

Homelessness crisis an immense policy failure



In June, Sonia Soto returned to her spot on the sidewalk alongside Commercial Street after she and others were required to move their belongings during a cleanup of the neighborhood east of Downtown San Diego. (Nelvin C. Cepeda U-T)

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The human-made catastrophe of mass homelessness can be deadly. There have been at least **1,425 preventable deaths** in San Diego County since 2020. Elected officials and their appointees in San Diego County have failed homeless people since at least 1996, when the city of San Diego reported to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that “inability to pay high rents” was among the **most common** reasons for homelessness.

This is a policy failure of epic proportions — implicating all levels of government and both major political parties. But rather than take responsibility, officials often blame the victims. Hence, the criminalization of homelessness serves an insidious, irrational purpose.

Seniors, people with disabilities and low-income workers and families are caught in a speculative housing market with a median monthly rent of **\$2,384**. Since landlords typically expect an income of three times that amount to rent a unit, an annual income over **\$85,000** is needed to qualify for a home at that cost, compared to the **\$12,482** that Social Security Insurance pays annually. San Diego's minimum wage — **\$16.30** an hour as of Jan. 1 — means those working two full-time minimum wage jobs would still be **\$17,000** short.

Many people are likely to die before getting access to rent subsidies for the city's Section 8 vouchers due to 10-year long waiting lists. The federal government recently passed a record **\$858 billion** military budget but somehow can't fund vouchers and construct public housing to take care of **over half a million** of its own houseless residents. Meanwhile, the Pentagon, under basic accounting practices, can't account for at least **\$6.5 trillion** of its long-term spending.

So houseless people sleep in tents along sidewalks or shelter in vehicles, playing cat and mouse with police officers who ticket, fine and arrest them, dump their belongings like wheelchairs and walkers into trash trucks, impound their vehicles, and threaten to forcibly treat and institutionalize them under California's misnamed "CARE Act."

None of this is effective in moving anyone into housing. Rather, treating unhoused people as criminals makes their lives that much harder.

The city offers stopgap measures like congregate shelters, which are unusable by seniors and people with disabilities and prone to outbreaks of diseases, and "safe parking" lots. A whole industry has built up around homelessness, but these grossly inadequate offerings have far less capacity than is needed for the growing numbers of houseless residents.

They really have no choice, and it is only getting worse. The Regional Task

Force on Homelessness reports that for every 10 people placed into housing last year, **13 more** people fell into homelessness for the first time.

The city allowed the COVID-19-related moratorium on evictions to expire at the end of September, leading to a tsunami of evictions. There were **1,150** in October alone. All it takes is a job loss, an illness or a rent increase for someone to join these ranks.

Our homeless problem is not at all complex. California has higher rates of homelessness compared to other parts of the nation not because we have more drug addiction or mental illness but because our housing is **more expensive**.

Nor are we unable to address the problem. There are many things that San Diego leaders can do. They can:

Repeal the Vehicle Habitation Ordinance and stop using the anti-encroachment ordinance meant to control trash to punish people forced to live on city streets.

Preserve affordable housing and boost housing stability by reinstating COVID-19-related eviction protections, passing local rent control and lobbying our state Legislature to repeal both the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act, which bans effective rent control, and the Ellis Act, which allows affordable housing to disappear.

Treat this housing crisis like a real emergency. Stop approving luxury housing, tourist hotels and new sports venues, and put every possible city resource into creating housing for extremely low to middle-income San Diegans and to expand housing subsidies.

Improve the conditions for unhoused people while permanent housing is created.

Establish and properly maintain bathrooms and handwashing stations that are open 24/7.

Improve “safe parking” programs to meet basic humanitarian standards.

Establish a low-barrier permit program for street parking of vehicles used as

shelters with access to bathrooms, handwashing stations and trash collection.

Open city beach and parkland for quality campgrounds, full-service RV parks with hookups and tiny homes for unhoused San Diego residents. Similar measures were taken to provide temporary housing for homeless veterans after World War II supported by the courts.

Establish non-congregate shelters for seniors and people with disabilities in hotels and other locations. Ensure that no one is ever discharged from a hospital into the streets.

Issue a moratorium on impoundment of vehicles used as shelter for so long as the housing emergency exists.

Facilitate and empower unhoused individuals to run their own programs and communities.

All it takes is political will to stop our fellow human beings from dying needlessly on our streets. Will San Diego meet the challenge?

Housing, not handcuffs!

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