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STREET SHEET

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'VOLUNTEER JAIL': HOW CALIFORNIA'S GO-TO SOLUTION FOR HOMELESSNESS BECAME A HOUSING PURGATORY

BY LAUREN HEPLER, CALMATTERS

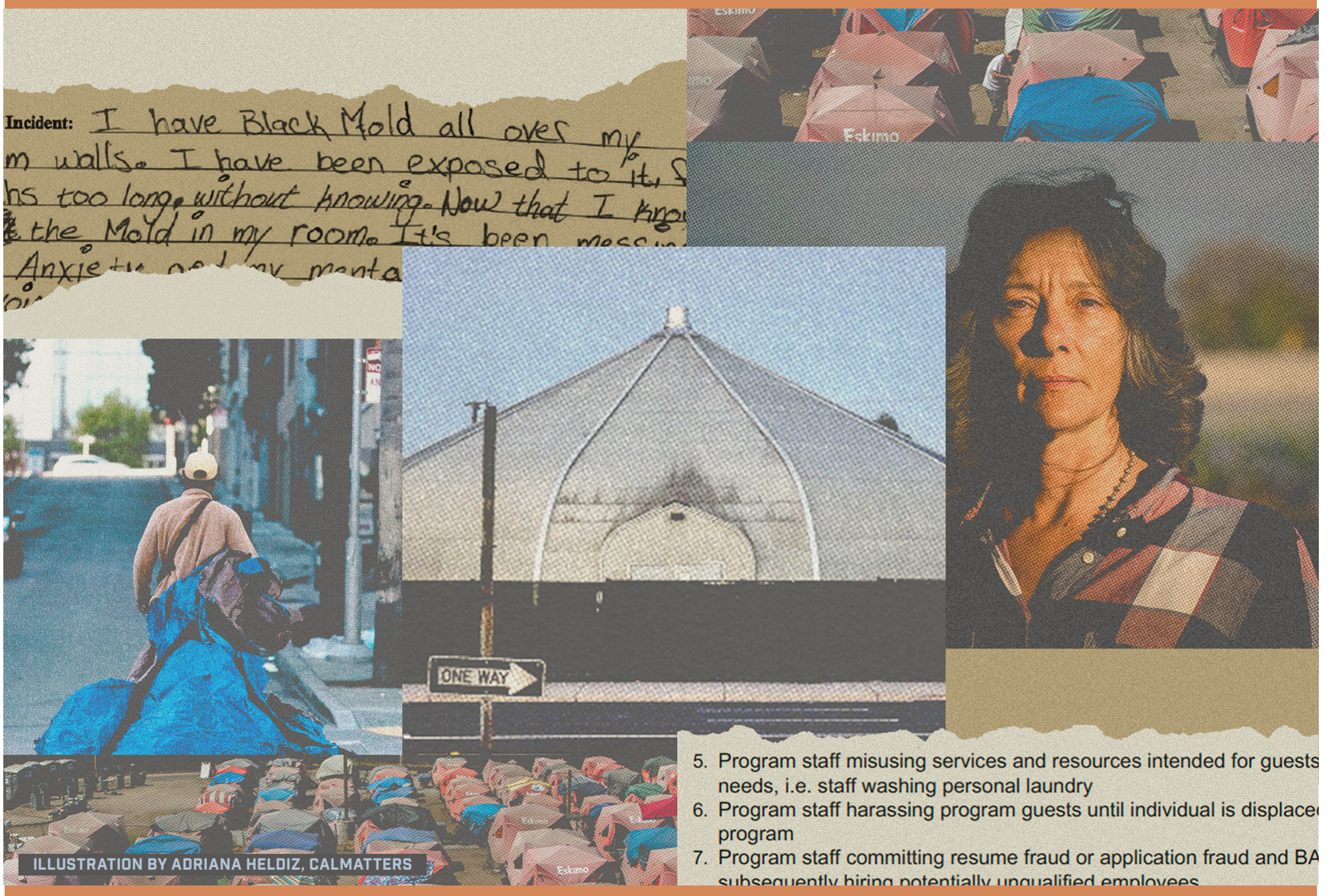

ILLUSTRATION BY ADRIANA HELDIZ, CALMATTERS

The records catalog the chaos inside California homeless shelters.

In Salinas, internal emails say the staff at one brand-new shelter grabbed the best donations for themselves and helped friends and family jump the line for housing. In Los Angeles, court records show a leading nonprofit hired a man who was convicted of attempted murder to work security at a shelter, where he committed three sex crimes in one day.

Then, buried deep within thousands of pages of shelter reports, there are the stabbings in forgotten corners of Silicon Valley, the child abuse in Fresno and black mold in Oakland. Just about everywhere, a hidden epidemic of shelter death lurks.

Even if residents of the state's roughly 61,000 emergency shelter beds endure the gauntlet, they'll likely get stuck in housing purgatory. New state data obtained by CalMatters shows that fewer than 1 in 4 residents who cycle through shelters each year move into permanent homes, far below what many shelter operators promised in their contracts with public agencies.

As homelessness rises in California, state and local officials keep relying on shelters as the backbone of their increasingly aggressive efforts to get people off the streets. But the conditions inside, combined with low housing rates, now have some experts and even shelter executives calling on governments to fundamentally rethink their approach.

Dennis Culhane, an expert in homelessness and housing policy, calls outsize reliance on shelters and other short-term services "the big failure" in California. It's true, he said, that the facilities can be a lifeline for sick and older people who might otherwise die outside. But he worries about how officials prioritize shelters over other ways to deliver lasting housing, such as direct financial support.

"The shelters are not a solution," said Culhane, a University of Pennsylvania social scientist who has advised the city of LA, the U.S. Congress and other public agencies. "We have every reason to believe that if we scaled up income support and provided rental assistance, we would probably see the homeless numbers cut in half."

continued on page 3...

GRAB BARS IN SRO SHOWERS:

A BRIEF HISTORY

JORDAN DAVIS

Lately, a surprising subject has been coming up at tenant meetings of the Central City SRO Collaborative, one that's near and dear to my heart: Grab bars in showers.

A tenant organizer at the collaborative has been encouraging tenants to fill out forms requesting grab bars in their single-resident occupancy (SRO) hotels and persuade their doctors to write them a note requesting reasonable accommodation.

It took a tremendous push over several years to reach this point..

Back in 2017, when I served on the city's SRO Task Force, several members who had ties to the SRO collaborative opposed me on this basic accessibility issue.

In 2013, the Board of Supervisors passed legislation requiring all common restrooms in SROs to be equipped with appropriate grab bars. During public comment, Dan Jordan, then a tenant leader for the Central City SRO Collaborative, supported the legislation, claiming that it was necessary to prevent slip and falls.

