

NCH . NEWS . . .

NATIONAL COALITION FOR THE HOMELESS | 2201 P St NW | Washington, DC 20037
 Phone: 202.462.4822 | Fax: 202.462.4823 | INFO@NATIONALHOMELESS.ORG | WWW.NATIONALHOMELESS.ORG

NCH News -- August 2008

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Forgotten Faces

A poem by Brenda Whitmire, *NCH News* reader

In amongst the pile of debris,
 There lies a body that is crying out for humanity

People walk by and never say "hi",
 To a forgotten face left on the street to die

A lithe arm reaches out in the air,
 In hopes that someone will answer their prayer

A warm place to rest one's head,
 A hot meal and a comfortable bed

The things we take for granted in our everyday life,
 Is what they need in their poverty and strife

Won't someone reach out and care?
 To a world that's without and in despair?

What does it take to see?
 What is before you and me?

When you see a face looking up to you in dismay,
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Stop a moment and smile and wish them a good day

For we are all connected in some way,
Reach out and touch a person in need today

NCH Welcomes Davis Greene

This month, the National Coalition for the Homeless is joined by intern Davis Greene, a 21-year-old senior Political Science major at Davidson College.

Davis first learned of NCH from a presentation by current Executive Director Michael Stoops during his freshman year. Since then, he has been involved in social justice causes through the group Engage from Change, and has led an Alternative Break trip to Washington, DC for NCH's Urban Plunge.

During his time at NCH, Davis will be producing materials to promote NCH's Homeless Challenge program, as well as conduct research on opportunities for political action among people experiencing homelessness.

Through his work, Davis hopes to gain more knowledge of advocacy work. In the future, he would like to pursue more formal education in a related area, such as Public Policy or Peace and Conflict Studies.

National Alliance to End Homelessness Conference July 28-30



The National Alliance to End Homelessness will hold its Annual Conference July 28-30 at the Hyatt Regency Capitol Hill.

The Conference will feature numerous workshops on issues of concern to people experiencing homelessness, advocates and service providers, ranging from data analysis to Website administration. In addition, the last day of the Conference will provide the opportunity to meet with lawmakers in the nation's capital.

To register for the Conference, visit <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/calendar/detail/1874>.

Civil Rights Won for Alaska Homeless **By Rebecca Ratner, NCH intern**

On September 11th 2005, three teenagers brutally attacked Ulak Hope, a homeless man living in Fairbanks, Alaska. Hope suffered multiple facial fractures after being beaten with a baseball bat. Police say the attack was unprovoked.

The issue of hate crimes against homeless people is not a new one, and the National Coalition for the Homeless has been working on the issue for quite some time. According to a report put out by NCH on state incidences regarding abuse of the homeless, the United States had 160 anti-homeless attacks in 2007.

The state of Alaska previously had a hate crimes statute that covered gender, race, ethnicity, and mental and physical handicaps, but homelessness was never a factor, according to a report by the Anti Defamation League. Also, many homeless people never reported attacks against them, for fear of being arrested or further harassed themselves.

Thanks to NCH's efforts to assist the Alaska Coalition on Housing Homelessness, that is about to change.

Alaska just passed a bill that would allow for more severe punishments for those who have committed an attack on a homeless person, taking into account that the person who was attacked was vulnerable and possibly incapable of resistance as a factor in the attacker's sentencing. The Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness was instrumental in helping to pass the bill, as they provided testimonials throughout the hearing and sat in on the teleconferences around the state.

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provided testimonials throughout the hearing and sat in on the teleconferences around the state.

According to the Alaska State Legislature Journal for the Second Session of the 25th Legislature, the bill involves “an act relating to an aggravating factor at sentencing concerning the knowledge of the defendant regarding the vulnerability or incapability of resistance of the victim due to homelessness.”

The bill was signed by the governor of Alaska and will be put into effect September 2nd 2008, a reason for celebration at the NCH office in Washington, DC and the Alaska Coalition on Housing and Homelessness.

Getting the bill passed was no easy task according to Kris Duncan, a social worker at the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation who attended the House hearing regarding the bill. Duncan said she was surprised by the amount of negativity invoked by legislators. Many officials said that they thought this bill would grant homeless people special privileges, and would send a message that an attack on a homeless person is worse than an attack on any other group of people.

This, says Duncan, was not the purpose of the bill, and that rather than elevating one group of people over another, “it would be a way to bring homeless people back up to the level of mainstream society when it comes to their civil rights.”

