Dreams for Change: A San Diego shelter for the vehicular homeless

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Dreams for Change is a San Diego, California, nonprofit organization founded in May 2009 by Dr. Teresa Smith with the goal of helping families and individuals in need in the aftermath of the Great Recession and to the present. The group's first initiative was the Safe Parking Program, which allowed families and individuals a secure location to sleep in their vehicles for the night.

Smith told the WSWS, "During the recession, we saw an increase in numbers for first-time poverty for families and individuals, and most of them were falling into or were homeless. We would send them down to the shelters, but most of them would come back to me and tell me that they weren't really homeless, but that they had lost their job, and were trying to get back on their feet, but they would currently stay in their car where they are safe.

"When we would deal with families, what we saw time and time again were more of them falling into homelessness but living in their car."

The idea for Dreams for Change was started by graduate students from San Diego State University and the California Western Law School and in its first year helped 350 people, ultimately getting 65 percent of those individuals into secure housing.

"When we started this back in 2009, we had hoped that our program would be more of a transition, a temporary program," Smith said. "We thought it was going to be a few years kind of project. You know, capture those who were hit by the recession. We thought as the economy began to recover, we would hope to see a dwindling in the need for this program, in hopes that this would be going away.

"But what we really saw was just the opposite happen. As the recession recovered, we actually saw people working, and we were going through a housing crisis at that time, and rents were going through the roof. More people ended up just living in their car."

San Diego has a very high cost of living, with the average one-bedroom apartment costing $1,910 a month, as of last December. This is the eighth highest rent in the country, with an increase of 13 percent from the year before, according to the rental service Zumper. The rate for a two-bedroom apartment the same month was $2,500, also up 13 percent.

Regarding the exorbitant costs of rent, Smith said, "The reality is that wages have remained stagnant, rents are extremely high, and have more than doubled over the last few years. The price for a one-bedroom condo right now is $1,500 and more as they got larger. That number far exceeds what a minimum wage job earner will make over the month.

"There are also senior citizens, or those that are disabled, only getting a few hundred dollars a month or even less. You are going to have a really tough time finding any kind of housing for that. Room rentals are starting at $800 a month here."

Real estate developers have also pushed out affordable housing throughout the city to make way for luxury condos. As Smith explained, "We have seen the loss of over 10,000 units for the redevelopment of high-end condos. These were the kind of units that used to assist families who were poor or disabled."

In San Diego County especially, many of the vehicular homeless include families, the elderly, and those with disabilities. Many shelters only house single adults and don't provide for those with disabilities, while many more simply can't afford to live elsewhere.

Smith told the WSWS that there has been an increase of homeless families and described seeing homeless students in addition to the disabled and the elderly.

The rehousing rate has also declined over the last several years. Smith pointed out that three years after the recession around 60 percent of the families she worked with found housing. This had now dropped to some 20 percent.

"Some families take months to get back on their feet and finding rooms takes so long," she said. "You have to deal with paying money to even process applications some places. You have to get on waitlists, too, for some places."

Last month, the San Diego City Council repealed a law which punished people for living in their cars. While advocates for the homeless welcome the measure, there are

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many other laws that penalize the homeless. For example, it is still illegal in San Diego County to live in an “oversize” vehicle overnight, which includes recreational vehicles (RVs).

Despite an increasing number of unsheltered homeless, including those living either in their cars or on the streets, many cities have increasingly fined people for living in vehicles. Of the 187 cities surveyed by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 39 percent had laws which punished people for living in their cars.

Since 2006, there has been a 143 percent increase in such laws, according to the Law Center, leading to people getting tickets and, if they fail to pay, having their cars impounded.

“RVs have to deal with oversized vehicle zoning laws, and cannot be parked between 2 and 6 in the morning, so there is that issue for a lot of people who are living in their RV,” Smith explained, adding, “Some people either drive around during that time or risk getting ticketed or even towed. It creates a lot of issues here.”

Smith also spoke about the daily issues the vehicular homeless face. Some have gym memberships and are able to take showers, she said. Others have kids to take to school in the morning and go to their jobs as well. Dreams for Change, she said, tries to provide a sense of normalcy for them.

For many vehicular homeless, fast food is the only nutrition they can get. The park has a refrigerator and a grill so people can prepare meals.

“We have found one of the most important things is having a safe place for individuals to sleep,” Smith said. “You hear of individuals sleeping with one eye open, afraid of getting knocked on and harassed by the police. If you have a safe place to sleep it allows peace of mind for things we take for granted, but mostly it’s a small step to stabilization.”

According to a recent report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) more than 550,000 Americans experienced homelessness on any given night last year. An increasing number of the homeless are living in their cars to have some semblance of shelter.

San Diego County also has the fourth highest homeless population in the US this year, according to the same report from the HUD. With an estimated 8,576 homeless on any given night, the San Diego region trails behind only Seattle/King County in Washington state, Los Angeles County, and New York City.

The report stated that around 5,000 members of San Diego’s homeless are unsheltered, living in the street, in a vehicle or a self-made structure like a tent. The remaining 3,500 homeless were sheltered at the time of the study, including those in emergency shelters, safe havens and transitional housing.

This number is an underestimate, however, as the study did not include those living in RVs and some residents in shelters. Experts say the actual number could be as high as 9,220 people.

Statewide, California has the highest homeless population at 129,972 individuals, some 24 percent of the country’s entire homeless.

The reasons for the statistics are not hard to find. With the statewide minimum wage now set at $12 an hour, many workers and their families find themselves unable to afford a basic standard of living. Considering many of the jobs available are part-time, low wage, and offer little or nothing in the way of health benefits and other securities, many fall into destitution in the richest state in the richest country in the world.

The WSWS also spoke to Anthony, a 52-year-old worker originally from Louisiana who has worked several jobs, including security and at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, before he was laid off. He now earns money cutting grass.

Anthony had heard of Dreams for Change from a case worker who met him while he was living in a park. He told the WSWS, “It was a big help for me because it was an opportunity to avoid getting so many tickets and citations. I have a brother who lives on the streets right now, but I am a little more lucky that I have an RV to live in for the time being.”

Because of a past criminal record Anthony stated that it was difficult to find consistent work. Family problems and lack of employment ultimately forced Anthony to live in his RV.

“Living in a RV is hard, man,” said Anthony, “Neighbors get mad at neighbors all the time for having their RVs parked out front, but imagine people like myself that come and go across town trying to park an RV? People get mad about these things and they call the police on me.”

He added, “Being homeless in an RV is like a chess game, you know? Sometimes you get lucky and sleep good, but sometimes they find you and then you’ve got to deal with finding money to get your vehicle out of the impound. You get scared of just dealing with it. You can’t sleep.

“I shed tears, man. I thank my girl for being there and believing in me. So I cry about these things. Because deep down I just know I am going to be ok. Just gotta deal with this first.”

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