Fast forward to 2017: I had just been appointed to the SRO Task Force earlier that spring. I was riding high from passing a motion to support expanding the all-gender restroom ordinance to include common bathrooms in SROs, which later became the first law of its kind in the nation. Young, optimistic and excited about this victory, I pushed to expand this ordinance to cover private bathrooms in SROs as well, with the intent of proposing a motion to deal with the issue.

The task force brought this topic up for discussion in September 2017, and raised questions about expense, landlord entry, and the logistics of tearing out walls and moving tenants in the meantime. At the same time, I was also involved with Senior & Disability Action's SRO workgroup, and when I brought this matter to their attention, the workgroup brought up some real concerns that older bathrooms lacked studs to install the grab bars. I wish I addressed this matter sooner.

After a rough morning of hearing about the supposed infeasibility of such a plan, I decided to do some overdue homework. I was able to find at least one product online that allows for the quick installation of grab bars into any type of wall, even without studs. When the topic was discussed the following November, the same old lies kept coming up. Throughout this whole process, Dan Jordan, who served in the task force's other tenant seat, was claiming that expanding the grab bar ordinance that he supported back in 2013 was a bridge too far, citing cost, even though he saw through the landlord's BS back in 2013, and that the cost wasn't over $1 million. Clifford Gilmore, a Central City SRO Collaborative employee who was aligned with the more conservative pro-landlord bloc, high-balled the costs. Because the task force's more progressive members were not showing up at the meetings, I decided to punt on the motion. The proposal was brought up again in 2018, but it never moved forward.

In 2019, the Task Force disbanded, and I focused on #30RightNow throughout the pandemic. I moved to another building and later got my gender confirmation surgery, which required me to stand up in the shower for the first eight weeks of my recovery. Without grab bars, I was risking my safety.

In March of 2022, during my recovery period, I slipped and fell in the shower. Before reaching that eight-week mark, management notified us that grab bars would soon be installed in our private bathrooms. I watched workers install the grab bars in less than an hour, without having to tear out the wall, contrary to what landlords and their task force allies previously claimed. Those grab bars have held for three years, even though I weigh 250 pounds—the minimum amount of pressure that grab bars must be rated for.

Ironically, the Central City SRO Collaborative is now encouraging tenants to request grab bars after two people within that community tried to torpedo the original proposal. I am glad that the tenant organizer is doing this, and I don't want to relitigate the past. I do think, however, that expanding the grab bar ordinance to include private SRO restrooms is long overdue, and I hope the costs won't burden residents. These grab bars will benefit current and future residents alike. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

If you live in permanent supportive housing with a private bathroom that doesn't have grab bars, please contact Jordan Davis at 30rightnow@gmail.com

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The STREET SHEET is a project of the Coalition on Homelessness. The Coalition on Homelessness organizes poor and homeless people to create permanent solutions to poverty while protecting the civil and human rights of those forced to remain on the streets.

Our organizing is based on extensive peer outreach, and the information gathered directly drives the Coalition's work. We do not bring our agenda to poor and homeless people: they bring their agendas to us.

STREET SHEET STAFF

The Street Sheet is a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness. Some stories are collectively written, and some stories have individual authors. But whoever sets fingers to keyboard, all stories are formed by the collective work of dozens of volunteers, and our outreach to hundreds of homeless people.

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Street Sheet is published and distributed on the unceded ancestral homeland of the Ramaytush Ohlone peoples. We recognize and honor the ongoing presence and stewardship of the original people of this land. We recognize that homelessness can not truly be ended until this land is returned to its original stewards.

ORGANIZE WITH US

HOUSING JUSTICE WORKING GROUP
TUESDAYS @ NOON
The Housing Justice Workgroup is working toward a San Francisco in which every human being can have and maintain decent, habitable, safe, and secure housing. This meeting is in English and Spanish and open to everyone! Email mcarrera@cohsf.org to get involved!

HUMAN RIGHTS WORKING GROUP
WEDNESDAYS @12:30
The Human Rights Workgroup has been doing some serious heavy lifting on these issues: conducting direct research, outreach to people on the streets, running multiple campaigns, developing policy, staging direct actions, capturing media attention, and so much more. All those down for the cause are welcome to join! Email lpierce@cohsf.org

EVERYONE IS INVITED TO JOIN OUR WORKING GROUP MEETINGS!

'VOLUNTEER JAIL' CONT...

To better understand what's happening inside shelters, CalMatters requested and analyzed previously unreleased state performance data, reviewed thousands of police calls and incident reports, and interviewed more than 80 shelter residents and personnel.

The reporting provides a unique window into facilities that are almost always closed to public access and ban residents from taking pictures or video. Among the findings:

+ California spent big on a shelter boom. No state agency could provide an estimate for how much total taxpayer money is spent on shelters, so CalMatters analyzed local contracts and state funding data. We found that governments have invested at least $1 billion since 2018. The number of emergency shelter beds in the state more than doubled, from around 27,000 to 61,000, federal data shows. There are still three times as many homeless people as there are shelter beds in California.

+ Those shelters are deadlier than jails. Annual shelter death rates tripled between 2018 and mid-2024. A total of 2,007 people died, according to data obtained from the California Interagency Council on Homelessness. That's nearly twice as many deaths as California jails saw during the same period.

+ Scandals have plagued fast-growing shelter operators. Oakland's Bay Area Community Services saw revenue climb 1,000% in a decade to $98 million in 2023. At the same time, it faced a long list of allegations against staff at one taxpayer-funded shelter, including fraud and inappropriate relationships with clients. LA's Special Service for Groups brought in $170 million in 2023, a nine-figure jump since 2017, while drawing complaints and lawsuits over violence and sexual misconduct.

+ Oversight is failing at every level. While the state sends local governments hundreds of millions of dollars for shelters, it does little to ensure accountability. Nearly all of California's 500-plus cities and counties have ignored a state law that requires them to document and address dangerous shelter conditions, CalMatters found. Meanwhile, audits and complaints show that the local agencies that directly pay and monitor shelter contractors often fail to follow up on reports of unsafe conditions, unused beds or missed housing targets.

+ The result: Shelters become a bridge to nowhere. California shelters fail to move the vast majority of residents into permanent housing. Shelters operators, governments and researchers don't always agree on the best way to calculate their effectiveness — but even under the most generous formula, the state's shelters delivered housing for just 22% of residents from 2018 to early 2024. Shelters often kick out far more people than they place in housing.

"All you've done is create a very expensive merry-go-round," said Sergio Perez, who until recently served as the Los Angeles city controller's chief of accountability and oversight.

Gov. Gavin Newsom's office did not respond to repeated requests for interviews about how homeless shelters fit into the state's housing strategy, referring all questions to other state agencies.

Nonprofit organizations run most of California's publicly funded shelters. Leaders say they're constantly scrambling to address a thicket of challenges: high turnover among low-paid staff, slow government payments, unrealistic budgets, addiction and mental health crises and a lack of affordable housing.

