

October 11, 2024

To: AB32 Environmental Justice Advisory Committee

From: Muriel Strand, P.E.

Re: **Environmental Justice for Homeless People**

While I had been aware for years of the growing populations of homeless people, it was at the beginning of covid that I began attending the zoom meetings of advocates for the homeless, such as the Sacramento Homeless Organizing Committee and the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness.

Though I have not played an active role in direct and badly needed support for homeless people, I have observed various and diverse aspects of the situation, and noted that the scapegoating and stigma associated with homeless people is substantial and totally counterproductive.

**It appears to me that there are 2 major populations of homeless people.** There are those who have been traumatized by more than their share of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and similar issues such as the near-total defunding of mental institutions nationwide. This population has been growing since I attended college near People's Park in Berkeley.

**More recently, there are the working poor who have been destabilized by lacking the \$500 to cling to the neoliberal capitalist merry-go-round when confronted by a big rent increase, car crash, health crisis, layoff, divorce, etc.** More that a few of those people continue to work as long as they can until local governments take the cars or tents they are trying to live in. The passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, aka 'welfare reform,' has effectively defunded the social safety net of Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Some of the most disturbing fallout of our national surrender in the War on Poverty are detailed in Daniel Hatcher's recent book, "Injustice, Inc." And now Project 2025 wants to defund SNAP.

It's not news that many manufacturing jobs (along with the capital equipment for manufacturing) have been exported to low-wage nations such as Mexico and China. Automation has also played an increasing role in the loss of working-class jobs. More recently, the Poor People's Campaign has begun to call more attention to these problems, in particular to the way that societal elites have used racism to divide and conquer the working class, which the Rev. Dr. William J. Barber has described in detail in his recent book, "White Poverty: How Exposing Myths About Race and Class Can Reconstruct American Democracy."

It appears to me that the initial concept for helping the homeless by providing temporary shelter was based on the assumption that they could soon and readily re-enter the working world. However, this philosophy seems to be persisting, though societal conditions have intensified economic stresses to what I believe is a breaking point.

**Local government responses to homelessness are mostly driven by the concerns of chambers of commerce and paranoid neighborhood residents who just want the homeless people to disappear.** Thus, local governments concentrate on sweeping away their

encampments, throwing away all their stuff including birth certificates and ID. This counterproductive strategy is based on unrealistic local ordinances which effectively criminalize homelessness by banning almost everything homeless people are doing to try to survive, and then levying unpayable and compounding fines for the inevitable violations.

In addition, much of the funding that is allocated to the homelessness problem is sucked up by staff costs, for cops, courts, lawyers, jails, and, oh yeah, a few social workers. It's unknown how much is spent on garbage disposal costs for stealing and trashing of homeless people's meager belongings. **Local governments show minimal interest in audits of such wasteful spending.**

Not surprisingly, homeless people have few other healthcare options than emergency rooms, more public expenses due to these totally impractical policies. **Yet the implicit assumption in healthcare models is that patients have homes, kitchens, bathrooms, and jobs. So physicians can't write prescriptions for these health essentials** but can only send homeless people back to the streets with prescriptions they can't afford.

While drafting my comments on Sacramento County's proposed Climate Action Plan, I noticed that the county's position paper on Environmental Justice is focused on 4 low-income neighborhoods in Sacramento. Unfortunately, homeless people are unable to reside anywhere for more than a few days before being evicted due to invasions by government staff of the unregistered cars and donated tents that are the only homes available to far too many.

**All this is the background for my earnest entreaty to the Environmental Justice Advisory Committee to add homeless people to the list of economically challenged groups in your portfolio.** This is a statewide concern, as California is home to more than our share of the total homeless population nationwide. If we can't even manage to handle current homeless populations we will be toast when the climate refugees really start showing up

The economic model of neoliberal capitalism assumes that anything that makes money is an economic good. But **putting profits first means mission creep**, widespread opportunism, widespread desperation, a \$35 trillion national debt, and a nation where almost everyone thinks the country is going in the wrong direction—but with a huge divide on how to achieve the functional economy that could support healthy communities and happy families for all.

Brooke Harrington's recent book, "Offshore: Stealth Wealth and the New Colonialism," details how the ultra-wealthy 0.1% conceal their loot in secret stashes, deluding themselves that they 'did it all themselves' and that paying taxes is unfair.

All these factors create a fertile field for demagoguery, whether by populists or the prosperous.