

# COMPASSION WITH RESULTS

## ACTION PLAN ON HOMELESSNESS FOR AMERICAN CITIES

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cities across the United States are struggling to address the homelessness crisis. The latest point-in-time survey found 552,830 people experiencing homelessness in the United States, including 194,467 people living unsheltered in tents, cars, and on the streets.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to provide a roadmap for immediate impact for American cities and counties on the issue of homelessness. We propose a plan that will dramatically reduce public camping, drug consumption, and street disorder within 30 to 60 days of implementation. While the long-term goals for subsidized and permanent supportive housing are necessary components of public policy in many jurisdictions, we believe these plans must be supplemented with the short-term objectives of creating an emergency “safe ground” facility and adopting a policy of “compassionate enforcement” that will deliver immediate results to the citizens, families, and homeless individuals across the country.

In contrast to jurisdictions like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle, which have spent billions of dollars per year on homelessness and have only seen the problem worsen,<sup>2</sup> this paper will argue that “unlimited compassion” is the road to ruin. Our goal is to present city and county governments with an alternative that will take care of those in need and, at the same time, create a community that is safe, clean, and vibrant for everyone.

We have modeled this plan on best practices from cities that have delivered cost-effective and rapid results:

- Modesto, California, moved 400 people into a “safe ground” emergency shelter within 30 days and reduced quality-of-life crimes by 83%.
- Burien, Washington, completely eliminated camping in public parks within 30 days through a low-cost policy of “compassionate enforcement.”
- San Diego, California, built an emergency shelter and moved 700 people off the streets within 60 days through a public-private partnership.

In this policy paper, we propose a series of short- and long-term measures that will help people in distress, comply with the *Martin v Boise* decision, and dramatically reduce the social disorder associated with street homelessness:

1. Immediately build a “safe ground” facility for the unsheltered population
2. Adopt a policy of “compassionate enforcement”
3. Enforce a strict ban on public camping
4. Implement policies to mitigate the addiction crisis
5. Orient services around a philosophy of transformation
6. Provide paid work opportunities for people in need
7. Lobby for conservatorship for the severely mentally ill

Voters in communities with high rates of homelessness deserve action. Cities and counties have the opportunity to make tangible and immediate progress. Let’s get to work.

1 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *2018 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*, December 2018

2 Marc Stiles and Coral Garnick, “The Price of Homelessness: The Seattle area spends more than \$1 billion a year on this humanitarian crisis,” Puget Sound Business Journal, November 16, 2017

# 1 IMMEDIATELY BUILD A “SAFE GROUND” FACILITY FOR THE UNSHELTERED POPULATION



## **The most urgent goal for homelessness policy is to get people off the streets and into shelter.**

While permanent supportive housing is a critical component of many cities' long-term plans, these units will take years to come online and may not have enough capacity for everyone on the streets. In the meantime, this long-term strategy must be supplemented with a short-term strategy of constructing emergency facilities that can immediately provide shelter for all of the men and women on the streets.

## **We recommend that cities immediately create a “safe ground” facility that can accommodate the unsheltered population.**

In Modesto, California, city officials and private charities worked together to quickly build a fenced “safe ground” facility with uniform 10x10 blue tents, 24/7 security, portable bathrooms and showers, food service provided by nonprofits, and access to extensive public services.<sup>3</sup> This allowed the City of Modesto to immediately move 400 individuals off the streets and into the new outdoor emergency shelter, where they were registered in the HMIS system and provided access to rehousing, medical care, and mental health services. As a result, police and city crews were able to remove illegal encampments throughout the city, and the city experienced an 83% drop in quality-of-life crimes associated with unsheltered homelessness.<sup>4</sup>

In cities and counties with high rates of homelessness, we recommend purchasing Qamp tents and contracting with fencing, sanitation, and security companies to provide the essential infrastructure for a “safe ground” facility, which can be constructed in less than 30 days. The Qamp emergency tents, which were donated to the City of Modesto, can be purchased commercially for less than \$400 apiece.<sup>5</sup> With a secure “safe ground” facility in place, cities and counties can “flood the zone” with existing resources, provide triage services to connect the homeless with the appropriate programs, and create cost efficiencies that will help more people escape homelessness.

## **If new funding is difficult or time-consuming to secure, we recommend that mayors and city councilmembers petition local businesses and philanthropies for private contributions.**

In San Diego, two local businessmen provided the initial funding for a new emergency shelter facility, which enabled the city to expedite their plans on homelessness. We believe that business leaders in American cities will quickly rally to support a cost-effective plan that will deliver immediate reductions in unsheltered homelessness and street disorder.

