

Homeless in San Diego, California

Life on the street in “America’s Finest City”

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San Diego, California, has an ever-increasing homeless population. The city ranks third in the nation for the number of homeless—estimates put the figure at around 10,000. While the recently elected mayor, Bob Filner, boasts of wanting San Diego to be the first city to end homelessness, the numbers are growing epidemically and services are being cut and dismantled.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently published an article examining this important social problem and exposing the duplicity and contempt with which the official political system deals with it (see “Homeless crisis grows in San Diego”). Greg Sullivan, currently homeless in San Diego, wrote to the WSWWS in response to this article and then agreed to an interview with us.

WSWS: Can you tell us about your situation and some of the services that are provided for the homeless in San Diego?

Greg Sullivan: I arrived here in 2000 from the East Coast looking for a job during the dot.com bubble. I had a degree in accounting and thought I’d have a job within a week—I never even got a call on my resume. I took what I thought was a balanced approach of applying to jobs that fit my qualifications, and then some that I was overqualified for as well as some that I was underqualified for. I didn’t know it at the time, but my accounting career was over in 2000.

I was not able to find a job and was living in my car from 2001 to 2005. After my car died in 2005, I began living on the street. Back then, I was able to get showers at Neil Good Day Center—run by the Alpha Project. Any time of the day, I could get a shower, and no card or ID was necessary; then a few years ago, they made some changes, and showers were only available during a two-hour timeslot.

I sent them an e-mail and asked them why they made such arbitrary restrictions that effectively discontinued the service to a large number of people who had come to depend on the center if, for nothing else, to get washed and cleaned. They responded with a rather ambiguous e-mail about “issues [that] limiting showers were meant to cure,” and that they were sensitive to my concerns.

In 2010, they ended the showers altogether. There is no place in San Diego for us to get a shower now.

WSWS: We read that the clothing vouchers ended not too long ago. Is there any place to receive clothes and other necessary items?

GS: I used to receive clothing vouchers from Vinny’s, but now they don’t give them out anymore—we have to depend on various groups. In January, Homeless Connect gave out a lot of clothes.

Another organization called “First Saturdays” ostensibly provides services on the first Saturday of each month. I went to one of their events and then tried to go the next month. No one was there! They had apparently changed locations without telling anyone. Many of the groups are unreliable or fly by night, and you can’t really depend on anything.

WSWS: Since 2008, there have been an increased number of people living in poverty and becoming homeless. Some of the homeless populations are families and children—have you witnessed any of that here?

GS: There has definitely been an increase in people. Vinny’s, where I go for lunch, serves anywhere from three to four hundred people a day. Also, there have been new groups coming to downtown. You see more and more people who don’t fit the “core profile”—those with drug problems or mental disabilities—that people might think of when they think of the homeless. Just recently, I’ve seen a new group where I usually sleep, they look like a small Asian family.

WSWS: Over the winter, there were housing shelters such as Alpha Project. Is it easy to get into these places?

GS: I was denied service to Alpha Project because I did not have a card. You can’t receive most services without getting some form of service card. I felt intimidated when they refused me to come in. It seems like a gang is running some of the places—there are very rough and crass security guards everywhere that offers services, and there are formidable gates and fences around everything.

Many of the people going to get services are elderly now. Like I mentioned, they aren’t the typical homeless profile people may think of. It’s hard getting yelled at by thugs, especially if you are elderly.

WSWS: In your response to our article, you mentioned the police officer coming up to you at the Civic Center when you were at a distribution. Is this a common occurrence?

GS: I have been arrested over 50 times, and have spent a month in jail for trespassing, because I was sleeping at 3rd and Ash. They will wake you up in the middle of the night around 10 p.m. and demand to see your ID. I used to show them my ID, but then the same police kept coming and arresting me. It might be different if you aren’t homeless and the police ask for your ID one time, but it’s always the same police and they know me.

I don’t play that game anymore—it’s a matter of dignity. I refuse to show them my ID, and they arrest me and take me to jail.

WSWS: Have they arrested you for anything else?