Larry Haynes, CEO of Mercy House, a Santa Ana-based shelter operator,

Javier Cruz (second from left) has been living with his mother and siblings at the SHARE Center in Salinas for more than two years. Oct. 29, 2024. Photo by Manuel Orbegozo for CalMatters

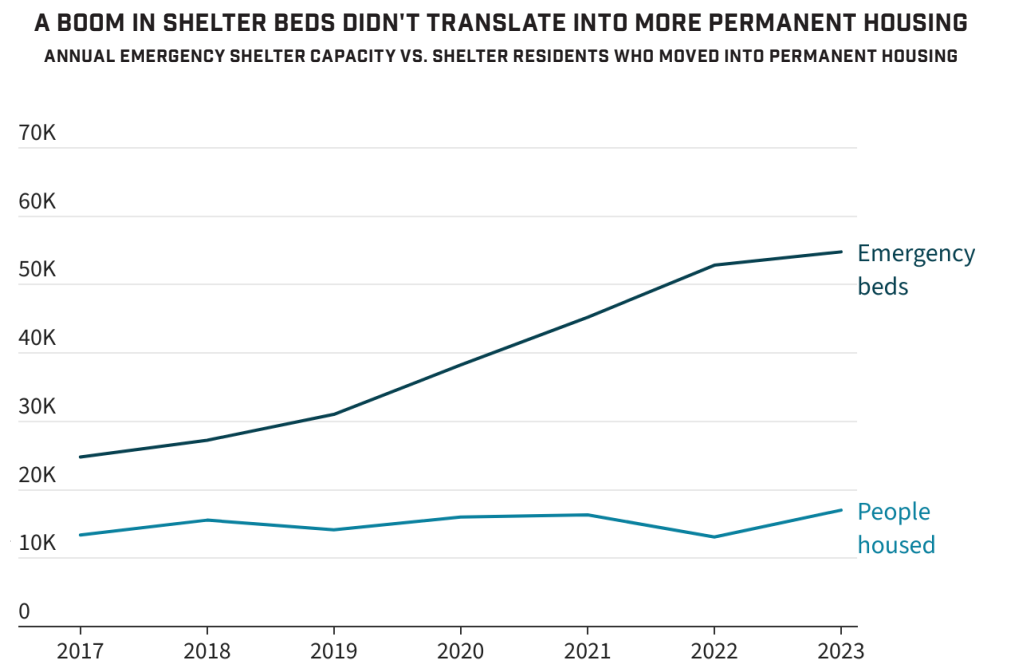

Chart: Mohamed Al Elew, CalMatters • Source: U.S. Housing and Urban Development, California Interagency Council on Homelessness

fuck did you think was going to happen?'" he said.

"Shelters are part of a system, and they're being judged and rated and critiqued for things over which they have no control," he said. "That doesn't mean the shelters don't suck, that they don't have problems, but it's got to be put in its right context."

Holly Herring has seen it all in five years of work at shelters in the San Diego area. Her clients have survived everything from hate crimes to electrical fires to moldy food, leaving her wondering why shelters don't at least get inspected and publicly graded like restaurants.

Then Herring became homeless herself, fleeing violence in her own home. She had a choice to make: Would she stay in a shelter like the ones she had worked in? She decided she couldn't.

"I know that it is safer and more dignified for me to sleep in my car than it is in a shelter," she said.

CalMatters requested shelter records from all 58 counties in California. Stories from three places — rural Salinas, suburban Orange County and Los Angeles, the state's biggest city — show how a shelter system that's supposed to offer a safe haven instead fuels a self-defeating cycle of homelessness.

little sisters when he was 16 years old after the family stayed in a nearby domestic violence shelter. He hoped for stability while he finished high school, but it didn't take long to notice that something was off.

Every few weeks, people came by to drop off donations like food, blankets and cleaning supplies — but the family and their neighbors at the shelter didn't get the donations. Sometimes they saw staff hauling donations out to waiting cars, according to multiple written complaints that shelter residents filed to city and county officials.

The nonprofit that ran the shelter promised to do "whatever it takes" to find the family a home. More than two years later, Cruz has turned 18 and set his sights on college, even though some days, he said, he's been too depressed to leave his bed. His family still lives at the SHARE Center.

"They just really don't focus on the people," he said in an interview. "They told my mom, 'Do not worry, we'll take care of it.' Two years later? Nothing."

Cruz didn't know it at the time, but as he and his family held out hope for a lasting home, officials in Monterey County and the city of Salinas became overwhelmed with complaints about how an Oakland-based nonprofit, Bay Area Community Services, ran the shelter, according to internal communications obtained by CalMatters.

The complaints ranged from daily indignities — staff stealing food and donations or washing their own clothes in the shelter's free laundry machines — to misconduct "potentially involving criminal fraud, discrimination, alteration of data and records, and misuse of funds," according to a manager with the county's Department of Social Services, who emailed the nonprofit's leaders a 21-point list of complaints in July 2023 compiled from multiple SHARE Center residents and employees.

Shelter personnel gave taxpayer-funded housing to friends and family, the complaints alleged. Multiple people reported that staffers had sexually harassed or had inappropriate sexual relationships with other staffers or clients. They made detailed claims about how workers illegally bought food stamps from clients, manipulated shelter data and forged program documents. There were allegations of nepotism and fake resumes in hiring. Retaliation for raising concerns.

"This is wrong on so many levels," one woman living at the shelter wrote. "Please help."

Before everything unraveled, the SHARE Center was a beacon of hope. It opened about a year into the pandemic as business boomed for BACS.

The nonprofit had expanded its housing programs from a few churches to cities all around the Bay Area. Annual revenue surged 440% in five years. CEO Jamie Almanza was named 2020's "Woman of the Year" by a state senator, and she had a TED Talk titled "How to create a world where No One Lives Outside."

It was all very impressive to officials 100 miles south in Salinas, who were also hoping to seize the COVID-funding wave. The local housing crisis was so dire that elementary school kids had started showing up to Monterey County Board of Supervisors meetings to ask them to build a new shelter.

In a series of public contracts, the county and city agreed to pay BACS more than $4 million to run the shelter, a sleek blue building on a hill with big expectations. "Today is a historic day," Supervisor Luis Alejo said at the ribbon-cutting in May 2021. After years of political resistance, he vowed to "manage the center with professionalism, and without the stereotypes that are often said about such services."

Instead, the SHARE Center became an example of how things can go awry when desperation meets a sudden funding boom.

One week after the county official noti-

continued on page 4...

'VOLUNTEER JAIL' CONT...

continued from page 3...

fied BACS of the long list of complaints, Almanza, the CEO, told the county by email that her organization "took immediate action and terminated seven staff," including a manager and supervisor. She said the organization "did not find any evidence of fraud." The message did not elaborate on how they investigated the various fraud allegations.

BACS eventually submitted an investigation to public officials. Monterey County officials denied public records requests from CalMatters to review that investigation, stating that the results are "PRIVILEGED AND CONFIDENTIAL." The county's Department of Social Services said all allegations "were investigated and addressed to an extent determined appropriate."

