

# US: Plan to drive homeless out of downtown Richmond, Virginia

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In line with the nationwide trend, the city of Richmond, Virginia, backed by business and Virginia Commonwealth University, is carrying out policies that hide homelessness and punish the poor. Construction of a new building that will consolidate meal services to the city's homeless and working poor is slated to begin this summer.

Dubbed the Conrad Center, this building will be located in a neglected valley, isolated from main areas of the city. Already surrounding the property is the city's jail, a court building, a lumber dealer and the overgrown remnants of railroad yards.

Richmond was once one of the most industrialized cities in the South and, after the Second World War, one of the fastest growing industrial centers in America. Major tobacco companies had facilities in Richmond, along with chemical companies like Dupont and Ethyl Corporation. While these companies have cut production and their workforces bit by bit, nearly all other manufacturing industries in the city have shut down; many buildings are vacant or used for storage. Replacements for industrial jobs have primarily been low-wage retail and service jobs, and temporary labor.

With the decrease in industry, there has been a catastrophic decline in commercial business and housing. Broad Street, the main thoroughfare of Richmond, is scarred with abandoned department stores and many vacant small businesses. Heading south from downtown, into the Southside area, two miles of commercial buildings lining US Route 360 are almost entirely vacant.

The situation with housing is similar: the overall residential vacancy rate is almost 9 percent. Some blocks are mostly abandoned houses, and on others only a few buildings remain. Richmond's population has also declined, dipping below 200,000 for the last few years, while its metropolitan area of 1.1 million has experienced continual growth.

Despite the vacancy rate and the decline in city population, there is an increasing lack of affordable housing in Richmond. Almost all new housing developments are high-income, with many old warehouses being converted into "luxury housing." The 2005 "Out of Reach" report by the national low-income housing coalition found that a laborer who works 40 hours a week in Richmond must earn \$14.56 per hour—nearly three times the present \$5.15 minimum wage—to afford a two-room rental unit. [1]

The response of many city governments to this national crisis of job-letting and rising costs of living has been to cater to business and the wealthy at the expense of the most vulnerable layers of society. The Richmond city government is no different. Its "Master Plan 2000-2020" shows that the increasing lack of affordable housing is policy: "The overall strategy is to aggressively market the city's older neighborhoods as examples of urban living, and provide incentives to bring middle- and upper-income homebuyers into the city's housing

market." [2]

Hand in hand with attempts to create a wealthy coterie in Richmond's downtown come contemptuous attacks on the city's working class. Recently, Democratic Mayor L. Douglas Wilder set out a plan to move bus routes away from the state library and other public buildings, saying that "Traffic needs to move through here ... and we can't have all those people lying around outside the Library of Virginia, that beautiful building that I insisted be on Broad Street when I was governor." The people "lying around" outside the building are primarily black working class residents waiting for transfer buses, and the only place to sit is on the library's short marble wall.

In addition to the mayor's comments, two city funded advertising campaigns have begun this year—one on billboards depicting a forlorn pregnant teenager with the text: "Richmonders, we spent \$26 million of your taxes last year," while the other states the hours of the school day, with the suggestion that anyone who sees a child during these hours should call and report them to a truancy office.

Amongst these reactionary social campaigns, the homeless receive the most brutal treatment. Richmond's Conrad Center will serve to make the homeless live in some of the most miserable areas of the city. Tactics in Atlanta, Georgia, have been much more forceful. An ordinance was recently passed in Atlanta banning panhandling from the city's business district with claims that it causes fear, intimidation, potential criminal activity and negative perceptions of the city. Washington, DC forces homeless with court dates to wear plastic ID bands around their arms akin to animal collars. In Los Angeles, mentally ill homeless from the city are taken to the outlying Skid Row and simply dumped there.

Currently, many homeless in Richmond spend time in the city's Monroe Park, around which Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has established its main campus. For a long time, VCU has encouraged meal programs that serve the homeless in the park to move to a nearby Salvation Army shelter. Lately, this has been quite effective and, as compensation, the school has made quarterly contributions to the Salvation Army to help with the cost of the increased meal service at its facilities.

VCU's effort to rid Monroe Park of the homeless is part of a broader move in conjunction with the city to "revitalize" downtown Richmond. The "Downtown Plan" for this effort, available online, clearly demonstrates that the city is acting on behalf of business and financial interests, with little regard for the fate of the city's poor. [3] The plan openly states that it "does not address broader issues like the availability of affordable housing or eliminating poverty and other causes of homelessness. Instead, the plan focuses on means to mitigate

serious adverse impacts on Richmond, while continuing to provide assistance to this segment of the population.”

The primary means of doing this, according to the Downtown Plan, is to “encourage the number of adult home residents and homeless shelter clients in Downtown to remain static or be reduced” and to “encourage service providers to locate in areas where their services can be provided without substantial negative cultural or economic impacts.”