GS: One time I purchased a frozen pizza at Ralphs. I wanted to heat it up in the microwave that is provided by them as a sort of perk. Because I wouldn't leave my backpack at the door while shopping and paying for the pizza, the manager wouldn't let me use the microwave. A frozen pizza is not much good without a microwave. When I tried to take my belongings with me to heat the pizza, they called the police. That time, I was in jail five days and then went to trial. After the trial I had to serve 32 more days in jail before I was released. That was the only time I spent that long in jail.

WSWS: What is the process when they arrest you?

GS: They've begun a new procedure that involves strip-searching. They make you bend over, grab your ankles and cough. If you refuse, they threaten you; they sometimes say they are going to tase you if you don't comply.

I refuse to do it. It's different each time I refuse; sometimes they will just put me in a cell with nothing but underwear.

It's against the Fourth Amendment, and it is unreasonable, I've read a lot on the subject—the WSWS has a number of good articles on it. It's been shown that people aren't smuggling things in—the policy of searching cavities isn't revealing more contraband. It's another method of breaking people down straight out of the CIA manual.

I've written more about my experiences on my online diary, which can be found at gregsdiary.livejournal.com.

WSWS: Have you seen any opportunities to get a job or get back on your feet?

GS: I've worked at a limo company, had a few driving jobs, and other casual labor jobs, but they were all dead ends with no benefits and no regular work schedule. The only job that you can find is casual labor. I have sent my resume out to everywhere, and I have not heard any replies. The designated "job centers" are no good, you don't get work there.

WSWS: Mayor Bob Filner has stated that he wants San Diego to end homelessness. What does this mean, and have there been any improvements?

GS: If anything, it's gotten worse. I was just arrested for "illegal lodging" last week. When he says he's going to "end homelessness," that's not a good thing—they'll arrest you, or they'll put you on a bus somewhere. So maybe at any given time, there are fewer homeless people actually on the street. They are all arrested or in transit to be homeless again.

WSWS: When and how did you begin reading the WSWS?

GS: Like I said, I'm from the East Coast, so I originally found some articles by Kate Randall back in 2010. She covered issues on health and education near where I grew up. Her articles are excellent.

I've been following the articles on Spain closely, especially about people committing suicide because of their homes being foreclosed on. My niece is going to Spain, and I try and discuss some of these things with my sister and my family.

My family espouses some right-wing views—personal responsibility, morality—nothing about social responsibility for the problems people are in. Originally, I had these right-wing views, too.

Now you hear about these bankers and CEOs getting off for free

for their criminality, and then these arguments seem ridiculous. And I look at myself—I very rarely drink, I don't do any drugs, and to the best of my knowledge I don't have any mental disorders or psychological problems.

WSWS: What changed your views?

GS: Well, obviously becoming homeless was a big objective turning point. I have student loans like everyone else, so that played a role.

I was interested in the issue of single-payer health care and the elimination of the profit motive. Before Obama became president it seemed like there was a slight push in that direction.

When Bush was in office, it was totally different. People like Michael Moore made movies like *Sicko*, which kind of made an argument for socialized health care, but then he's really not against the profit motive after all or the war in Iraq.

It turns out that it doesn't matter what they are or what they said, they're Democrats.

WSWS: What about the WSWS appealed to you?

The site is incredible. You can go on one day and see a news article about Germany and what is happening across the world, which tells you a lot of things you didn't know. Then the next day you'll go on and there will be a Perspective on the same issue, which explains everything from a class point of view.

I'd been reading it for a couple of years and I thought I understood the perspective, but I think when it really struck me was when I was reading Dave North's *The Heritage We Defend*. The section on "The Nature of Pabloite Opportunism," where there was an effort by the Pabloites to focus attention on the fight between the two super-powers instead of the fight between the ruling class and working class. That's when it clicked.

I can't say enough about the web site. I really like David Walsh's articles, too. It is the only site that calls for a class analysis; nowhere else can you find such an analysis. I read it daily, and try to read all the articles that are published every day.



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