Rod Powell, former assistant director of community development for Salinas, said "a fair amount" of the long list of allegations was substantiated. He attributed much of the dysfunction to the nonprofit's struggle to recruit and manage local staff from its headquarters in the Bay Area.

"They could not find adequate leadership in our community," said Powell, who now works for a different city. "Them being based in the East Bay, it really didn't translate down here."

BACS officials declined to share their investigation with CalMatters. "There was no evidence of fraud, discrimination, alteration of data and records, nor misuse of funds," Nora Daly, the nonprofit's chief development officer, said in a statement. "To the extent our comprehensive review identified other issues of performance or conduct, we addressed with prompt and appropriate remedial action."

A Monterey County report from late 2023 shows that BACS had found housing for 30% of all people living at the shelter, far below the 70% goal laid out in the nonprofit's contract. Daly said that figure should be calculated differently to exclude people who are still "actively living" at the shelter. Using this math, which is favored by some state agencies, she said BACS exceeded housing goals.

The complaints about the shelter didn't end there. In the weeks after the misconduct allegations, city staffers complained that the nonprofit was losing homeless people, "unable to find" where they went after outreach workers referred them to the SHARE Center.

Salinas' manager of homeless services, Kayshla Lopez, requested that city and county officials get more access to the shelter's waitlist or client-tracking data.

"I personally think there needs to be more oversight," she wrote.

All the tension came to a head in mid-August 2023, when emails show that Almanza asked to schedule a call with public officials to address the "difficult personnel situation" and discuss her organization's future at the shelter. Months later, citing frustrations with bureaucratic red tape and budget reductions, the nonprofit formally terminated its contracts.

The termination included not only the SHARE Center, but also more than $10 million worth of other state grants awarded to BACS and Salinas, vaporizing badly needed affordable housing. One $8 million grant was quietly rescinded by the state, and another property that was purchased with a separate $2.6 million award sat empty late last year.

"As you know, this endeavor has not come without mutual obstacles which we have met with both of your teams on countless instances," Almanza wrote to the city and county. "However, even with the challenges, BACS is proud of the number of people and families we have served."

From the outside, the SHARE Center still looks like a decent place to get back on your feet. The shelter sits behind a tall metal fence with neat landscaping. The property has a basketball hoop for kids and sweeping mountain views for those still decompressing from street life.

A nonprofit called Community Human Services took over in fall 2024, and residents and staffers both say that the transition hasn't been easy.

Brian Samaniego, 53, has lived at the shelter for the past year. In that time, he's filled out 22 apartment applications and told three different case managers about how he found his mom dead in their family home, sending him into a spiral of addiction, homelessness and what he increasingly sees as false hope of getting out of the SHARE Center.

Catherine Moore goes through old notebooks filled with the names and numbers of shelters and possible housing leads that she called while she was homeless, on May 14, 2024. She believes the only reason she made it to her own apartment was because she spoke out against poor shelter conditions, advocated for better housing options and won a rare voucher for subsidized housing. Photos by Jules Hotz for CalMatters

"They sold me a fairy tale, that it was going to be real quick when I got here," he said. "It's not people that are failing the programs, it's the programs that are failing the people."

When shelters kick out more people than they place in permanent housing

In the decade since she was diagnosed with an incurable brain disease, Joline Tingler has been in and out of a half dozen Orange County homeless shelters.

The last one she got kicked out of was a co-ed shelter in an industrial corner of Anaheim called Bridges at Kraemer Place. The nonprofit that runs the shelter, Mercy House, says shelters have one main job: "obtain permanent housing as rapidly as possible."

But that's not what usually happens in California. And that's not what's happening at Bridges.

Just 11% of the 415 people who cycled through Bridges found permanent housing, according to the nonprofit's 2024 report to the county. More than eight times as many people ended up back on the street, at another shelter, in an unknown location or dead.

They either leave or get "exited" — nonprofit-speak for getting kicked out — and keep churning through tents, jails, hospitals and other temporary programs. There's even a name for people like Tingler stuck in this cycle: frequent flyers.

In spring 2024, the Orange County Board of Supervisors was asked to approve a new $4 million annual contract for Mercy House to run Bridges. In a report prepared for the vote, county staff noted that Mercy House was "currently under performing" on contract requirements, including a mandate to permanently house 30% of its clients. Mercy House has been "impacted by high staff turnover," the county report said, "as well as the severity of barriers experienced by participants which limits their ability to engage meaningfully."

County supervisors unanimously approved the new contract.

Haynes, the CEO of Mercy House, said his organization tries to do "everything we can" to avoid kicking people out, sometimes prioritizing the stability and safety of entire facilities over trying to resolve individual issues.

"It's an impossible situation," he said.

Reliable outcome data is notoriously scarce in the shelter world, and Haynes called for "a complete reset." He wants to create a baseline and hold each part of the homeless services system — outreach, shelter, housing — responsible for what it can control.

"Unfortunately, what happens is both progressive and conservative politicians engage in this, and this becomes more performance than actual work," he said. "It becomes more spectacle than substance."

In Tingler's case, she and two former neighbors said the offense that's gotten her kicked out of multiple shelters was smoking marijuana on the premises. The 44-year-old former "Army brat" and longtime Orange County resident ended up homeless in 2015, she said, after a divorce and a low-paying retail job left her short on cash. She's bounced around ever since and said she smokes to manage symptoms of Huntington's disease, a Parkinson's-like genetic condition that causes muscle spasms, trouble swallowing and behavior changes.

One glaring problem, according to Tingler and more than a dozen others who have stayed in shelters around Orange County, is that group shelters are often a one-size-fits-all solution. People with severe physical and mental health issues are crammed into bunks alongside people in the throes of addiction, newly sober, fleeing domestic violence, leaving jail or trying to rebuild after layoffs, debt or evictions.

On any given day, shelter staffers have to try to get someone into rehab, call an ambulance, break up a brawl, administer anti-overdose drugs or lobby a landlord to take a client.

"There's two or three dumpster fires a day," said one nonprofit executive in central California.

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Court records show that

she's been arrested multiple times in the past year as cities crack down on people sleeping outside.

She recently sprang Monster from the pound after he was confiscated during another sweep.

When shelter security becomes the 'predator'

Before he was hired as a security guard at a shelter in South LA, Ronald Evans was convicted of second-degree attempted murder and robbery in the 1990s. He was three months into his new shelter job when, in a single day, a drunk Evans sexually battered three different women living at the shelter, according to court records and victims' testimony.

No one at A Bridge Home at JD's Place, a shelter run by the LA-based nonprofit HOPICS, immediately called the police. Eventually, the victims did report the incidents to law enforcement. One said in court that she was kicked out of the shelter after she reported what happened.

"You are one of the worst type of predators," one victim told Evans following his conviction, calling him a "snake" who devoured "what little bit of existence that I was holding onto."