3 Modesto Bee Editorial Board, “Why Modesto’s homeless tent city deserves praise,” *Modesto Bee*, September 1, 2019

4 Modesto Bee Editorial Board, “Our View: Salvation Army, Modesto, Stanislaus County came together and got it right” *Modesto Bee*, March 11, 2019

5 Qamp, “A Temporary Tiny House,” September 2019, <https://qamp.com/>

# 2 | ADOPT A POLICY OF “COMPASSIONATE ENFORCEMENT”



## **The attitude towards homelessness and its associated street disorder is rapidly shifting in American cities.**

Residents in cities like Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and San Diego have realized that tolerance of public camping has often turned into permissiveness and greatly degraded the quality of life in many neighborhoods:

- According to recent public polling data, 53% of Seattle voters now support a “zero-tolerance policy” on homeless encampments.<sup>6</sup>
- In Denver, voters recently rejected a “right to camp” initiative by an 81% to 19% margin, with strong opposition to the proposal from the business community.<sup>7</sup>
- In San Francisco, former Mayor Mark Farrell summed up this shift in public opinion: “We have moved as a city from a position of compassion to enabling street behavior. We have offered services time and time again and gotten many off the streets, but there is a resistant population that remains, and their tents have to go. Enough is enough.”<sup>8</sup>

## **We recommend a policy of “compassionate enforcement” to move the street homeless into shelter and reduce street disorder.**

We recommend that cities and counties increase the size of their homeless outreach teams, give them the authority to enforce the law, and put an end to camping in public spaces. The “compassionate enforcement” approach has delivered results in other cities:

- In San Diego, the city was able to build a new emergency shelter and move 700 people off the streets within 60 days through a policy of outreach and enforcement.<sup>9</sup>
- In San Francisco, local leaders have reduced illegal tent encampments by more than 50% through a combination of providing services and enforcing a zero tolerance policy for street camping, panhandling, trespassing, and property crime.<sup>10</sup>
- In Burien, Washington, city officials have completely eliminated camping in public parks by securing emergency shelter, conducting outreach, and providing campers with a strict 72-hour notice to vacate.<sup>11</sup>

6 Vianna Davila and Vernal Coleman, “In new poll on homelessness, Seattle area favors compassion but distrusts politicians,” *Seattle Times*, January 11, 2019

7 Christopher Rufo, “Pushback,” *City Journal*, Summer 2019

8 Danny Westneat, “The sirens are sounding on homelessness. Just not here.,” *Seattle Times*, April 25, 2018

9 Ibid.

10 Vianna Davila, “San Francisco is cracking down on tent camps. Will Seattle do the same?,” *Seattle Times*, September 20, 2018

11 Christopher Rufo, “Enforcement Works,” *City Journal*, August 23, 2019



# 3 | ENFORCE A STRICT BAN ON PUBLIC CAMPING

**We recommend modeling city and county policies on a successful program in Burien, Washington, that has eliminated camping in public parks.**

Recently, Burien, Washington, launched a successful pilot program that can serve as a model for cities and counties across the country. City Manager Brian Wilson created a simple plan “designed to balance the rights of people living unsheltered with the City’s responsibility to maintain public health and safety.”<sup>12</sup> The plan required outreach teams and law enforcement to:

- Maintain a list of open shelter beds to comply with the *Martin v Boise* decision
- Conduct outreach and offer shelter and services to everyone on the streets
- Provide a 72-hour notice to vacate to individuals camping in parks
- Strictly enforce the law against camping in parks and public spaces
- Arrest any individual who repeatedly refused to comply with the camping ban

**Compassionate, low-cost enforcement can change the incentive structure and immediately deliver results.**

Burien Police Chief Ted Boe, who estimated that there were between 50 and 100 homeless individuals in Burien prior to the pilot program, sent outreach teams to meet with the homeless for 30 days prior to implementation of the policy. During the outreach period, six people accepted services and, according to Boe, “the vast majority of people vacated the parks knowing this was coming.” By the time the city gave the final 72-hour notice, there were only 27 people who had remained in the parks. After an additional offer of shelter, services, and transportation, 26 people voluntarily moved on and, after repeatedly refusing to comply, one man was arrested.<sup>13</sup>

Today, according to city officials, there is zero camping in the city’s parks. At the council meetings after implementation of the program, many residents have testified that there has been a significant improvement in their neighborhoods. Burien did not have to build new housing units or add new social programs—they simply had to coordinate the existing resources of law enforcement, social services, and the nonprofit sector towards the goal of immediately reducing street homelessness and its associated disorder.

