

San Diego homelessness crisis remains after hepatitis A outbreak

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In spite of a series of initiatives carried out by the local political establishment in response to a recent public health crisis, the city of San Diego continues to remain in the grips of a homelessness crisis.

Official reports indicate that more than 9,000 homeless people live on the streets of San Diego, with over a thousand of them being concentrated in the downtown area. According to these latest figures, which are widely believed to underestimate the problem, San Diego has the fourth largest homeless population in the country.

In 2017, the total number of homeless people nationwide reportedly increased for the first time in seven years. While the national number increased by about 1 percent, the number of homeless people in San Diego went up significantly, by 5 percent.

The number of homeless people dying in the streets of San Diego has also been steadily increasing. While 56 homeless people died in San Diego County in 2014, the number spiked to 90 in 2015, 115 in 2016, and 117 last year.

The local political establishment in the city routinely proclaims that a solution for the problem is at hand. As was the case for his predecessors, current Republican Mayor Kevin Faulconer professed a great deal of concern for the problem.

Stating that his administration would make homelessness its number-one social service priority, Faulconer promised swift action in his 2017 state of the city address a year ago. These initiatives included a new hotel tax hike to provide financial resources, the creation of a centralized intake homelessness center hub, and hundreds of new shelter beds.

By the summer of last year, none of these promises had been fulfilled.

However, a serious outbreak of hepatitis A in San Diego began to make national, and even international news, at the end of the summer, threatening among other things the standing of San Diego as a desirable tourist destination.

While the outbreak, the deadliest in the US in many decades, was centered in San Diego, other cases were reported in other cities in California as well. To this day, the

hepatitis A outbreak has infected more than 500 people and led to the death of at least 20 individuals.

More than half of the infected, and the majority of the victims, are homeless people, as the disease tends to spread under poor sanitary conditions.

The outbreak compelled the local political establishment to suddenly snap into action.

Three large severe weather shelter tents were put up in different locations of the city by the end of the year.

Given the quantitative scope of the problem, the response by the city is totally inadequate. The three new tents together can only host a total of 700 individuals, leaving several thousands more in the streets. Inside, they consist of tightly packed-together bunk beds, thus hardly alleviating the issues that have led to the hepatitis A outbreak in the first place. Finally, the tents are temporary, meant to operate for seven months from December 1.

The tents have been established by the city as a form of "bridge housing." That is, the homeless can remain there for no longer than 120 days. The stated goal of this arrangement is for 65 percent of those leaving the tents to find permanent housing afterward.

In reality, the Regional Task Force on the Homeless indicates that only about 25 percent of homeless people who enter shelters in San Diego are then able to move into permanent housing. The agencies that win multimillion-dollar contracts to set up temporary shelters have to prove, by various means, that a certain percentage of inhabitants transition to permanent housing; however, many tenants are then unable to remain housed and keep up with increasing rents.

What this snap initiative has accomplished is to secure a total of \$6.5 million for various service-providing outfits, including \$2.8 million for the Alpha Project and \$1.9 million for Veterans Village of San Diego.

The hepatitis outbreak is now apparently subsiding; a handful of cases per week are currently being reported, less than at the peak of the outbreak. The health emergency that had been officially declared on September 1 of last year may

be called off by the end of this month.

This means that the city's paltry response to the homelessness crisis that was triggered by the hepatitis A outbreak, far from constituting the beginning of a serious effort to solve the problem, will be a temporary and inadequate band-aid.

The homelessness problem, moreover, is more than simply a matter of having a sufficient number of beds available for those who live in the streets.

In San Diego, as elsewhere, the homeless crisis is the concentrated expression of all the manifold problems that exist intractably under capitalism. These include housing availability and costs, but also the lack of jobs, low wages, public health and addiction problems, lack of resources for mental health problems, and inadequate education.

This is all capped by the corruption and indifference of the political establishment and the unwillingness on the part of the ruling class they represent to make the slightest economic sacrifice in order to address the pressing social problems confronting the poor and working class.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to homeless individuals in downtown San Diego last weekend about the conditions they face and the response by the government.

Rachel, a young woman who has spent time homeless in her hometown of Seattle, Washington, then in Tijuana, Mexico, and finally in San Diego, reviewed her experience living on the streets in the Southern California city.

"I was really surprised when I came here to see how many people are in the streets here. I've never seen anything like that before," she said. "There is a minimal amount of shelters for women. I was turned away from three shelters because there wasn't space. I finally got into the Alpha Project tents, where I've been for about two weeks now, with 300 other men and women. They feed us there once a day, at 5 p.m., so it gets really crazy, there's fights, drama."

Rachel explained that the tents "changed things a little bit, but they change the rules daily in there, they don't really know what they are doing.

"Ever since the hepatitis A outbreak, [the city] wanted to deal with the problem really fast. They promised us there were going to be housing coordinators helping us get into long-term housing. The Alpha Project is supposed to be a bridge to something else, but not permanent housing. There has to be something after that. We are supposed to talk to housing coordinators, but nobody's talked to me about it. No one really has an answer."

Debra, 61, originally from Colorado, worked for a hospice for 13 years, then as an in-home caregiver.

"I became unemployed, then homeless three years ago," she explained "When I lost my job I took two trips to Alaska

to try to make that work, that was the last shot I gave it. I couldn't do the minimum of 16 hours per day they required there. I am just not that young anymore, so I had to come back. No matter how many applications I put out here, due to my age, they wouldn't hire me. They never gave me a chance."

"I've been out here homeless about three years. I've seen it go from bad to worse. The city doesn't provide much for us. We don't have facilities to go to the bathroom. I am surprised they actually brought out stations to wash our hands after the outbreak of hepatitis," she said about the hepatitis outbreak in the city.

"They stopped giving out tents and started setting up big ones. Now everybody's got to live close to each other, and nobody knows what the other guy has. Tuberculosis could possibly break out. You are talking close quarters, you know? Feet-to-feet, head-to-head bunk beds. Who wants to live like that?"

Debra also addressed the possible upcoming visit of President Trump to San Diego, explaining her attitude toward the political establishment: "The last time we had somebody big like that they started cleaning up the streets, made it look like there's not a problem here, and I think that's sad. This is government covering up the real issues. Why cover up the streets? You can't sugarcoat it, paint it another color.

"I think we are going to end up in concentration camps, because that's what those tents look like. This is supposed to be America, the land of the free, where you can come and live the American dream. ... I don't think the government really cares, I really don't. If they did, things would have been changed by now. It's getting deeper, and it's getting worse."



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