

Homelessness, by the book

Understanding three decades of homeless-creating policies and what we can all do to change it

BY ISRAEL BAYER
AND MONICA BEEMER

It's hard to cut through the never-ending news cycles that bombard us daily to deliver a message. If your organization lacks resources and political clout, it becomes even harder to be heard. If the message has anything to do with human rights and homelessness, forget about it.

In a time when many Americans find themselves on the brink of economic collapse, individuals and families are looking at a horizon dotted with issues that affect their way of life but feel absolutely powerless to do anything about it.

The media, in all its forms, delivers headlines by the second about natural disasters, the global economy and soldiers who die fighting for a war we barely understand. Meanwhile, in households from Peoria to Portland, the realities of daily life set in; loss of jobs, massive foreclosures, and the loss of unemployment benefits — ultimately, for hundreds of thousands of Americans, the loss of any safety net whatsoever. Homelessness.

In 1979, the Department of Housing and Urban Development spent \$77.3 billion in today's dollars developing and maintaining housing to ensure all people could afford a place to live. Yet since 1995, the federal government has done nothing while more than 500,000 of these units have been lost, and an additional 335,000 could disappear this year.

In 2009, roughly 3.4 million families experienced foreclosures — 60 percent caused by unemployment. This year, as many as 3.5 million people will experience homelessness in the United States — a number that has been increasing since the Wall Street collapse and government bailout of the banks, and in the midst of the Bush administration's 10-year plan to end homelessness. To put this into perspective, the federal government's discretionary military spending is at \$663.8 billion dollars.

The Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP), a group of grassroots homeless organizations based in California and Oregon is releasing an in-depth updated version of "Without Housing: Decades of Federal Housing Cutbacks, Massive

Homelessness and Policy Failures."

The popular report was first released in 2006, and has become a staple for politicians, scholars, think-tanks, poverty organizations and the general public to track the rise of modern-day homelessness. From the Ronald Reagan era in the 1980s, when the federal government dismantled the social safety net, to the present day, the report outlines the past three decades of policy failures that have led us to this point.

More importantly, the new report gives an abridged history of homelessness dating back to the 1929 stock market crash when more than one million people found themselves without homes, and details on how the United States effectively responded to the crisis by creating both urban and rural housing programs to systemically change the face of homelessness. The updated report is not only a roadmap into the past, but is also a fresh look at the present-day realities of homelessness in America. By highlighting both the local and federal responses to homelessness we see how people experiencing homelessness and mental health have been systematically stripped of their human rights. We also see in the report a roadmap for the future, and how we can effectively fight poverty by systemically changing how the system is structured.

Currently, local and state governments who are strapped, and in many cases on the verge of financial collapse due to the recession, are throwing millions of local dollars at the problem. For three decades, cities and counties across America have been on the hook for the federal government's dismantling of a housing safety net. Yet, both Democrats and Republicans at the federal level continue to fall short of delivering the necessary resources for local communities to stabilize the situation.

Local municipalities have created laws that dehumanize and criminalize the masses locally who simply have no place left to go. County jails have become this country's largest residential mental health facilities. Police enforcement has replaced treatment and courts are being staffed with social workers. Chambers of commerce spend as

much as 74 percent of their budgets on private security and have become proficient in the business of drafting anti-homeless laws. Shelters have become an institutionalized tier of our country's housing stock and social workers are expected to "fix" broken people rather than address social inequality and access to treatment. Homelessness has become institutionalized.

WRAP looks at these different quagmires, and offers a grassroots approach to getting involved, and possible solutions to what has become the everyday crisis we know as homelessness. We respectfully demand a change. Millions of hard-working people without shelter are depending on it. We deserve the opportunity.

You can download a copy of the report at www.wraphome.org.

Sisters Of The Road and Street Roots are founding members of the Western Regional Advocacy Project. Monica Beemer is the Executive Director of Sisters Of The Road.

2010 UPDATE

WESTERN REGIONAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

WITHOUT HOUSING

DECADES OF FEDERAL HOUSING CUTBACKS

MASSIVE HOMELESSNESS

AND POLICY FAILURES



2940 16th Street, Suite 200-2, San Francisco, CA 94103 • phone: 415.621.2533 • www.wraphome.org



Copies of "Without Housing: Decades of Federal Housing Cutbacks, Massive Homelessness and Policy Failures," are available online at www.wraphome.org. They are also available in book form for \$10 for a single copy, \$7 each for 10 or more copies, and \$5 each for 50 or more copies. (Available for \$5 or less for low- or no-income folks)

To receive your copy, send check or money order to:
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San Francisco, CA 94103

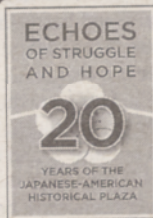
ARTS — for — JUSTICE

Confronting Modern Day Slavery

Sunday, July 25th, 2010, 3:00-7:00pm, South Park Blocks

The PACIFIC CENTER FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE invites you to Arts for Justice: Confronting Modern Day Slavery. The program takes place on the campus of Portland State University, adjacent to Smith Memorial Center, between SW Harrison & Montgomery. No prior registration is necessary. All are welcome. Admission is free.

You're invited to join the celebration



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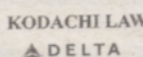
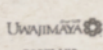
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5:00 PM HISTORICAL PLAZA • REDEDICATION CEREMONY

featuring Justice Michael Gillette, Oregon Supreme Court; Lawson Inada, former Oregon Poet Laureate; Portland Taiko and the Minidoka Swing Band

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