<sup>12</sup> City of Burien, “Pilot Program to Connect Unsheltered to Services,” May 1, 2019  
<sup>13</sup> Christopher Rufo, “Enforcement Works,” *City Journal*, August 23, 2019



# 4 | IMPLEMENT POLICIES TO MITIGATE THE ADDICTION CRISIS

**West Coast cities are beginning to see a rapid increase in addiction and crime associated with homelessness.<sup>14</sup>**

In King County, prosecutors and law enforcement recently estimated that the majority of the homeless population in the region is addicted to opioids including heroin and fentanyl.<sup>15</sup> For the unsheltered population living in tents, cars, and RVs, the percentages are even higher—the City of Seattle’s homeless outreach team estimates that 80% of the unsheltered population in difficult encampments have a substance abuse disorder, and outreach workers find used needles in virtually all of the homeless encampments they clean up.<sup>16</sup>

Assuming that these figures hold constant throughout the West Coast, we estimate that heroin and fentanyl sales to the homeless population of California, Oregon, and Washington is a \$1.8 billion annual business.<sup>17</sup> This has created a massive black market that is funded in large part through property crime, such as theft, burglary, and shoplifting. According to data from King County Jail and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, homeless individuals are 38 times more likely to commit crimes than the average citizen,<sup>18</sup> and roughly 4 in 10 state prisoners and jail inmates committed crimes in order to fund their drug addictions.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, many cities have pursued a policy of decriminalization that has led to a significant increase in public disorder. As Seattle’s former top crime adviser Scott Lindsey recently reported: “The increase in street disorder is largely a function of the fact that [hardcore drug] possession has been largely legalized in the city over the past several years. The unintended consequence of that social policy effort has been to make Seattle a much more attractive place to buy and sell hardcore drugs.”<sup>20</sup>

**To mitigate the impact of addiction, we recommend prioritizing recovery programs and eliminating policies that create a “magnet effect.”**

The solution to the homelessness crisis is not to decriminalize public camping and drug consumption, which has created a “magnet effect” in cities across the West Coast. In Seattle, 51% of the city’s homeless population came from outside the city limits, including 9.5% who came “for legal marijuana,” 15.4% who came “to access homeless services,” and 15.7% who were “traveling or visiting” the region and decided that it was a good place to set up camp.<sup>21</sup> Academic studies in cities like San Francisco<sup>22</sup> and Vancouver, BC,<sup>23</sup> suggest that at least 40% to 50% of the homeless moved to those cities in search of a permissive culture and generous services.

Cities and counties should pursue a strategy that eliminates perverse incentives and expands access to on-demand detox, rehabilitation, and recovery programs that help people overcome their addictions. Leaders must work to get people off the streets and into treatment, not allow them to live in public spaces in perpetuity.

14 Christopher Rufo, “An Addiction Crisis Disguised as a Housing Crisis,” *City Journal*, June 14, 2019

15 *King County v Purdue Pharma*, Superior Court of Washington in and for King County, January 5, 2018

16 *City of Seattle v Purdue Pharma*, Superior Court of Washington in and for King County, January 5, 2018

17 Christopher Rufo, “An Addiction Crisis Disguised as a Housing Crisis,” *City Journal*, June 14, 2019

18 David Kroman, “In Seattle, 1 in 5 people booked into jail are homeless,” *Crosscut*, February 19, 2019

19 Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Drug Use, Dependence, and Abuse Among State Prisoners and Jail Inmates, 2007-2009*, June 2017

20 Daniel Beekman, “How to fight downtown crime? New strategy amid debate,” *Seattle Times*, April 16, 2015

21 *City of Seattle*, 2016 Homeless Needs Assessment, March 2017

22 Jennifer Amanda Jones, “Problems Migrate: Lessons from San Francisco’s Homeless Population Survey,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, June 26, 2013

23 Julian M Somers, Akm Moniruzzaman, Stefanie N Rezansoff, “Migration to the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood of Vancouver and changes in service use in a cohort of mentally ill homeless adults: a 10-year retrospective study,” *BMJ Open*, 2016

# 5

## ORIENT SERVICES AROUND A PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSFORMATION

**At heart, homelessness is a human crisis that can only be solved through human relationships.**

Alice Baum and Donald Burnes, who wrote the definitive book on homelessness, put it this way: "Homelessness is a condition of disengagement from ordinary society—from family, friends, neighborhood, church, and community... Homelessness occurs when people no longer have relationships; they have drifted into isolation, often running away from the support networks they could count on in the past."<sup>24</sup>

The most successful organizations and outreach workers build relationships with the homeless and offer a path for personal transformation. Community First in Austin, Texas, is one of the most successful nonprofit service providers in the nation. Their low-cost housing community for the homeless has shown an 80% drop in drug use and a 60% drop in alcohol use among its residents. As founder Alan Graham says: "Housing will never solve homelessness, but community will."<sup>25</sup> Community First focuses on building relationships, providing opportunities for dignified work, and helping individuals overcome their personal challenges to meet their full potential.

