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Care plan that spells out official city homeless policy. The mayor signed a resolution in October to accept the federal money, yet he didn't sign the resolution making the Continuum of Care plan official city policy. He didn't veto the resolution, either, so the plan, which had unanimous Board of Supervisor support, became the official policy.

Formulated by 225 San Francisco residents – homeless, service providers, city employees and neighborhood activists – the 2001-06 Continuum of Care plan outlines guidelines for the city to deal with homelessness. The No.1 “principle,” says the plan’s executive summary, is that the city have one homeless policy “supported by the mayor, the Board of Supervisors, city departments, housing and service providers, people who are homeless or formerly homeless, advocates, and business and neighborhood groups.”

The city has a plan but no action, and Daly saw the summit “as an opportunity to break the years of public policy deadlock surrounding homelessness,” and a way to build consensus on how to proceed.

Podium posturing

“I want to thank Supervisor Newsom and Supervisor Hall, who might have bit off more than he wanted to chew, for providing the spark so that we could have these discussions,” quipped Ammiano.

Newsom spoke briefly, and what he had to say was sobering. He alluded to impending budget cuts and said the city will have to do more with less. “The fact is the state budget’s got a \$17.5 billion deficit and the federal surpluses are continuing to contract, not increase,” he said.

Once Hall got rolling, the moderator had to remind him to cut it short. His suggestions were met with scattered boos and hisses – and raucous applause. Especially when he said he was wrapping up his speech.

Hall’s emphasis was on meeting short-term needs. He said he has introduced legislation that would double the number of shelter beds and storage facilities.

“The city will attempt to provide approximately 3,500 shelter beds,” Hall said. “I’ve chosen this figure to accommodate what most legitimate surveys have shown is more than enough beds to meet the needs of overnight beds of any one time. This figure also limits the number of shelter beds of the City and County of San Francisco to .5 percent of the city population, which I might add, is a greater percentage than any other city in the country.”

“It’s a fact some people prefer not to use shelter beds, and if they can find other shelter for themselves, that’s their choice,” Hall said. “As Americans, as human beings, that’s their choice. But what is not their choice is to colonize the streets and to drive the average nonhomeless resident from their own public walkways.”

Voices of the homeless

An exhaustive city census orchestrated by the mayor’s office in October found a 30% increase in homelessness last year compared to 2000, (5,376 in 2000 and 7,305 in 2001). Yet, although the count involved many volunteer hours and trainings, the actual numbers are still in dispute. (See *Extra* No. 10)

Difficult as it is to count the homeless, it was also difficult to pick out the homeless among the summit attendees. Some were obvious, with full duffel bags always clutched closely. But other homeless attendees were dressed neatly and blended in with the crowd dominated by service providers, politicians and homeless advocates.

While Jewn Bug, who works on *Poor* magazine and is part of the Po Poets project, said she thought the alliance between “both sides” an important aspect of the summit because it brought homeless and policy makers to the same table. Bug

also noted that the politicians had not experienced homelessness firsthand.

“Just because someone’s been versed in a textbook or knows the statistics or knows the laws through and through doesn’t necessarily make them the expert,” she said.

The nuts and bolts of the summit

The workshops were held in various rooms on the second floor of Herbst Theater. One covered Jobs, Income and Education.

Don Hesse, administrator for First Source Hiring, said job opportunities for low-income people had recently taken steps forward and steps back. He said most of the entry-level jobs in the new Four Seasons Hotel were placed through the Mission Hiring Hall, a community organization. But, he said, the lowest-paying jobs are in the service industry, such as hotels and restaurants. “So even when you get a company that can come in and work with the community and go through the job training program and place people there, the jobs are still low-paying jobs,” he said. “It’s very difficult to put the big package together.”

But Hesse did say that a Home Depot that may go up near City College has promised to work with the college in a training program for low-income people with entry-level pay of about \$13 an hour.

Someone asked Hesse about the lack of coordination of job-related services for low-income and homeless people. He said a “One Stop Center” will be opened at the corner of Mission and Cesar Chavez. The federal Workforce Investment requires communities to set up a central location where people can access services through the EDD and other job agencies. “You don’t have to go from place to place in the city, you just have to walk desk to desk,” he said.

A woman who works at *Poor* magazine said poor people who may have been in crises all their lives (substance abuse, learning disabilities, mental illness) getting a job at Home Depot is not an option. A meaningful job is necessary to engage these people, she said. It works at *Poor* magazine, she said, referring to the magazine’s successful media internship. “The reality is if you look at a new notion of jobs and you flip the cash grants that come through Cal Works and PAES (Personal Assisted Employment Services) this can be a way of funding for that job creation... I don’t think it’s that hard.”

“No more room” is an all too common refrain heard by nonprofits, said Steve Fields, executive director for the Progress

Jose M., undocumented and homeless

He was not on the stage at any time during the opening remarks, but the slender, ruddy-faced man who had sheets of cardboard wrapped in a white plastic garbage bag (it rained that morning) sat in the front row. Jose M., 31, who is undocumented and homeless, said he’d lost his job after Sept. 11.

