as if we disappeared tomorrow, homelessness would go away. It

is the same thing in Chicago, Detroit and all over—they get their playbooks from the same source.

"We believe that it is society's problem that there is poverty and homelessness. There are bigger factors at work here: the wages, temporary labor, unavailability of jobs, lack of adequate health care—all these things contribute to homelessness. We don't view poverty as a moral issue in the fiber of the individual human being. It's a larger systemic issue. Why else would it be the same in Detroit, Chicago or Cincinnati?

"We just did a study and over 50 percent of the homeless people in Cincinnati work. But it is primarily as these temp laborers. Work today, pay today, never get any advancement, never get any seniority, hazardous conditions. You are the working homeless. You stay in a shelter. You can never make enough to get out of your debt, or whatever obligations are on you. It's frustrating."

Susan Knight added, "Our 2000-2004 HUD plan says Cincinnati should reduce concentrations of African Americans and poverty. I am not against mixed income housing, nor against poor people having choices to be able to go wherever they want. But HUD's policy is demolition, in the name of mixed income housing. All they are doing is putting more people on the streets. Living in the projects is no fun, but the answer is not destroying them and leaving people with no alternative.

"HUD acknowledged that in no city in this county is the minimum wage a livable wage. The temp labor industry is making our lives hell. The women tend to work in hotels and maid service. The men tend to work in factories, folding shirts, at the stadium and the construction sites—hard labor.

"Twenty-two percent of homeless women in the area depend on federal and state welfare programs. As of October these women are probably going to be cut off

as the five-year deadline ends. We already know of three cases of women ending up in the shelters, but every month you are going to lose more women. My guess is that initially they are going to go doubled up, and then they are going to end up on the streets. So every month we're losing women off the rolls."

Knight condemned City Councilman Jim Tarbell and his efforts to gentrify impoverished neighborhoods. "He owns a lot of property in Over-the-Rhine, all boarded up abandoned buildings. He's claiming that he can't develop them right now. What he's really doing is land speculating, waiting for the real estate values to rise. He pulled out a map of the area and asked, 'Do you really want the poor people, the people with the most problems to be the first thing you see when you come into this city?'"

Knight explained the police crackdown in recent months and how it fueled the anger, which erupted in April's riots. "In the last 12 months, one in three of our homeless men—60.8 percent of whom are African American—reported harassment by the police. Ask the general population the same question, you get maybe one in 20. Eleven percent of homeless women felt harassed by police. One of the biggest impediments we have to getting people housing is background—issues with misdemeanors or felonies—including the incarcerating of the mentally ill. It is a vicious cycle: the homeless are arrested by the police and they can't get housing because of a criminal record.

"The first day of the riots was in Over-the-Rhine, but the second day there were kids from all the neighborhoods. They had made t-shirts saying, 'Cincinnati 2001 riots: Enough is enough.' They can't name the city manager, but they will say they are sick of being harassed by the cops, of the assembly line justice system, where public defenders have an average of 1,000 cases a year, and all the poverty issues that are the same in every city. That's what they were talking about. They were sick of it and they were saying 'they heard us, because now the world is here.'"



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