Focus on Green Shelters



In recent years, it seems most every institution in American society has been making an effort to address environmental concerns. Homeless services are no exception – as shown by the advent of the green shelter.

A “green” building is one designed to make efficient use of natural resources in order to reduce ecological impacts and minimize operating costs. Design features of a green building might include use of solar power, materials such as bamboo or recycled metal, use of fluorescent lighting, and gardens.

The first – and so far, only – shelter consciously built in line with these principles is Crossroads in Oakland, California. Opened earlier this year by the East Oakland Community Project, the shelter includes such features as a solar-paneled roof and furniture made of pressed wheat.

In addition to being better for the Earth and for shelters’ budgets, green buildings are likely to be better for occupants’ health. For example, given the emphasis green principles place on circulation of fresh air, residency in green shelters would help to combat the disproportionate development of asthma in children experiencing homelessness.

Crossroads, we hope, will be the start of a long trend.

Homeless Win Lawsuit Against City of Fresno ACLU Press Release

FRESNO – United States District Judge Oliver W. Wanger gave preliminary approval today to a \$2.35 million class-action settlement between a class of hundreds of homeless Fresno residents and the City of Fresno and the California Department of Transportation. The court had already determined that Fresno’s practice of immediately seizing and destroying the personal ...bethesdahosting.com/.../397_2008...

Transportation. The court had already determined that Fresno's practice of immediately seizing and destroying the personal possessions of homeless residents violates the constitutional right of every person to be free from unreasonable search and seizure. The homeless plaintiffs in the lawsuit, *Kincaid v. Fresno*, were represented by a team of attorneys from the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California (ACLU-NC), the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights (LCCR) and the law firm of Heller Ehrman LLP.

"The Court's ruling and the settlement should send a strong message to other cities throughout our country that if they violate the rights of their most vulnerable residents, they will be held accountable," said ACLU-NC staff attorney Michael Risher.

Plaintiff Al Williams suffered the effects of the raids on three occasions. In addition to losing clothes and food, his wife's wheelchair was destroyed and her medicines confiscated by Fresno police officers. "I felt like everything was taken away from me, but this settlement gives me hope for the future for myself and all the other people who suffered," said Williams, who now hosts a local radio show in Fresno.

"Many homeless people lost everything they owned to the City's trash compactors and bulldozers. With this settlement, they can access what has always been the solution to homelessness: a safe, clean place to live," said Elisa Della-Piana, an attorney with the Lawyers' Committee.

[Read more.](#)

Homelessness: Historic Perspective

By Richard Troxell
Executive Committee, National Coalition for the Homeless

Understanding the past helps us understand the present and act toward the future. Homelessness is the physical manifestation of poverty and our collective failure to either successfully recognize it or deal with it.

This recent round of homelessness in this nation begins with the federal government abdicating its relationship and role of responsibility for our nation's poor in the 1980s. Many specific things have led to homelessness in this nation, not the least of which was another mortgage foreclosure debacle mirroring today's sub prime mortgage fiasco.

-Other causes include: the end of the Viet Nam War- one-quarter of all people experiencing homelessness today are veterans. We have the entire US Department of Defense to address this concern and yet we are allowing our government to use, discard and disregard our nation's best sons and daughters after maiming them both physically and emotionally.

-We saw the deinstitutionalization of our nation's mental health facilities where minimally paid workers were providing substandard care and abusing our mentally ill- who now comprise 40%+ of our nation's homeless citizens.

-This coincided with the closing of our nation's mental health institutions and the advent of psychotropic drugs such as lithium that led us to believe that we could treat serious mental health problems on an out-patient basis.

-Gentrification in the 1980s-1990s played a significant role in creating homelessness. Gentrification is when one group of people of a certain socio-economic standing moves into a geographic area and supplants an existing group usually of a lesser socio-economic status. This occurrence often included the destruction of affordable housing along with motels that were either "upgraded" or leveled for the creation of condominiums and even parking lots.

-Double digit inflation and financial pressures led to families shifting from one bread winner to the need for two. This in turn led to the creation to "latch key kids" who never established community bonds.

-The economic pressures of the 80s then led to the highest divorce rates in our nation's history.

-Of course the courts have historically relinquished children to the mother who then found themselves transporting their 2.2 children around with them attempting to enter or re-enter the job market while they sought entry level jobs with either stale or non-existent employment skills at the onset of the high tech evolution.