In other words, the city is not addressing the underlying problems that lead to homelessness; rather, in the interest of business and tourism, it will promote efforts that conceal homelessness.

Plans for the new service center for the poor, the Conrad Center, represent the realization of this plan. Its sequestered location, which would require over a mile of walking, including a long, steep hill to get to downtown, is precisely what the city, business and the university want. Located in a low, wide valley, the nearest stores are over a half-mile away, and most temporary labor services and jobs are several miles away. Instead, the overcrowded city jail and Richmond’s Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court occupy half of the surrounding land.

In fact, all land around the site is private property, and there are no public parks nearby. It is easy to see that the city jail might be the next stop for those whom the shelter deems a problem or those who are trespassing.

In defense of the location, the city has noted the proximity of the Conrad Center to low-income housing. Given that the area around the valley has the highest rates of poverty in Richmond (between 50 and 70 percent are below the federal poverty level in a given census district) it is assured that many will need the meals services provided by the Conrad Center.

The plan states that “those families who use the Conrad Center will be linked with case management to assure that they are accessing the benefits available to them such as food stamps to prevent the need for future use of the Center.” In light of recent cuts by the Bush administration in housing assistance, food stamps, student loans, and other aid, it seems callous to declare that the goal of a meals service program is to prevent its future use.

Operations of the center, as stated in city ordinance No. 2004-258, follow the same course: “On the first visit to the Conrad Center, guests will be required to meet with a case manager to determine what form of help is needed and what programs will benefit the user so that they will not have to continue to use the Conrad Center for Services.”

After that, “guests” are referred to the Daily Planet, a homeless services provider two miles away, which puts them into a system linking all service providers. If the user cannot make it to the Daily Planet, its coordinating services will be offered at the Conrad Center twice a week. Either way, users are then issued access cards which track how much they use the various services.

If users fails to participate in the Conrad Center’s programs, they have the “incentive” of becoming ineligible for free meals after 60 days. If the near or complete consolidation of meals services is achieved through the Conrad Center, this effectively means these people will simply be left without food. The city ordinance acknowledges this, stating: “We will continue to provide meals to many of the individuals who utilize the program at present, but expect that we will lose some of the current participants.”

Even though the location is miles away from many jobs, “the 72 percent of individuals who are currently working and choose to visit the Conrad Center will be required to pay their own transportation

fees,” according to the ordinance. Bus fare is \$1.25 for each trip, and if a worker needs two meals from the center a day, transportation alone would already cost \$5, only 15 cents below Virginia’s hourly minimum wage.

As for those without jobs, the center’s plan also touts an optional “Culinary Training Program,” stating that “with the economic growth of downtown Richmond, the graduates of the Culinary Training Program will be able to fill many positions that require culinary skills.” Whether or not these jobs would be anywhere near the \$15 an hour average needed to afford housing is not mentioned.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Cleve and Ashley, a homeless man and woman who asked not to be identified by their full names for fear of losing their shelter and jobs. Both expressed revulsion at the location of the Conrad Center, but were not aware of the specifics since little has been reported in the media.

Cleve gave an image of the brutal situation facing the homeless in Richmond: “You want me to comment about the situation here? Here’s a comment: I never heard of a shelter that won’t let you stay in it! The Salvation Army won’t open unless it’s below 35 degrees outside. There are few other homeless shelters that are open either, and there are no daytime shelters at all.” Astonishingly, prior to a protest in front of city hall in 2001, shelters were only allowed to open if the temperature was below 25 degrees Fahrenheit.

Ashley added, “Every morning in the shelter, we get woken up at 6 a.m., whether you work or not, and we get put out on the streets. I got a job, but it’s at 9 a.m. I can’t go to the job two hours early ... if it’s 30 degrees outside, how are they going to force us to sit outside all that time?” Ashley is provided shelter through a local program that puts about 40 women in a different church each week. At every weekly change, the women still have to get up early in the morning. Until late in the day, they are forced to carry their belongings around until they are picked up to head for the next shelter.

The weekly movement and restrictive hours take a devastating personal and economic toll. Commenting on holding a job, she also said, “A lot of these jobs we can’t take; like if you get asked to work 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. at a department store, you have to decline, because how are you going to get back to the shelter? The van to whatever church you’re at that week comes at 6 p.m. Many of the jobs are out in Chesterfield and Henrico counties anyway, and there’s no bus service to out there.”

Cleve concluded that “It ain’t that much different anywhere else, but this place is the worst yet of anything I know ... I feel like I’m being dehumanized.”

#### Notes:

[1] “2005 Out of Reach” report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition

[2] Richmond Master Plan, Chapter 4—Key Strategies and Directions, p. 26

[3]

<http://www.ci.richmond.va.us/forms/docs/online/downtown/Chapter3>

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DtownMngmnt.pdf



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