

Homeless crisis grows in San Diego

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Homelessness in the city of San Diego has reached epidemic proportions. The city ranks third in the nation, after New York and Los Angeles, in terms of its overall homeless population. According to recent estimates, some 10,000 homeless reside in the city of 1.3 million. This number most likely under-reports the problem, as the homeless population is very difficult to track.

Mayor Bob Filner, along with the San Diego city council, announced plans to end homelessness in the city in the next four years. “We’re going to look at the homeless literally directly in the face when I’m mayor,” Filner said. “Frankly, I want to be the first city in the country that eliminates homelessness.” However, the mayor has not released any specific proposals on how the city might accomplish these goals.

Earlier attempts by the city to completely end homelessness have already failed. In 2006, the city devised the “Plan to End Chronic Homelessness,” which included building 2,000 new housing units for the most severe cases by the end of 2012. People are considered chronically homeless if they have been homeless for a year or have been so at least four times in the past three months. This plan was only designed for a portion of the total homeless population, and as the deadline passed, chronic homelessness remained a major problem in San Diego.

The plight of the homeless has become particularly pronounced during the winter season. Although San Diego has a temperate climate, nighttime lows can dip near freezing. While more than 800 of the homeless were expected to receive housing, food, and other amenities from the city’s Downtown Emergency Winter Shelter, these figures do not represent even 10 percent of the total homeless population in San Diego. This leaves many without any shelter, food or medical services.

The nearby city of Escondido has already begun implementing its own “solution” to the growing homeless problem by playing loud music in its public parks at night to prevent indigent residents from sleeping there. This initiative also includes tree trimming, extra police patrols,

and policies to discourage donations. Resulting from this plan is an additional 200 patrol officers designated primarily to evict homeless people from the parks. The callousness of this solution reveals more about the attitude toward this social problem by the local political establishment than its occasional statements of concern.

Meanwhile, increased levels of poverty put many in the city’s working class at risk of joining the existing homeless population. The official unemployment rate in San Diego remains at 8.1 percent, well above the national rate of 7.6. While recently the greatest job losses have come from temporary holiday positions in retail, layoffs in the service sector continue to climb as well as in government jobs as a result of the state budget cuts. Overall, the Employment Development Department reports that 130,200 San Diegans are out of a job from a labor force pool of 1.6 million. The official figures do not include those who are no longer looking for work. In reality, the situation facing the poorest San Diegans is more widespread than government numbers document.

A report released by The Center on Policy Initiatives last year establishes a dramatic increase of those living in poverty within San Diego; 15.1 percent of the population lives below the federal poverty level (FPL). This is a drastic increase from 11.1 percent living below the poverty line in 2007, before the onset of the economic crisis. However, the method for measuring the FPL systematically underestimates the problem. A family of four is considered impoverished if they make an annual income of \$22,811 or less, while an individual must make \$11,484 or less (see “Homelessness and hunger on the rise in San Diego, California”).

This dismal state of affairs naturally puts a strain on large sections of the population. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 633,782 homeless people live within the United States. Of the 10,000 officially documented homeless people living in San Diego, one in four is between 18 and 30 years of age, one in six is a military veteran, and one in three has a family. In total, one in four is chronically homeless.

The calculations for the HUD report were conducted by the “point-in-time calculation.” The “point-in-time” was conducted on a one-night count in January 2012, consisting of the homeless shelter staff counting the homeless in and around the streets and shelters only for the larger metropolitan areas. Though stated by the HUD report that homelessness has decreased by nearly 6 percent, this method only points to the conclusion that the actual homeless population is much higher.

The shelters that exist to provide aid to homeless families are under dire strain from the recent influx of new families. For example, The San Diego Rescue Mission, which acts as a shelter for women and children, has a capacity of 60. However, Molly Downs, an emergency service director for the institute reported to KPBS, a local news source, that these shelters have been overflowing recently with the arrival of new homeless families. Some nights have had as many as 96 families in one shelter alone. These figures mostly include women and children. The Rescue Mission, like similar institutions, is a short-term solution for families in poverty. The city has no plans for instituting a long-term housing program.

Nearly all efforts made to alleviate homelessness have come from volunteer organizations, where the real scale of the problem can be registered. These efforts can offer only a temporary respite to the hardships of homelessness and poverty. One such example is Project Homeless Connect, which held its seventh annual one-day fair for the unsheltered on January 30. The fair offered free services such as health screening, flu shots, haircuts, and housing counseling. In all, around 1,150 people lined up for assistance including young children, adults, and many military veterans.



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