“This is all what I own – I live on the streets. I used to have a good job, I was making \$100 a day in construction.”

He said he’d come from Mexico when he was 16. “I’ve been in this country for over half my life and I worked in construction for half my life. Unfortunately, all those years I was bad, I was a drug addict. I used cocaine all the time. Now I don’t use cocaine – I get off mostly through praying. A friend of mine, he’s a pastor of a church – the homeless church.”

Praying and daily Bible study at a church that is run out of a converted school bus keeps him out of trouble, he said.

What is the biggest barrier to his finding somewhere to live? “Because I’m not able to find a job, and if I were to find a job, I would be able to pay rent and then I would not be in the streets no more,” he said. “I’ve been trying to find a job and I can’t and it pisses me off because I’m been working in construction 17 years and I got experience. I got skills and I don’t got a job, and I don’t want to steal, man, it’s easy to steal.”

The Bible, he said, prevents him from robbing people of their wallets. But, he said, “If I see some food laying around – like yesterday I see two burritos – I eat one yesterday and then another one last night, and then half of it this morning. That was my breakfast. And if I go out there and I see food, I’m going to steal it because I got no job. I’d rather steal it than steal somebody’s wallet.”

Jose can’t stop talking: “Can you help me to find a job? I work remodeling houses for 17 years... I’ve been clean for six months... I read the Bible... Praying helps, can you help me get a job?”

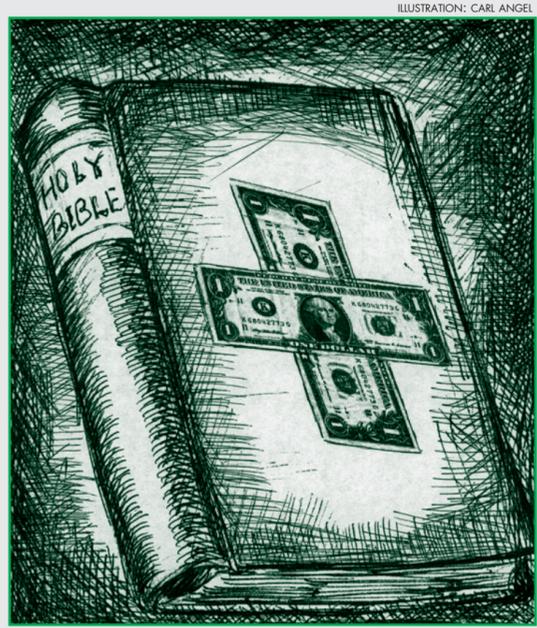


ILLUSTRATION: CARL ANGEL

Foundation, a panelist in the Role of Nonprofit Service Providers workshop.

“It’s like an amusement park with a ride everyone wants to get on, with 5,000 people in line and only 12 seats,” he said of the need for services. While need has increased in the last 20 years, he said, there has been no increase in services.

“It’s insane,” he said, “and if we don’t come out of here demanding more services in every sector that serves the needs of the homeless, then someone might think we can actually do it with what we’ve got. And that’s outrageous and criminal.”

Many providers said they were feeling the squeeze of budget cuts. Linzie Coleman, the center director for Next Door, a city-funded shelter, said she knew what it was like to work 70-hour weeks, yet be asked to find something she could cut because of impending deficits. “There’s a reality in what you can do when the city 100 percent funds you. You are in a political hotbed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year,” she said. “It’s great to be funded,” but she is caught between trying to please the community and the City, she said. “Nobody tells you what you do right, it’s always what they think you did wrong.”

Michael Blecker, executive director of Swords to Plowshares and facilitator for that workshop, said that one avenue for the nonprofit sector to voice its concerns about funds is at the Board of

Supervisors budget hearings. The hearings are usually held only one month prior to deciding the new budget, he said, but this year there is more lead time to look at the departments’ initial budget proposals.

“I think that organizations and groups need to build a strategy around using this new budget opportunity to make our voice heard to at least the Board of Supervisors,” he said.

Newsom, Blecker said, introduced legislation in December that would change the way nonprofits get funded in part by quantifying services the shelters provide. “I think we need to reject this notion of private incentives and privatizing what we do as if we could treat people like products. We should reject that,” Blecker said and people cheered.

‘Quality of life’ criminals

The day ended with a meeting in the main hall in Herbst Theater where the workshop facilitators took the stage and shared results.

“The current set of budget cuts that are on the table have to be taken off the table if we are seriously talking about addressing the needs of homeless people,” said Chance Martin, *Street Sheet* editor and facilitator of the Neighborhood Responses to Homelessness workshop.

Seven neighborhood representatives contributed to the workshop, which drew about 120 participants, Martin reported. They found that while every neighborhood in the city has homeless people, “the overwhelming majority of services are provided in only a handful of neighborhoods,” he said.