CalMatters does not name the victims of sexual violence without their permission. But stories from survivors show how violence and sexual abuse can plague shelter life, dragging people further down rather than building them back up.

Police logs obtained by CalMatters show more than 1,300 calls for violent attacks in just a dozen LA shelters since 2019. Contract shelter operators are also supposed to inform the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority of major incidents like deaths, assaults and medical emergencies.

After the agency refused to turn over these records last year, CalMatters sued. The agency eventually agreed to release them. We are currently analyzing them as part of our ongoing investigation.

Reports of violence against women at LA shelters around Skid Row are so widespread that advocates last year wrote an open letter to Mayor Karen Bass arguing that the facilities "are not an ethical option."

"They are really unsafe," said Kat Calvin, executive director of the nonprofit Project ID, which helps homeless people get state identification. "We have clients come in all the time with unwanted pregnancies because they were raped."

Two other women told CalMatters about violence they endured while living at the same HOPICS shelter in South LA. In interviews late last year, both shelter residents showed physical scars, as well as photos and emails that documented more recent attacks.

Roxana Soto had three fresh scars on her ear, chin and shoulder from a knife attack by a man who she said also lived at the shelter. Another woman, who asked not to be identified because she fears retaliation, had a black eye and staples in the top of her head that she said stemmed from a beating by another shelter resident on the sidewalk just outside. Soto and two other shelter residents said they witnessed the aftermath of the attack.

"They tell you that if you call the cops, they'll kick you out," Soto said. "When I got stabbed, I had to call the ambulance three, four times. They didn't even want to come to the address anymore."

The shelter is operated by HOPICS, a division of Special Service for Groups, which most recently reported $168 million in revenue from government grants in 2023.

HOPICS Director Veronica Lewis confirmed in a statement that the organization did have a record of the violent incidents last year, but said it "has no knowledge" of shelter residents being pressured not to call police.

"When we were made aware of the incident, all appropriate action was taken, working with the victim to ensure their safety and security, as well as stable shelter," Lewis said.

SSG and HOPICS require all employees to sign anti-violence and misconduct policies. The nonprofit uses video surveillance to "watch the happenings of its sites" and has implemented rules to limit "one-on-one interactions" behind closed doors, she said.

As for Evans, Lewis said, he was fired in late January 2020 after it was reported that he was "inebriated" at work; she said the organization did not immediately learn of the sexual misconduct allegations. HOPICS was unaware of Evans' criminal record, she added, despite the fact that he was fingerprinted for its background check in 2019. "The results came back Cleared in November 2019 via the DOJ and FBI's fingerprint process," Lewis wrote in an email.

Evans had served nearly five years in prison in the late 1990s.

One shelter victim, a 55-year-old woman, had been living there for about a month when Evans motioned for her to come toward him. He was visibly intoxicated, with "bloodshot red" eyes, and he smelled "like alcohol," she told the court. She got "kind of nervous," she later testified. Then he grabbed her.

"He started feeling on me," she recalled in court, saying he groped her buttocks and left her humiliated, feeling "like I was nothing."

A second woman, now 52, testified that he assaulted her while she was dressing. He was handing out shower towels. The woman took her shower, dried off and bent over to get her clothes when she "felt something" behind her.

"I turned around; it was him," she said. "He had his finger on … my vagina."

The woman reported the incident to a security officer, she told the court, who "said she was going to report it to a case manager."

She didn't hear anything else "until they asked me to leave," the woman said. "I got kicked out."

A 26-year-old woman told police that Evans propositioned her for prostitution, asking her if she wanted to "make some money to go to Vegas." When she told him she wasn't a prostitute, he grabbed her and reached down.

She said she "felt his fingers over her vaginal area," according to police testimony during Evans' preliminary hearing.

But police were not called on the day this all happened. Instead, the 55-year-old woman testified, another HOPICS staffer gave Evans "a ride home."

Eight months later, on Aug. 25, 2020, the LA County district attorney's office charged Evans with one count of sexual penetration by force and two counts of sexual battery by restraint. Evans pleaded no contest and was convicted of three counts of sexual battery by restraint. He was sentenced to four years in prison and required to register as a sex offender. Evans declined an interview with CalMatters.

All three victims also sued SSG. Two of the lawsuits are sealed. In the third lawsuit, the victim sued the nonprofit for negligence and sexual harassment. The victim's attorney told CalMatters that the case was "resolved," but he "could not disclose any information about its resolution." Lewis said, "All cases were settled in confidence."

In 2021, one of the victims stood before the former security guard in LA Superior Court and recounted how the experience impacted her and her family.

After months of sleepless nights worrying if Evans would harm her, she was trying to move forward, taking a class in business law and looking forward to enrolling in law school.

"I'm not going to be a victim in here anymore," she said. "The next time that I come into a courtroom, I will be standing next to someone, defending them."

'It doesn't work, and it never has'

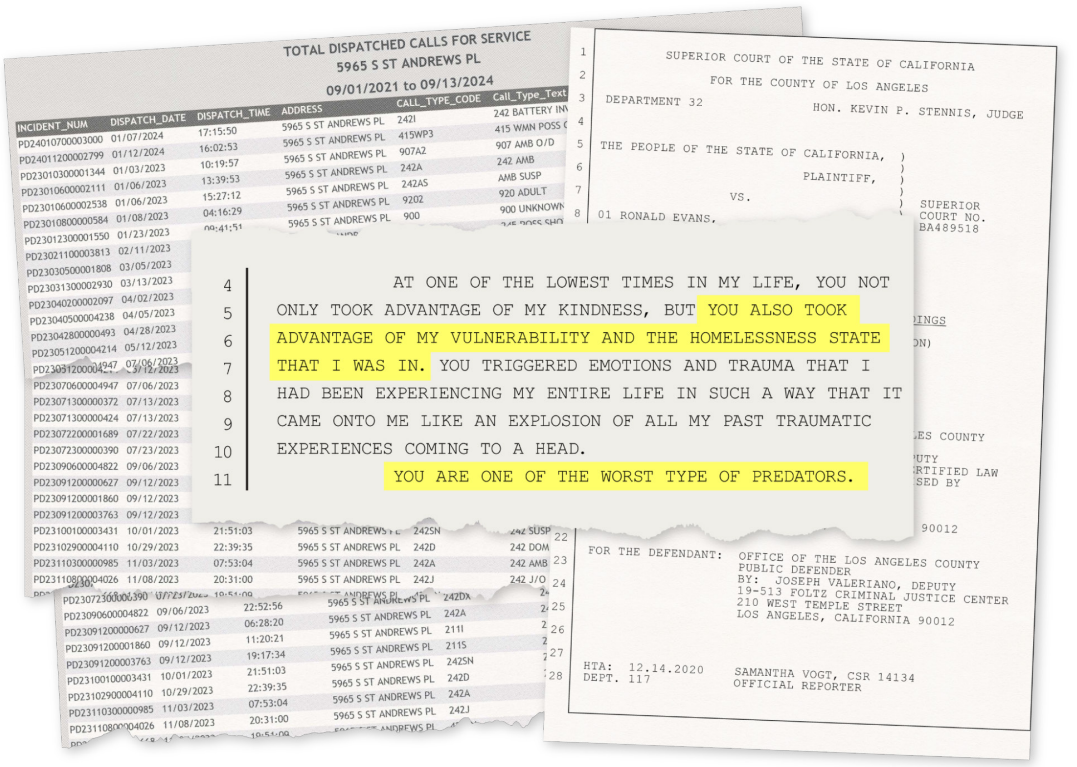
For all the horrors playing out at California shelters, getting into one still isn't easy.

