

The clock ticks on in the waiting game of health care reform

Mark has been around for years. He has even met my sister, and to this day he still asks about her. She came to visit me during the winter before last, and they spent a cold, clear afternoon in the lobby of The Downtown Chapel, simply hanging out and talking. From time

to time my sister will ask how he's doing, and my answers always feel empty. "He's OK, he is trying to get in to his apartment still...", "He's doing alright; he just got out of the hospital again." This year we have hardly

seen him, and every time he has come in to visit I am both relieved that he is okay, and sad to see that he is still in the same place.

Last winter the place where he was sleeping at night burned to the ground. He was sleeping in the doorway of a building in an industrial section of town, I read about the fire in the newspaper. I think that I was more upset than he was. I remember saying, "Mark, I'm so glad you weren't sleeping there when the fire started." He seemed to shrug off my concern that morning, the look on his face told me *this is the type of thing that is always happening to me; this is the chaos that is my constant companion in this life.*

I have always admired his determination to be positive, despite the circumstances that shape his life. I know very little about him, but what I do know is that his life is hard. He struggles with various mental health issues, and has been working with a number of agencies to help him meet his needs. He is one of the more vulnerable

folks I know, it seems like he is always having stuff stolen or being taken advantage of.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about Mark, with all the talk of health care reform in the news. Mark is dependent upon hospitals and emergency rooms for his primary care, and he is quick to share with who ever will listen about his latest struggles to feel good.

"Lately I've just been soooooo exhausted, like, major exhausted in the most tired kind of way," he shared one morning, as he rested his head in his arms on my desk. He did look tired that day, and like it had been a while since he had an opportunity to rest, eat a good meal, and clean up. At that moment, we were trying to talk to someone at the Housing Authority of Portland. Mark was worried that he had missed some messages, since his new cell phone had recently been stolen. We got through, and there was no news on his housing, but they thanked him for checking in.

I watched Mark and smiled, hoping to put him at ease. He started pulling papers out of his pockets and becoming agitated, "These hospital papers say that I am sick... that I need rest... Sally, if I read these to someone do you think it will matter or will they just thank me for calling?"

Unsure of what to say or do, I asked for the papers and glanced at them, hoping for any clues as to how to help him proceed in advocating for himself. What I saw at the top of the page gave me pause. It read: **Diagnosis — Lack of access to health care and social support. There was no listing of any physical health problems, other than exhaustion, and no treatment prescribed.** I scanned the room; most of the people in the room shared the same diagnosis.

My eyes fell on Leanne, who often needs our help in paying for prescription medications she has not been able to afford for a while. She tries to make ends meet on her fixed income, but prices for everything have been going up this year. Next to her was Jamie, who we recently helped with tickets to the ER because the pain in his infected tooth had become unbearable. "What I need is a dentist, but I am on the waiting list at the clinic for an extraction." As I looked at each person, my mind was flooded with more memories: when I had to



Sally Martin
FROM THE
DOWNTOWN
CHAPEL

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call the paramedics for Whitney when she had a seizure, one of the paramedics said, "Oh gosh, Whitney, this is the third time we've seen you this week."

I am not naive enough to believe that health care reform is a fix-all solution to the many-faceted problems people face. However, I speak for many people I've known when I say that health care reform that provides greater access to regular, preventative care will make a difference in many lives. It is my hope that this change is coming, and that it won't be too late.

We've lost sight of the value of healthy communities

BY PAUL BODEN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

At some point in history, people will look back on American responses to homelessness during the '80s, '90s and early 2000s and most assuredly they will wonder "What the hell were these people thinking?"

The notion that local governments can protect downtown business interests from having to bear witness to the realities of poverty by simply criminalizing the presence of poor people harkens back to the days of Jim Crow Laws, Anti-Okie laws, Alms houses and "Let them eat cake."

From Portland's sit-lie and anti-camping laws to Berkeley's Public Commons for Everyone(?) to L.A.'s Safer Cities Initiative and San Francisco's perpetual "Matrix"-style police enforcement, we are seeing a hardening of the premise that public space is the purview of the Business community and that the only people who are seen to have any right to that space are those that the businesses see as potential customers or Condo tenants.

This concept is advancing to the stage of class warfare. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) (sometimes calling themselves

Community Benefits Districts) are able to self tax themselves and then control how those tax dollars are spent within their district: they hire security that are authorized to function in public areas (even though they are not under public oversight or monitoring), and they use the tax money they collect to directly lobby government

You have heard talk about "letting no crisis go to waste," talk that within our current economic meltdown there is opportunity. But opportunity for whom?

Not for poor people. Not for people without housing or for families living in cars or for individuals in hotels who are being criminalized out of their communities. It's the BIDs who are finding more and more opportunities to expand their agenda of displacing poor people so they can enhance profit margins and advance downtown gentrification.

Los Angeles, San Francisco and Berkeley are cities that pride themselves on being enlightened and progressive. But our self-image does not reflect our reality.

A report just released by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty and the National Coalition for the Homeless, "Homes Not Handcuffs," ranks these three California

cities among the top 10 meanest cities in the country. Los Angeles comes in on top, San Francisco is seventh, and Berkeley is the tenth among 273 cities listed.

Homelessness is a spreading and deepening crisis in all of our communities. To deal with it by criminalizing people is ineffective, inhumane, and incredibly expensive. It is also just plain mean.

Fighting back is what we do. We will not disappear and we will not cease to exist. We will continue to organize, to educate, to represent in court and to build alliances with our brothers and sisters across the country. We will demand a government that values the humanity of all people. A government that sees quality education, health care and housing as bringing value to a community and prioritizes ensuring it exists. We will see the day when the value of a healthy community has the same importance that the value of profits for corporations has today.

That day is coming. Join us and it will get here that much sooner.

Paul Boden is the executive director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project based in San Francisco, Calif. More information is at www.wraphome.org

MEAN STREETS

A new report by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty and the National Coalition for the Homeless looks at ordinances in 224 cities across the U.S. from 2007 and 2008 to develop a list of the meanest cities towards the homeless.

The Top 10 Meanest U.S. Cities are:

1. Los Angeles, CA
2. St. Petersburg, FL
3. Orlando, FL
4. Atlanta, GA
5. Gainesville, FL
6. Kalamazoo, MI
7. San Francisco, CA
8. Honolulu, HI
9. Bradenton, FL
10. Berkeley, CA



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