

“This is the direct result of bad public policy”

Atlanta shelter director speaks on the homeless crisis

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26 October 2009

As conditions worsen for the working population, emergency shelter providers in Atlanta, Georgia, are confronted by a huge increase in need from the newly homeless, unemployed, and foreclosed upon. At least 7,000 homeless people now depend on the city shelters each day, and many more people who are on the brink of homelessness have sought out assistance with rent and utility bills.

At the same time, providers have seen their funding stagnate or decline. The Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless, a major downtown shelter, has come under pressure to close by the city government and business development group Central Atlanta Progress. The Task Force serves more than 700 people every night on a walk-in basis.

Anita Beaty, director of the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the worsening situation.

“I’ve been working for the Task Force since 1985,” Beaty said. “We’ve seen homelessness become a national issue since then. It had just begun to emerge as a recognized, publicly visible problem in the mid to late 1970s because the HUD [US Department of Housing and Urban Development] budget was cut so dramatically in that period, and at the same time medical institutions released a large number of mental health patients. There was no support network in place to manage those people.

“Homelessness began to emerge as a social phenomenon in the mid-1980s and it became clear that it wasn’t a temporary problem,” she said. “As organizations opened soup kitchens and shelters, it became clear that the people who were waiting for help

one winter were among those waiting the next year, and the next. Things were not getting better.”

Beaty told the WSWS: “Homelessness is not merely a ‘phenomenon’ of our society. This is the direct result of bad public policy. It is a deliberate, exclusionary public policy, removing the safety net—first housing and then health support—and creating a section of people who struggle harder than anyone for services, but cannot get what they need.”

Beaty emphasized the relationship between rising homelessness in Atlanta and the city government’s efforts to gentrify the downtown, and in particular the closure of its public housing projects.

Atlanta was the first city to open public housing projects in the United States, and this year it became the first city close the last of them. “In the last few years,” Beaty explained, “we’ve seen the city’s Housing Authority privatize all of the public housing. For all intents and purposes, we’ve lost some 5,000 units of public housing and 3,200 in the last two years—all of these were occupied.

“The way the housing authority has accomplished this goal is to allow the projects to deteriorate, and to allow all the basic services people depend on to fall by the wayside. And then the city points to these dilapidated conditions as a reason to tear it all down. Techwood went this way before the Olympics.”

Techwood Homes, completed in 1936, was the first housing project to open in America. At the time, it was a state-of-the-art complex complete with electric stoves, garages, centralized laundry facilities, a kindergarten and a library.

“The public housing projects in Atlanta led the way in housing for people emerging from the Depression,”

Beaty noted. “They were opened for veterans returning from World War II, and then later for moving African Americans out of the city’s slums—eventually with the consequence of further segregating communities.”

The project was neglected and fell into terrible disrepair, and was torn down by the city in 1996 just before the Olympics opened. The acreage was rebuilt with mixed-use property, displacing all but a few former residents.

“You cannot tear down housing until there are units to replace it,” she stressed. “There was a great deal of local activism against using the Olympics as an excuse to pursue a neo-liberal agenda in Atlanta. Right after the bid was announced, the plan to demolish public housing and privatize all that land was on the agenda.”

Beaty told the WSWS that the concern of the city never lay with the well-being of its poor inhabitants, but rather in their permanent displacement. “The property the housing units were built on were being advertised for development before the demolition,” she noted. “Twelve public housing communities were pitched in real estate listings as ‘Atlanta’s emerging development market.’

“Now money is not available for housing; we still haven’t crawled back up from the funding level of the late 1970s. And applying for housing has become a way of marginalizing and criminalizing people, making them qualify for housing through drug tests and all kinds of intrusive checks.”

The solution to the housing crisis and the deterioration of public housing projects, Beaty suggested, was a question of rational planning and proper management of the facilities. She rejected the concept of mixed-income housing vouchers as a means of providing poor people better options. “Of course we need people to have options, choices. And yet the people who are required by federal law to be given those options are completely excluded from the process.”

In tandem with the elimination of public housing, the city has enacted a series of ordinances in an attempt to illegalize homelessness on downtown streets, including banning charitable donations of food on sidewalks, sitting in certain public areas and asking for money. “We’ve fought every one of these laws and lost,” Beaty commented.

“Because we have an overflow shelter, we’re the

Grand Central Station of the homeless providers,” Beaty said of the Task Force, which serves a large number of men, including many long-term and mentally ill homeless. “We’re also the gap filler, because other shelters are overfilled. We see the faces of people who need help. We’re serving twice as many people as this time last year on a day-to-day basis.”

Yet, Beaty noted that the situation was poised to worsen, particularly for poor working class families. “The demographic shift hasn’t been as dramatic as it would seem because many families that have been through foreclosure haven’t hit the street yet.” Many families are doubling up and exhausting their limited options, she said.

The response of the city government, like other urban governments throughout the country, has been to attempt to hide the problem. “Atlanta has led the way in criminalizing poverty and homelessness,” Beaty noted.

Along with selectively enforced laws against begging and loitering, the city has targeted the Task Force itself, as a centrally located homeless shelter that attracts the most desperate. In July, the shelter filed a lawsuit against the city government and Central Atlanta Progress on charges of harassment and interference.

The Task Force has been denied certifications that would allow it to access federal funds in spite of the shelter’s compliance with every requirement. In the past year, the shelter has also had its water shut off repeatedly without explanation from the city. (See “Atlanta homeless shelters strain under economic crisis .”)

“We’ve been marked for extinction since they closed down the public park downtown,” Beaty told the WSWS. “It’s been a long difficult road, but we intend to continue fighting and serving people who need our help.”



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