California has more than 187,000 homeless residents and about 61,400 shelter beds, federal data shows. Those hoping for a bed usually have to interview and wait for a call back; shelter waitlists routinely stretch for months.

That doesn't stop public officials from chastising people on the street for refusing to accept shelter. Many officials doubled down after the Supreme Court gave permission to raze encampments last year, insisting that they are offering shelters as alternatives to camping tickets or jail.

"We have offered people shelter and space, and many people are declining the offer," London Breed, then the mayor of San Francisco, said after the court ruling, though the city's shelter website routinely shows hundreds of people on the waitlist. "We're hopeful we make it so

continued on page 6...


TOTAL DISPATCHED CALLS FOR SERVICE
5965 S ST ANDREWS PL
09/01/2021 to 09/13/2024

INCIDENT_NUM	DISPATCH_DATE	DISPATCH_TIME	ADDRESS	CALL_TYPE_CODE	Call_Type_Text
PD24010700003000	01/07/2024	17:15:50	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242I	242 BATTERY INV
PD24011200002799	01/12/2024	16:02:53	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	415WP3	415 WMN POSS C
PD23013000001344	01/03/2023	10:19:57	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	907A2	907 AMB O/D
PD23010600002111	01/06/2023	13:39:53	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242A	242 AMB
PD23010600002538	01/06/2023	15:27:12	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242AS	AMB SUSP
PD23010800000584	01/08/2023	04:16:29	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	9202	920 ADULT
PD23012300001550	01/23/2023	09:41:51	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	900	900 UNKNOWN
PD23021100003813	02/11/2023				
PD23030500001808	03/05/2023				
PD23031300002930	03/13/2023				
PD23040200002097	04/02/2023				
PD23040500004238	04/05/2023				
PD23042800000493	04/28/2023				
PD23051200004214	05/12/2023				
PD23061200004247	06/12/2023				
PD23070600004947	07/06/2023				
PD23071300000372	07/13/2023				
PD23071300000424	07/13/2023				
PD23072200001689	07/22/2023				
PD23072300000390	07/23/2023				
PD23090600004822	09/06/2023				
PD23091200000627	09/12/2023				
PD23091200001860	09/12/2023				
PD23091200003763	09/12/2023				
PD23100100003431	10/01/2023	21:51:03	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242SN	242 SUSP
PD23102900004110	10/29/2023	22:39:35	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242D	242 DOM
PD23110300000985	11/03/2023	07:53:04	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242A	242 AMB
PD23110800004026	11/08/2023	20:31:00	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242J	242 J/O
PD23072300000390	07/23/2023	19:51:09	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242DA	
PD23090600004822	09/06/2023	22:52:56	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242A	
PD23091200000627	09/12/2023	06:28:20	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	211I	
PD23091200001860	09/12/2023	11:20:21	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	211S	
PD23091200003763	09/12/2023	19:17:34	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242SN	
PD23100100003431	10/01/2023	21:51:03	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242D	
PD23102900004110	10/29/2023	22:39:35	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242A	
PD23110300000985	11/03/2023	07:53:04	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL	242J	
PD23110800004026	11/08/2023	20:31:00	5965 S ST ANDREWS PL		

SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA
FOR THE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES
DEPARTMENT 32 HON. KEVIN P. STENNIS, JUDGE
THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA, PLAINTIFF, VS. 01 RONALD EVANS, SUPERIOR COURT NO. BA489518

AT ONE OF THE LOWEST TIMES IN MY LIFE, YOU NOT ONLY TOOK ADVANTAGE OF MY KINDNESS, BUT YOU ALSO TOOK ADVANTAGE OF MY VULNERABILITY AND THE HOMELESSNESS STATE THAT I WAS IN. YOU TRIGGERED EMOTIONS AND TRAUMA THAT I HAD BEEN EXPERIENCING MY ENTIRE LIFE IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT CAME ONTO ME LIKE AN EXPLOSION OF ALL MY PAST TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES COMING TO A HEAD.
YOU ARE ONE OF THE WORST TYPE OF PREDATORS.

FOR THE DEFENDANT: OFFICE OF THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY PUBLIC DEFENDER BY: JOSEPH VALERIANO, DEPUTY 19-513 FOLTZ CRIMINAL JUSTICE CENTER 210 WEST TEMPLE STREET LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90012

HTA: 12.14.2020 DEPT. 117 SAMANTHA VOGT, CSR 14134 OFFICIAL REPORTER

CMS Photo Link: Clockwise from top left: Police dispatch calls for a shelter run by HOPICS and court transcript records for the conviction of Ronald Evans. Collage by Gabriel Hongdusit, CalMatters

'VOLUNTEER JAIL' CONT...

continued from page 5...

uncomfortable for people that they accept our offer."

When people do say yes to shelter, there are many reasons that problems arise. The first is California's housing market, which is the primary barrier keeping people with low incomes, evictions or other financial black marks from moving back into regular housing. Waits for subsidized housing are often so long that people get stuck for months or years in the state's patchwork shelter system.

"It doesn't work, and it never has," said Dennis Culhane, an expert on homelessness who has lived undercover in shelters and studied their evolution over several decades. "That is part of what makes being homeless such a bad experience — that you have to be in these awful facilities for survival."

Erica Costa, director of external affairs for the California Interagency Council on Homelessness, said in an email that the agency "acknowledges the gravity of allegations concerning misconduct" in shelters, and that daily responsibility for shelter conditions falls on local funders and shelter operators. The state agency is responsible for "coordinating efforts" among local governments, service providers and community groups, she said, and considers shelters one of many ways to address homelessness.

"Emergency shelters serve as an immediate, short-term solution, providing individuals experiencing homelessness with safety, basic necessities, and a point of entry to supportive services," Costa said, though the agency stresses that they "are not a permanent solution to homelessness."

Barracks-style emergency shelters grew in popularity in the 1980s as California and other states shuttered mental hospitals and public housing. Today's shelter patchwork includes large taxpayer-funded group shelters, a smaller number of domestic violence or gender-specific shelters and a wide array of private or religious shelters with stricter rules and far fewer public reporting requirements.

