

San Diego mayor outlines impending crackdown on homeless

Meenakshi Jagadeesan
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San Diego's mayor, Republican Kevin Faulconer, delivered his fourth annual "State of the City" address to an audience of politicians, bureaucrats and business leaders earlier this month. In his three years as mayor, Faulconer claimed, he had laid the foundation for a city that is "governed inclusively," putting its residents first, "with more services that matter to working families, larger investments in streets, parks and public safety, and opportunities for every neighborhood."

This may come as a surprise to many, given that San Diego has been in the news this past year precisely because of the lack of services and opportunities, particularly for the working class and marginalized sections of the population. Apart from having the fourth largest (and growing) homeless population in the United States, "America's Finest City" has the dubious distinction of having made headlines for enduring one of the deadliest hepatitis A outbreaks in the country in more than two decades.

Making a virtue out of necessity, the mayor's address did not shy away from addressing the problem. In fact, Faulconer correctly identified "homelessness, housing, and quality of life" as the biggest challenges facing the city. However, far from the "candid conversation" promised, the mayor's address provided an illustration of Orwellian demagoguery used to spin a web of illusions.

Faulconer presented the city's role in the hepatitis A outbreak as one that revealed its "resilience," "strength" and "compassionate, creative and collaborative spirit." In reality, the avoidable outbreak happened in large part due to known problems in the city's sanitation and social welfare services. And its spread was facilitated by the incredibly sluggish response of city officials to early reports of people falling sick and dying.

Faulconer himself did not make a public statement about the epidemic until almost nine months after the first outbreak had been reported in November 2016, and when he did, the measure proposed—offering free vaccinations one day a month—hardly dealt with the scope of the problem.

The hepatitis A outbreak was, of course, fundamentally connected to San Diego's vast and growing homeless population, which was being increasingly criminalized and denied access to public bathrooms and basic sanitation facilities by the city's administration. Without admitting culpability, Faulconer at least appeared to acknowledge the problem and presented his new strategy to deal with this issue as one that would provide "services with dignity," that would "Connect, Support, and House" the

homeless.

As an example of how this could work, the mayor extolled the virtues of the transitional camp set up by the city for a few months last October, and the three Bridge Centers established since December. These types of camps, he claimed, provided a secure way for the homeless population to move toward finding permanent housing.

In addition to the appointment of 15 outreach ambassadors, Faulconer also spoke of establishing a new storage facility in the spring "where homeless individuals can securely place their belongings so they can visit treatment clinics, attend school, interview for a job or go to work." His other major initiative was the creation of the city's first "Housing Navigation Center," an indoor facility that would be the "starting point for each person's journey to permanent housing."

These measures barely touch the tip of the iceberg in terms of dealing with homelessness in the city. The largest among the three Bridge Shelters accommodates only 350 people; the other two—dedicated to families and veterans—accommodate approximately 150 and 250 people. According to a conservative estimate, there were nearly 6,000 transients in San Diego in early January 2017, and officially that has grown by over 5 percent in the last year. Beyond the limited available room, the Bridge shelters also allow residents to use the facility only for a limited period of 120 days.

Given the complexity of the problems leading to homelessness, the unavailability of adequate social services and health systems, a depressed job market, and soaring rents, it is hard to imagine any sort of smooth transition within a span of four months, with or without a centralized "Housing Navigation System."

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to several homeless individuals in the downtown area about the growing crisis, and some of the proposed solutions in Faulconer's speech.

A former nurse's aide from Texas, John, disagreed with the mayor's portrayal of the city's response and didn't expect any significant measures to be taken in the future.

John commented on the fact that the city had a different set of priorities, "The city was busy preparing for Comic-con. They are funding other things. Other things make money for the city. The only thing that doesn't make money are the civilians. But civilians are what make the city...I'm waiting for 'America's finest city' to build 'America's finest shelter,'" he said.

Robert, a former computer technician, has found temporary

housing in a tent run by the Alpha Project but pointed out that the sheer numbers of those needing shelter implied that another brewing health crisis was on the horizon: “A year from now, this place will be festering with scabies, bedbugs and lice. The city does not want to invest in the infrastructure needed to maintain hygiene in homeless shelters.”