-Unable to sustain two households "his" credit was ruined and he often turned to drink. "She," unable to maintain a full mortgage payment on her new meager salary, then relinquished the house for an apartment and ever downsizing ends up in a homeless shelter.

-Economic insecurity and governmental oppression has driven millions of people across our southern border into our country where they seek a better life. Drowning in official document problems many of these people have now entered the ranks of the homeless.

-For a decade the U.S. Congress has abdicated its roll of maintaining the federal minimum wage and North American business has failed to meet the economic challenge. Now even a full time minimum wage worker cannot afford to house themselves in urban America.

While the 1980s saw a general reduction in service dollars, the single greatest force leading to modern day homelessness occurred when during the same time period, the federal government abandoned its role of housing our nation's poor. In response to poverty, the federal government had created 255,000 urban housing units nationwide by 1979. However by 1982, new affordable housing construction had fallen to only 20,000 units of housing and existing housing fell to a meager 35,000 units.

Also in 1979, rural housing reached 38,000 units but by 2004, rural housing had fallen to a shameful 1000 units.

The federal government stepped out of its role of providing for our nation's poor and what this meant was not clear even 15 years after our municipalities began to swell with the ranks of homelessness.

Criminalization of Homelessness Cycle

For the last several years, business owners in American inner cities have felt besieged by people experiencing homelessness. People having lost their last worldly possessions are drawn to populated areas where they hope to find work, pick up cast off items, collect discarded aluminum cans for recycling (about \$.40 on the pound at the time of this article) and approach citizens for "spare" change.

Having long ago grown weary of waiting for a solution that will "save their business patrons" from requests for financial help, they have taken action. For years these central business communities have been devising and sharing with other businesses in other municipalities new city ordinances they call "quality of life" ordinances. They outlaw camping, sitting, lying down, obstructing sidewalk passage, panhandling, solicitation, loitering, and aggressive panhandling. The National Coalition for the Homeless has been documenting these ordinances against the homeless for years and then ranking the cities relative "meanness" (see www.NationHomeless.org).

In October 2007, the city of Austin already possessing an anti-aggressive panhandling ordinance on the books, set out to ban panhandling throughout the entire city on all levels. While House the Homeless, Inc. does not promote panhandling, we believe in fighting to the end for a persons right to solicit their fellow human beings for help. This has been going on since the beginning of time.

In Austin, Texas, we describe the City's collective actions directed against the homeless throughout the year as the Criminalization of Homelessness Cycle, and it works thus:

1. It begins when downtown businesses (they are the very businesses driving these ordinances) pay poor working people less than a living wage. They pay them so little that they can't afford the basics of life: food, clothing, shelter, and they become homeless.
 2. They remain homeless because the social response is wholly inadequate in Austin, Texas with only 607 emergency shelter beds for every man, woman, and child when there are 4,000-6,000 homeless people in the estimation of the city/county health department. This mirrors cities throughout the nation.
 3. The businesses and their cronies on City Council, then pass laws against the condition of being homeless (i.e. no sitting, no loitering, camping, no lying down, no solicitation..., "Quality of Life" ordinances for which these poor people then receive \$200+ fines.
 4. The businesses and their special interest City Council members create a totally separate court system just to deal with "quality of life" violators called "Community Court." In lieu of paying the fines that they can't afford, homeless people are turned into a free labor force for the city when they must perform "community service." First businesses won't pay a living wage, and when they become
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homeless and powerless, they just take the labor of people experiencing homelessness.

5. Then when people have no alternative but to petition their fellow citizens for financial help (i.e. Panhandling) the downtown businesses and City Council label these homeless individuals as “criminals” and decry their survival activity of pan-handling as unsafe while allowing others at the same time to conduct identical activities such as firemen walking recklessly in traffic in their fund raising efforts.

6. The cycle is completed and their continued homelessness is assured when people experiencing homelessness can't get a job or rent an apartment because of all of the “Quality of Life” tickets and warrants issued against them. As an employer, who would you hire? If you were a landlord who would you rent to?

Quality of Life Ordinances became part of “tone” setting creating alienation and separatism beginning with words like “bums” and “transients” that communicated that these people were somehow less than us, living outside of our community and just passing through as “transients” with no relationship to us and we with no responsibility to them. Our only relationship with these homeless come as we created separate judicial systems and community courts that dealt with their “quality of life violations” special laws for special people.