A policy that uses citations with fines for “quality of life” infractions was called “criminalization” at the summit, and time and time again it was cited as detrimental in solving the homeless problem.

“People cannot access health care if they’re constantly criminalized for the actions they need to do to survive on the streets,” said a facilitator for the Healthcare, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment and Harm Reduction Programs.

John Viola, staff attorney for the San Francisco Coalition of Homelessness and facilitator for the Human and Civil Rights and Civic Responsibilities workshop, reported that the workshop participants, some of whom were homeless, called the “criminalization” of the homeless “a major violation of people’s basic human and civil rights.”

“Instead of giving people tickets for doing things they have to do to survive in the conditions of homelessness, give them services instead,” he said.

While the sound crew was wrapping cords and a few stragglers milled in the aisles, a small group of media representatives encircled Daly. They asked him questions such as, Where is the money going to come from to pay for the Continuum of Care’s and the Homeless Summit’s findings. “Well,” he replied, “we have \$5 billion in San Francisco; I think that’s a good chunk of money... We have hundreds of billions of dollars in the state of California, we have trillions of dollars in Washington, D.C.”

A Channel 5 reporter asked, “You’re talking about putting people in housing in one of the world’s most expensive cities – you’re not swimming up a pretty stiff stream there?”

“It’s almost straight uphill,” Daly agreed.

The reporter was persistent: “You’re talking about assisting a segment of your population that doesn’t vote, that doesn’t pay taxes, that a very large proportion of San Franciscans do not relate to... Are you as a politician putting yourself out on the edge of society?”

“If that means I’ve got a limited tenure in politics, then so be it, it’s not a very pleasant job anyway,” Daly said. “While I’m here, I’m going to shine the light on the issues that I care about.”

But the lights weren’t shining on the scene when a red-faced man with a shock of white hair ambled up to Daly and, interrupting the final interviews, said, “Excuse my voice, I got laryngitis... I remember you, you always been cool... I don’t have a blanket.” Daly said he’d see what he could do. ■

The need for housing A mantra, a joke and a cry for help

In his summary speech, Chris Daly noted the need for more health care, jobs, education and, especially, affordable housing. He repeated the phrase “affordable housing” five times and then said, “I’ll say it again, affordable housing!”

Tom Ammiano told a joke he’s used before. He said it always gets a laugh and it did this time, too: “Broadly speaking, we don’t have enough housing. I know this gay guy, he moved from New York here. He said, ‘I moved to S.F. to come out of the closet; now I found out I’m living in one and paying \$2,000 a month.’”

Mari Villava, a member of S.F. Youth Commission and an intern with *Poor* magazine, was among the dozen homeless or formerly homeless people who were trained to work with the media during the event. She had this to say:

“I hope out of this we’ll stop looking at Band-Aid solutions and we’ll start looking at the real cause of homelessness, which is lack of housing – low-income housing. Forget affordable housing! We need low-income housing; that you have a bathroom and a kitchen and a bedroom...not a place where you have the bathroom down the hall.”

–K.O.

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Continuum of Care – The city’s blueprint for helping the homeless

The 34-member Local Homeless Coordinating Board oversees the Continuum of Care plan and directs its development. This board is considered a “hub” that connects city departments and the mayor with the Board of Supervisors with community groups. The board has its own finance, policy and funding committees.

The key strategies, listed in the executive summary, address: prevention, centralized information systems, emergency shelters for families and individuals, affordable housing, integrated services, increased of economic opportunities, and respect for civil rights and diversity.

The plan states that it is more cost-effective to prevent homelessness than to pick up the pieces once someone becomes homeless. Some of the suggested steps toward prevention are to increase

legal assistance programs to tenants vulnerable to eviction, improve housing assistance to people discharged from jails and hospitals, and to youth who are aged out of foster care.

Homeless people spend a lot of time trying to track down information on getting services. The summary suggests centralized information systems to give out accurate and consistent information, as well as improve the cultural sensitivity of city staff and other homeless service workers.

Emergency shelters are a short-term solution to the homeless crisis, according to the Continuum of Care, but the shelters are important; they are called “front end services.”

Calling San Francisco’s housing situation “bleak,” the summary calls preserving and producing affordable housing a “pivotal component.” HUD’s definition of low-income for individuals is 77% or less of the area median, which the summary

puts at \$40,800, and very low income at 50 %, which is \$26,200, it says. But the Continuum of Care will target individuals who earn much less, (25% – \$13,100) because it says that most people who are homeless are very low income and wouldn’t be able to otherwise qualify for HUD’s affordable housing programs.

The summary says 10,000 people are on waiting lists for substance abuse treatment programs and 23,000 more are not seeking treatment, because there isn’t the capacity to serve them.

The summary estimates that 14.5% of the city’s population live in poverty (\$16,660). There are not that many jobs in the Bay Area for people with no more than a high school diploma. And unskilled work pays a “dismally low wage.” Job training, employment services and a living wage ordinance were among the suggestions for the expansion of economic opportunity category.