

Interview with director of homeless shelter in Long Beach

California's homeless: Casualties of class warfare

Our correspondents
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Last November the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released its 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report which found that southern California remains home to the largest homeless population in the country.

Long Beach, a city of approximately 460,000 south of Los Angeles, has the fourth highest rate of people living without shelter of any major American city. Long Beach listed 1,112 chronically homeless, along with 14,840 chronically homeless in Los Angeles city and county, the highest number in the HUD report. Long Beach also has the 10th largest population of homeless veterans of any major city, 527, compared to Los Angeles city and county's 6,291. Statewide, the number of homeless people living in shelters and living on the streets increased by 3,895 people since 2010, according to local homeless housing and service providers.

The report also found that California has 22 percent of America's homeless population, and that 66.7 percent of the homeless lack shelter, the highest percentage in the nation. In addition, 36 percent of America's chronically homeless reside in California, and of these people 86.6 percent were unsheltered. Long Beach also has the ninth largest population of chronically homeless in the US as well as the fourth largest unsheltered homeless population. About 22.8 percent of the population lives in poverty, according to the Long Beach Community Action Partnership, and one in three children under the age of five live below the abysmally low federal poverty line.

The report's definition of a chronically homeless person is someone who has gone without shelter continually for at least a year or at least four times in the past year and has a debilitating condition, such as substance abuse disorder or mental illness. It must be noted that the HUD report does not count the number of people who are being helped through programs that involve rapid re-housing, permanent housing, or those being cared for in an institution.

Immense resources are available to solve these pressing social problems, but they are monopolized by the super-rich. California by itself is home to nearly 100 billionaires.

While the California budget proposal restores none of the past cuts to human services that aid the homeless and the poor, despite a much hailed surplus, federal budget cuts to housing programs threaten to throw more people into poverty and homelessness.

Last week President Obama signed a budget bill into law that will cut \$8.7 billion in food stamps for the most vulnerable layers of the population. This is part of a broader attack on social programs that benefit the poor, including the deliberate expiration of extended benefits for 1.3 million long-term unemployed workers in the US. The lack of a job, in particular, is directly linked to homelessness, starvation, and all the social misery that accompanies it.

The cost of living in Long Beach in comparison to California and the rest of the country is exorbitantly high. The median household income in the city in 2011 was \$51,214 compared to the state average of \$57,287. The estimated per capita income is \$25,945. The cost of rent, which determines the quality of life for so many working class and poor residents in Long Beach, is also expensive. The median gross rent in 2011 was \$1,064 per month. The median house or condo value in 2011 was \$420,700 in Long Beach compared to \$355,600 statewide.

With this social backdrop in mind, the WSWs recently interviewed the director of a women and children's shelter in Long Beach as well as several women and children who call the shelter home.

The Long Beach Rescue Mission, which organizes the Lydia House and Samaritan House, started in 1971. In 1972, Lydia House opened as a nondenominational, privately funded shelter for homeless women and children.

Chaplain Tracy Brown has been working for four years as the director of Lydia House. Prior to that she worked at the Union Rescue Mission in downtown Los Angeles. "We have

very generous and consistent supporters providing clothing, hygiene supplies, diapers, whatever the ladies and children need, as well as cooking meals in our kitchen. Meals are also brought here from across the street at the Samaritan House, the men's shelter, which also provides free meals to the community."

Currently, the Lydia House is housing 39 people, 22 of whom are mothers with children. Brown explained the three types of housing arrangements with different levels of support. The first is a year-long New Life Program, which provides housing and a structured program for women who are dealing with substance abuse and/or the effects of abusive relationships. The second is the Case Management Program, which provides private rooms for women and their children for 90 days, although extensions can be granted. The third is the Bridge Program, which provides housing for six months for women who are more independent.

"Poverty has absolutely increased," Brown explained. "When I was working at the Union Rescue Mission in downtown LA five years ago, intact families—a father, mother, and their children—were coming in. People were hit with foreclosures, layoffs, and downsizing. It is unbelievable! Occasionally someone will get a job, but quite a few have become very discouraged. It's hard out there.

"One of the ladies living here is working as a substitute teacher. For many years she was working as a preschool teacher. Then she got a nice job working as an office manager in LA. One and a half months later, she got laid off. Funding was cut.

"The faces of the homeless are changing. They're not the stereotypical down-and-outs and winos any more. Now there are many mothers with children and whole families who come here, people who are used to working and are devastated to ask for help at a shelter. It's humiliating for them to be here."

Luon entered Lydia House at the end of December. "I used to work at the Staples Center as a security guard. Then I got unemployed. I was going to a funeral almost every year because of deaths in my family. That hit me hard. I couldn't find work, and I had nowhere to go, no place to take a shower.

"I was at the Cold Winter Shelter for a month and a half. They give you a cot, dinner, breakfast, and clothing. It's like a big warehouse with women on one side of the building, but there are only 150 spots. They pick you up at designated places and times. If you're late, you don't get picked up. Once when I was out, a man tried to slash my throat. I was so frightened to be outside.

"Once I got a job as a babysitter for a woman with six kids. I lived with the family, but the woman didn't pay me.

"I had no ride. I was walking the streets every night. So

when I got here, it was great. The Lydia House has uplifted my life. I have a place to sleep, hot showers, good food, and a safe place. You don't know how nice it is to be able to take a hot shower. It has had a big impact on me."

Michelle and two of her daughters, Yaya, 9, and Wynette, 15, have a private room. "It's a blessing to be here," she said. "My husband left us when he enrolled in AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). He said to me that he couldn't be of any use to us if he was drinking.

"I went down to the County building," Michelle continued, "and they got us a motel room for six weeks. After that, me and my girls were riding the buses because we didn't have a place to stay. Then the Multiservice Center eventually got us here. Like I said, it's been a blessing being here. My case manager helps us while we're in here. She has saved my life. I don't have to worry where we're going to sleep. They help us with clothing.

"The School on Wheels provides tutors for my girls. We get gift cards to buy school uniforms and free bus passes. We're in a nice room together. It's nice to have clean clothes, hot showers, and really nice meals."

Yaya is in fourth grade at International Elementary School. "I like it here. It's very good, more than good. There used to be more kids here, but now there are four kids. I need help in math and science, and a college student comes and tutors me."

Luon said, "The staff here is very understanding to our needs and wants. They do their best to help us. A lot of people come to the door, but the staff have to turn them away because there's only so many spots. Sometimes people come with their babies, and the staff gives them Pampers and formula. They might have a place to live, but no money to buy these things."



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