Shelters have long existed in big cities, but communities across the state have turned to them for legal cover to more aggressively clear tents and ticket their occupants, said Chris Herring, a UCLA assistant professor of sociology who spent 90 nights in San Francisco shelters. He believes local and state officials should be more focused on changes that could get more people off the street in the long term, such as more specialized sober living options, smaller and less chaotic shelters or better housing counseling.

"The political role is mainly to clear the streets," Herring said. "What I'm really worried about is more funding going into shelter with very little attention to the things that would end homelessness."

San Diego recently debated going bigger with a new 1,000-bed shelter. San Jose's mayor wants to spend money earmarked for affordable housing on more shelters. In Long Beach, a nonprofit and a public health agency are converting an old hospital into a campus with shelter, drug detox and medical services. LA is leasing entire apartment buildings to move more people into housing.

Across the country, a broader experiment is also underway: using direct rent assistance and guaranteed income to quickly rehouse people or keep them from becoming homeless in the first place. Culhane has urged California to spend around $1 billion to launch a program to rapidly stabilize 100,000 people by paying them $1,000 a month in guaranteed income, plus $800 in rent assistance. The state has spent $27 billion on homelessness since 2018.

In 2023, UC San Francisco found that 70% of homeless people surveyed could have stayed housed with an additional $300 to $500 in monthly income. A pilot project in LA paid people $750 per month and found that within six months, almost 30% of those who received this basic income got back into housing.

"The core thing is if there's no rental assistance, then you're not going to make progress," Culhane said.

Amy Turk, who runs the Downtown Women's Center in LA, says shelters do play an important short-term role when they're run well. The biggest issue, from her vantage point running subsidized housing and a day program for people on the street or in shelters, is that no one wants to take responsibility for putting the pieces together on homelessness.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has repeatedly said that shelters and encampments are local governments' responsibilities. Local officials counter that shifting state funding and intense backlash from neighboring residents often undercut their efforts. Day to day, one of society's toughest challenges keeps being outsourced to nonprofit contractors with widely varied resources, staffing and oversight.

"If you have X homeless people, you need X shelter beds and X permanent housing," Turk said. "It doesn't seem like the hardest math problem."

Byrhonda Lyons contributed reporting to this story.

This story was originally published by CalMatters.

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In California, there isn't a central, statewide agency that oversees homeless shelters. Shelters that receive public funding are monitored by local officials, who often handle complaints from residents. In some cases, state officials can also step in if residents report problems.

A new CalMatters investigation has documented chaos and scandal inside California's homeless shelters and found that fewer than 1 in 4 people cycle through shelters find permanent housing. Shelters, the reporting has found, are deadlier than jails.

Over the past year, hundreds of people living in homeless shelters have shared their stories with us, and have asked for help on how to navigate this complicated system. We put together this small resource guide to some of the agencies and organizations that can help people navigate problems in homeless shelters.

If you have general complaints against shelters, contact the organization that runs the shelter (the "shelter operator"), your local elected officials or state lawmakers.

If you have a discrimination or harassment complaint against a shelter, you can file an online complaint with the California Civil Rights Department (formerly the Department of Fair Employment and Housing) or call them at 1-800-884-1684.

If you have a complaint against security guards, you can file a complaint with the California Department of Consumer Affairs, and check guards' private security license status. You can also contact the organization that runs the shelter. CalMatters has investigated private security guards in homeless shelters and on the street.

For other legal issues, here is a small list of legal aid organizations and resources that assist with housing issues.
ACLU of Southern California's Dignity for All Project
Affordable Housing Advocates
California Courts Legal and Housing Resources
California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation
Greater Bakersfield Legal Assistance, Inc.
Housing Rights Center
Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles
Los Angeles Community Action Network
Stay Housed LA
Western Regional Advocacy Project
More legal aid resources in California

Tell us your story. Help us continue reporting on shelter conditions by filling out our survey: https://bit.ly/41D3G0D

FYI FOR SAN FRANCISCO SHELTERS

SHELTER MONITORING COMMITTEE - THE COMMITTEE THAT TRACKS THE CONDITIONS OF CITY-FUNDED SHELTERS. STAFF TAKE AND INVESTIGATE COMPLAINTS.

DROP-IN TIMES AT 440 TURK ST.: MONDAYS, WEDNESDAYS & FRIDAYS 10:30 A.M. - 12 P.M. AND 1:30 P.M. - 3 P.M.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS TYPICALLY TAKE PLACE ON THE THIRD WEDNESDAYS OF EACH MONTH AT SF CITY HALL, 1 DR. CARLTON B. GOODLETT PL., ROOM 408.

TO REPORT CONCERNS ABOUT A SHELTER:
PHONE: (628) 652-8080. ALL CALLS ARE CONFIDENTIAL AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE WHILE COMPLYING WITH MANDATORY REPORTING LAWS. YOU DO NOT HAVE TO GIVE YOUR NAME, THOUGH IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO INVESTIGATE A COMPLAINT WITHOUT ONE.

EMAIL: SHELTER.MONITORING@SFGOV.ORG

ONLINE: HTTPS://WWW.SF.GOV/DEPARTMENTS--SHELTER-MONITORING-COMMITTEE

SOURCE: SF.GOV

February 19, 2025

The Honorable Cindy Elias
Police Commission
San Francisco Police Department Headquarters
1245 3rd Street, 6th floor
San Francisco, CA 94158

Submitted via electronic mail

RE: COMMUNITY CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING THE JESSIE STREET PROJECT

Dear President Elias and Commission Members,

On behalf of the Safer Inside and Treatment on Demand Coalitions — two coalitions dedicated to enhancing the health and well-being of San Francisco's most vulnerable residents — we write to express serious concerns about the San Francisco Police Department's (SFPD) project at the parking lot on Jessie Street. We are a group of community members, service providers, including residents, people with lived experience, family members, advocates, medical professionals, and researchers. Collectively we represent decades of experience working directly with individuals in crisis, offering extensive knowledge of evidence-based strategies proven to improve health outcomes while addressing complex social challenges, including homelessness, behavioral healthcare, and substance use disorder.

The Jessie Street Project was described by Southern Station Captain Luke Martin as having been "thrown together starting about a week ago." While we understand the urgency of addressing pressing community issues related to drug use, we are alarmed by the lack of transparency and strategic planning surrounding this initiative. Our coalition members, who are deeply embedded in serving this community, have questions about the nature of the services to be offered and the potential long-term harms of relying on incarceration as a response to public drug use. This misguided approach is predicated upon the false premise that criminalization is a viable and desired pathway to healing from substance use disorder and reducing overdose risk. Instead, it risks exacerbating the very issues it seeks to resolve.