**We recommend creating a weekly "resource center" that brings together government agencies, nonprofit service providers, and the faith community.**

In Burien's successful pilot program to reduce street camping, the city's first step was to conduct outreach to the homeless population and establish a coalition of nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and shelter providers to offer a weekly "resource center" for anyone in need. For Colleen Brandt-Schluter, the city's human services manager, building relationships is the critical component. "We're out with our outreach workers twice a month, officers out daily, building relationships with people, trying to understand what's not working with the system," she says. "That's really building that trust with people. When enough relationship is built, there's a willingness to consider an alternative [to sleeping in the streets]."<sup>26</sup>

For city and county policymakers, we recommend further coordination between human services, law enforcement, service providers, and the faith community to establish a shared framework around the philosophy of transformation. Our belief is that the vast majority of homeless individuals have tremendous potential and that cities should orient public policy towards this goal. As we have learned from leaders like Alan Graham in Austin, the opposite of homelessness is not just housing—it's human connection.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Baum and Donald Burnes, *A Nation In Denial: The Truth About Homelessness*, 1993

<sup>25</sup> Alan Graham, personal interview with the author, July 2019

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Rufo, "Enforcement Works," *City Journal*, August 23, 2019

# 6

## PROVIDE PAID WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE IN NEED

**While many homeless individuals would like to work, the vast majority of the homeless population is not working full-time and earning an independent income.**

Recent survey data in West Coast cities suggests that upwards of 90% of the unsheltered homeless are unemployed.<sup>27</sup> In King County, for example, only 7.5% of all homeless individuals report having full-time work—many have lost jobs or become disabled, but most have dropped out of the labor force because of addiction, incarceration, family breakdown, emotional trauma, and other causes.<sup>28</sup>

This doesn't mean cities should "blame the victim" or withdraw support—it simply means that city leaders must be honest about the problem if they hope to solve it.

**We recommend launching a public-private partnership that offers a \$15-per-hour job cleaning the streets to everyone in the emergency shelter system.**

In New York City, the Doe Fund has helped 22,000 homeless and incarcerated men transform their lives through dignified work, cleaning the streets and learning basic employment skills.<sup>29</sup> The program provides a foundation for financial independence and a roadmap for better employment in the future.

We recommend that cities and counties work with nonprofit service providers to coordinate employment and oversee the beautification of downtown streets. This kind of program would not only provide economic opportunity for the homeless, but would help maintain city infrastructure and reduce the risk of transmission of infectious diseases such as typhus, tuberculosis, and trench fever that have begun to spread in cities like Los Angeles.<sup>30</sup>

**The ultimate goal of homelessness policy should not be to provide shelter, but to provide a pathway to self-sufficiency.**

We recommend that public officials make it easier for private nonprofits to experiment with new ideas and launch new programs that will help the homeless enter shelter, overcome addiction, reunite with family, and gain employment. Many nonprofits would benefit from a reduction in red tape that would lower their costs of operation and allow greater flexibility for providing services and helping people on the path to independence.

<sup>27</sup> Regional Task Force on the Homeless, *2017 Wellcount Annual Report*, 2017

<sup>28</sup> All Home, *Seattle/King County Point-in-Time Out of Persons Experiencing Homelessness*, 2017

<sup>29</sup> Isaac Saul, "How Do We Keep People From Going Back To Prison? One Organization Thinks It's Cracked The Code," *A Plus*, April 13, 2017

<sup>30</sup> Anna Gorman, "Medieval Diseases Are Infecting California's Homeless," *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2019

# 7 LOBBY FOR CONSERVATORSHIP FOR THE SEVERELY MENTALLY ILL

**There is a growing consensus that our 50-year experiment with “deinstitutionalization” has failed.**

Although advocates for “deinstitutionalization” highlighted important civil rights violations in the mental hospital system in the 1950s and 1960s, the federal and state governments have gone too far in the other direction, eliminating a crucial treatment option for people with serious mental illnesses.