Speaking on the city’s response to the crisis as well as complete disenfranchisement from the political system, Mark, 60 years old, told reporters, “They are not doing enough, there are people willing to work, but there are no jobs. All they care about are the rich, who keep getting richer while the poor get poorer.” He said people were being moved out of the streets, their meager possessions thrown away while developers got to build new apartments that no one could afford all around them.

Purportedly highlighting his stronger commitment to fight homelessness, Mayor Faulconer proposed in his address a measure that would open up San Diego’s downtown to more development, which has fueled gentrification.

The Convention Center expansion, Falconer claimed, would provide a major impetus to the job market, while also facilitating the city’s ability to provide support to the homeless, and carry out much-needed road repairs. What Faulconer was referring to is a ballot plan initiative—itsself a re-vamped version of a failed measure he had proposed in 2017—that aims to increase hotel taxes and is supported by a business-labor alliance that includes the San Diego and Imperial Counties Labor Council and the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Supporters of the measure tout the fact that the new initiative, unlike Faulconer’s initial proposal, will direct a significant amount of the funds toward homelessness, especially in the first five years. However, a closer look reveals that this initiative, much like the earlier one, is primarily focused on the redevelopment of the convention center.

In his wide-ranging study, *Convention Center Follies: Politics, Power, and Public Investment in American Cities* (2014), Professor Heywood T. Sanders, one of the country’s foremost urban development experts, has shown that the returns on investment, when it comes to convention center development plans, have remained elusive. At best, these plans have helped boost the immediate downtown areas where they are usually located. Business leaders, consultants and city officials have manipulated economic forecasts to push for policies that have reshaped land values and development opportunities in the downtown core area. San Diego is not an exception to this trend.

The biggest problem with Faulconer’s proposals to deal with the homelessness issue does not lie merely in the inadequacy of what might seem to be superficially progressive moves, or even the mendacity regarding economic redevelopment. The speech had a chilling and ominous overtone. Local leaders like himself, Faulconer claimed, had tried to pursue “universal consensus” and “tried to please everyone,” but “those days [were] over” and “things were different now.”

In introducing his new way for dealing with the homeless, Faulconer began by stating, “For individuals who refuse shelter and services. For criminals who hide among our homeless population. These are not options in our city anymore.” He

continued, “America’s Finest City will no longer tolerate the use of a sidewalk, a riverbed or a tarp as a home.” Indeed, the city has already spent \$57,000 on installing sharp rocks in a freeway underpass to prevent encampments.

What the mayor was alluding to is the fact that the city of San Diego’s policies toward homelessness rest on increased use of the police force to enforce ordinances criminalizing an already vulnerable section of the population. This despite the fact that in a November 2017 letter to the city officials, the head of the federal U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness recommended that San Diego should decrease its reliance on police as outreach workers.

Last September alone, police arrests among the homeless more than tripled, as compared to the numbers the same time the year before. During the same period, citizens and some local media outlets also covered the use of often brutal tactics by the police to clear out entrenched tent cities. The city justified police enforcement as a vital step in fighting the hepatitis outbreak, claiming that clearing the streets was the best way to clean them. However, the arrests of the homeless population, and even their general encounters with the police force have served very little function other than to terrorize and force them to move from one neighborhood to the other.

Diana had experienced homelessness in both Seattle and San Diego. She told the WSWs about the increasing sweeps by police and criminalization by downtown businesses. “The police and security guards keep telling us to move on but there’s nowhere to go. This is how they are dealing with the problem, by keeping us moving. You can’t even stop to rest when you’re tired and exhausted, they always threaten to call the police on you.” Mark also pointed out that the police not only harassed the homeless, but also ticketed the citizens who came out to feed them.

The city of San Diego, however, seems to be committed to its policy of relying on the police to enforce its homelessness policy. Not coincidentally, a key element of Faulconer’s address was to promise the hiring of 200 police officers to reinforce the San Diego Police Department. In December, the City Council voted to increase police pay by up to 30 percent.

In essence, far from being the harbinger of a “different” approach to the crisis, what Faulconer’s “State of the City” address previews are the perpetuation of the criminalization of the homeless, the further militarization of the city’s approach to the crisis, and the continued prioritizing of land redevelopment projects that serve the interests of the city’s elite.



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