Lack of Transparency and Community Engagement

There has been minimal community input in the development and implementation of the Jessie Street Project. The abrupt adoption of this initiative has left the community with few details about its processes. This contradicts public health best practices, which emphasize collaborative planning with community stakeholders. Decisions affecting public health and safety must be made transparently and with community involvement, ensuring that the voices of impacted residents are heard and considered. Additionally, if the project relies on arrestees accessing treatment through referrals, the capacity of local providers to accommodate an increase of people who are ambivalent about recovery should have been evaluated, and San Francisco's substance use disorder treatment providers should have been involved in the planning process and afforded additional resources themselves.

Please see the following list of questions that we feel would be helpful in asking SFPD for more transparency:

- How is the coordination happening with treatment services to connect people to appropriate care?
- What linkages to care services will be provided on-site?
- The Journey Home program has been reported as a resource in this project. Is there additional funding going to it due to this project? What are the plans to coordinate with surrounding jurisdictions?
- When will the data of this operation be made available to this body and the public?
- Are folks being arrested and held at the center prior to transport, or are folks voluntarily entering for services/being diverted pre-arrest into services at the center?
- What measures are being taken to avoid putting people who may be immigrants at risk of ICE interaction?

Ineffectiveness of Criminalization & Counterproductive Harms

The Jessie Street Project aims to reduce visible drug use and improve public safety through intensified law enforcement; however, historical data shows that punitive approaches to drug use are largely ineffective. Research indicates that criminalization exacerbates public health outcomes, including overdose risks, infectious disease transmission, and barriers to accessing health services. A Budget and Legislative Analyst (BLA) audit found "little evidence" that similar initiatives had positive impacts on crime or response times. The audit said, "we did not find a significant improvement in response times to 911 calls or trends in crime," despite increased police presence, raising serious questions about the efficacy of enforcement-heavy strategies.

The Drug Market Agency Coordination Center and Detention Pilot Project (DMAC) – an ongoing, similar enforcement-focused initiative – led to a significant increase in incarceration of people who use drugs without effectively connecting individuals to treatment. According to a San Francisco Chronicle review of DMAC data, "In its first year, the San Francisco coordination center's operations resulted in the arrests of 1,284 suspected drug users and 1,008 suspected dealers. Getting people into drug treatment through this method, however, hasn't been successful. Over the past year, only 29 people who were arrested on drug-related charges and booked into San Francisco County Jail asked for assistance with treatment programs." The new Mayoral administration has been explicit about prioritizing accountability and efficiency, and this disconnect underscores the failure of punitive approaches.

Moreover, enforcement-focused strategies can worsen public health outcomes. Research consistently shows that increased policing is "positively associated with drug overdose mortality for all drugs."6 These findings confirm what public health advocates have long suggested: punitive drug policies often lead to higher overdose risks and other public health harms. We cannot arrest our way out of the overdose crisis, and San Francisco Police Chief Bill Scott acknowledged as much in his Chief's Report at the San Francisco Police Commission meeting on June 7, 2023.

Insufficient Evaluation and Accountability

The Jessie Street Project lacks clear metrics for success or mechanisms for public accountability. Without these criteria, it is not possible to equitably assess the project's impact or justify its continuation at the 30 day evaluation meeting. According to the BLA, "SFPD has not established criteria to (a) evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives and whether they are worth the costs of overtime and officer fatigue; (b) guide decision-makers on appropriate levels of or need for police presence and staffing; or (c) scale down or conclude these initiatives once they have achieved their goals." This lack of accountability prevents informed decision-making.

Inappropriate Use of Community Resources

Prioritizing law enforcement responses to public health challenges diverts funding from proven, evidence-based solutions. In a budget deficit like this year existing programs will face funding cuts, limiting their ability to address the complex needs of the community. For example, the DMAC pilot was projected to cost $5.5 million (though actual expenses have not been fully tabulated and made publicly available).10 These funds could have been used to open two overdose prevention centers or provide 120 dual diagnosis beds, which were requested in the last budget cycle.

Criminalization disrupts vital connections between people who use drugs and service providers, which is critical in building trust before connecting people with treatment services. Research shows the risk of overdose for those who have recently been incarcerated is significantly higher following a period of abstinence in jail. Two weeks after release from prison, people are more than 27 times more likely, on average, to die of opioid overdose than the general population. This cycle of arrest and release exacerbates public health risks without addressing root causes thus prolonging the

Jailing people for public drug use wastes critical resources and creates a revolving door of arrest and incarceration. This revolving door puts people right back onto the street, now with a criminal record and a higher overdose risk without having received any services.

Recommendations

The rhetoric surrounding this initiative emphasizes the need for urgent action, implying that criminalization is the only viable solution. We strongly challenge this narrative. San Francisco must immediately invest in evidence-based strategies that reduce harm, promote voluntary treatment, and improve community conditions, including:

- Overdose prevention centers and drug adulterant testing;
- Expanding community-based syringe access programs, including safer use supplies, and naloxone distribution;
- Non-discriminatory access to medications for substance use disorder treatment;
- Overdose reversal medication and prevention trainings;
- Funding to support peer-led programs and tenant-led overdose navigation in supportive housing;
- Support and resourcing for syringe services programs;
- Counseling and outreach to PWUD;
- Housing and subsidies for permanent supportive housing; and,
- Culturally responsive, linguistically accessible, fact-based drug education.

As coalitions with extensive experience in behavioral health and substance use disorder treatment, we urge the Commission to hold the SFPD accountable, push for more data/community transparency, and reconsider this proposal. The City's response must be rooted in effective, evidence-based solutions that prioritize health, equity, and community-centered approaches which will ensure the long term well-being of San Francisco's most vulnerable residents and not just offer a quick fix solution.

We appreciate your attention and are open to engaging in further dialogue to collaboratively develop humane and effective solutions. To discuss our position, please write to Justice Dumlao at jdumlao@sfaf.org.

Sincerely,

Justice Dumlao

Community Mobilization Manager on behalf of the Treatment on Demand and Safer Inside Coalitions

Treatment on Demand Coalition

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DO YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR SHELTER RIGHTS?

SHELTER CLIENT ADVOCATES

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(IN BETWEEN 5TH & 6TH STREET)

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(415) 669-0284

EVICTION DEFENSE COLLABORATIVE

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CONTRIBUTE TO

STREET SHEET

WRITING: Write about your experience of homelessness in San Francisco, about policies you think the City should put in place or change, your opinion on local issues, or about something newsworthy happening in your neighborhood!

ARTWORK: Help transform ART into ACTION by designing artwork for STREET SHEET! We especially love art that uplifts homeless people, celebrates the power of community organizing, or calls out abuses of power!

PHOTOGRAPHY: Have a keen eye for beauty? Love capturing powerful moments at events? Have a photo of a Street Sheet vendor you'd like to share? We would love to run your photos in Street Sheet!

VISIT WWW.STREETSHEET.ORG/SUBMIT-YOUR-WRITING/ OR BRING SUBMISSIONS TO 280 TURK STREET TO BE CONSIDERED

PIECES ASSIGNED BY THE EDITOR MAY OFFER PAYMENT, ASK FOR DETAILS!