According to the Treatment Advocacy Center, there has been a 97% reduction in state mental hospital beds since 1955,<sup>31</sup> which has caused tens of thousands of mentally ill Americans to end up on the streets and in the criminal justice system. Recent analysis from Mental Illness Policy Org concludes that 25% of the homeless have a severe mental illness—predominantly schizophrenia and bipolar disorder—and 45% of the homeless have a mental illness of any kind.<sup>32</sup> It’s not compassionate to let these individuals remain on the streets without treatment and support.

**Cities and counties should join state-based activists in encouraging state legislatures to pass a “conservatorship law” for the dangerously mentally ill.**

Washington State recently passed positive mental health reforms like emergency involuntary commitment<sup>33</sup> and is opening new psychiatric beds in local communities,<sup>34</sup> but states must go one step further and consider conservatorships for the gravely mentally ill, including some of the street homeless who present a danger to themselves or others and have no capacity to take care of themselves.

Recently, San Francisco passed a pioneering measure that gives local mental health officials the power to provide conservatorship to individuals who are “gravely disabled (unable to provide for their food, clothing, or shelter) due to mental disease and who have been found by the Court unable or unwilling to accept voluntary treatment.”<sup>35</sup>

While mental health funding is predominantly a federal and state issue, it is also a crucial component of addressing the homelessness crisis in local communities. City and county governments must demand better treatment options for their severely mentally ill residents who have become homeless through no fault of their own.

31 Treatment Advocacy Center, “Psychiatric Bed Shortages,” <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/key-issues/bed-shortages>

32 Mental Illness Policy Org, “Homeless Mentally Ill Facts and Figures,” <https://mentalillnesspolicy.org/consequences/homeless-mentally-ill.html>

33 Heather Graf, “Involuntary commitment law goes into effect in Washington,” *KING5*, March 29, 2016

34 Joseph O’Sullivan, “Gov. Inslee pushes to add psychiatric beds around Washington state,” *Seattle Times*, May 11, 2018

35 City and County of San Francisco Human Services Agency, Public Conservator, <https://www.sfhsa.org/services/care-support/public-conservator>



## CONCLUSION

### **City and county governments on the West Coast are rapidly approaching a crisis of confidence on homelessness.**

Citizens in cities like San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, and Denver recognize that homelessness deserves greater public attention, but have started to turn against the agenda of massive new spending and mass decriminalization of public camping, drug consumption, and low-level property crimes, which has led to a growing breakdown in public order.<sup>36</sup>

In King County, 62% of voters now believe the problem is getting worse because local government “wastes money by being inefficient,” “is not accountable for how the money is spent,” and “too many resources are spent on the wrong approaches to the problem.” Despite recent support for new tax levies on education, transportation, parks, and libraries, only 7% of Seattle voters believe the government is “not spending enough to really solve the [homelessness] problem.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Cities and counties have the opportunity to strike a different course and make an immediate visible impact on homelessness.**

In the long term, many regions have laid out ambitious plans for subsidized housing and expansion of services. But in the near term, city and county governments must shift towards a policy of realism. Political leaders must acknowledge that “compassion without limits” will not solve the crisis and must balance concern for the homeless with concern for the broader community.

Ultimately, the success or failure of local government is a back-to-basics proposition: are the streets clean? Are neighborhoods safe? Are people able to live, work, and raise their families in a healthy environment? Cities and counties have the resources to contain the homelessness crisis—now is the time to take action.

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Rufo, “Pushback,” *City Journal*, Summer 2019

<sup>37</sup> Vianna Davila and Vernal Coleman, “In new poll on homelessness, Seattle area favors compassion but distrusts politicians,” *Seattle Times*, January 11, 2019

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher F. Rufo is a former research fellow at Discovery Institute's Center on Wealth & Poverty. He has directed four films for PBS, including his latest film, *America Lost*, which tells the story of three forgotten American cities.

Discovery Institute is a Seattle-based public policy think tank with the mission of connecting the practical truths of economics with the perennial truths of ethics. Discovery Institute's Center on Wealth & Poverty promotes thoughtful analysis and effective action on local, regional, national, and international issues.

*This paper has adapted previous work for Discovery Institute and City Journal. Stock photos courtesy of Unsplash.*



Discovery Institute's Center on Wealth & Poverty is leading a research project on homelessness, addiction, and mental illness. Our mission is to help city leaders, business owners, and neighborhood organizations meaningfully reduce homelessness and improve lives.

Major cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles have failed to tackle this issue, despite billions in public spending. We believe there is a better way.

Our research helps cities to reduce street homelessness, maintain public order, and rebuild human lives — all within existing budgets.

**For more information visit: [Fixhomelessness.org](http://Fixhomelessness.org)**