This tone setting led to Bum Fight videos and finally hate crimes that included setting homeless people on fire on the drag, youths video-taping themselves zapping homeless people with 50,000 volts of electricity while they slept in the open in Cleveland, Ohio, shooting people with pellet rifles like fish in a barrel around Republic Park in Austin, Texas unbridled for a week and even gang initiations with decapitations in Colorado were reported across the nation.

The Bush Administration responded to the collective expressed need to stem the tide of homeless in America's urban areas by appointing Philip Mangano to head up the fallow Interagency Council on Homelessness. Mr. Mangano led a campaign to get cities across America to create 10 Year Plans to End Homelessness. However, the plans are based on ending homelessness by targeting those individual survivors who are soliciting business patrons in America's downtown business districts in an effort to survive. These people are identified as the “chronic” homeless. They are identified as those having mental health concerns and four or more bouts of homelessness in three years. The federal government under the McKinney Vento Act releases dollars to the nation's municipalities through funding opportunities known as Super NOFAs. The government then dictates what the nation's communities must spend the money on in order to get it. A considerable portion of the money gets diverted away from either whole families or single women with children and toward the “chronic” homeless.

The Ten Year Plans coming out of American cities and being promoted by the federal government in an effort to end “chronic” homelessness cannot do so without addressing serious economic concerns of people experiencing homelessness.

Obviously, there are many aspects to homelessness. However, we have shown that the root of homelessness are borne of economics and we can divide homelessness into two distinct economic categories: those who work and those who are unable to work. Sustainable responses to these economic categories can be characterized as establishing “Livable Incomes.”

In order to stimulate the economy, specifically the housing industry, and to end “chronic homelessness” for a significant portion of the nation's homeless community, we must:

1) establish the principle/formula that by using existing government guidelines including the HUD Section 8 formula and the HUD Standard that no one should pay more than 30% of their income on housing Supplemental Security Income also know as SSI we can ensure that anyone found to be disabled by the federal government will receive a monthly stipend, (SSI), that enables them to afford basic food, clothing, shelter (including utilities) wherever that person lives throughout the United States.

2) establish the principle/formula that by using existing government guidelines including the HUD Section 8 formula and the HUD Standard that no one should pay more than 30% of their income on housing, we can permanently fix the federal minimum wage and ensure that anyone working 40 hours in a week will be able to afford basic food, clothing, shelter (including utilities) wherever that work is done throughout the United States.

By indexing to the local cost of housing, we ensure housing affordability throughout the US. This simple approach mirrors US Military pay practices (Base Housing Allowance).

We strongly encourage the Interagency Council on Homelessness to adopt our resolution and send the United States Congress and the US Department of HUD the clear message that our focus on homelessness 1) must be for all those experiencing homelessness not just “chronic” individuals, and 2) we must fix the Supplemental Security Insurance program and the Federal Minimum Wage ensuring that all participants can afford basic, food, clothing, and shelter (including utilities) throughout the United States. Until this happens we will not end homelessness locally or nationally across America. Until this happens we will have created a separate and unequal under-America creating a non-tax-supporting black market and an under class which weakens our worker base and our society as a whole.

See www.UniversalLivingWage.org to read support statistics, the mathematical formula and the hardest asked and answered questions found in our Facts and Myths Section.

Upcoming Speaking Engagements

Where to Catch Our Faces of Homelessness Speakers Bureau

7/16/2008 Georgetown University
7/17/2008 United Methodist Building
7/21/2008 Church of the Pilgrims
7/22/2008 Westpark Hotel
7/23/2008 Youth Services Opportunities Project
7/24/2008 NCH
7/28/2008 Church of the Pilgrims
7/29/2008 Church of the Pilgrims
7/29/2008 Sheraton National Hotel
7/30/2008 Youth Services Opportunities Project
8/2/2008 NCH
8/5/2008 Westpark Hotel
8/11/2008 Church of the Pilgrims
8/11/2008 Church of the Pilgrims
8/15/2008 Church of the Pilgrims

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If you would like Faces of Homelessness to come to your school, church or organization, contact Mike O'Neill at moneill@nationalhomeless.org.

Some Kind Words

A Letter to Speakers Bureau Director Mike O'Neill from an Urban Plunge Participant



Michael,

I just wanted to extend a heart-felt thank you to the National Coalition for the Homeless, not only for allowing the University of Wyoming to participate in the Urban Plunge two years in a row; but also for giving me the specific opportunity to experience it. As a result of my participation in the Plunge, as well as other opportunities, my interest in helping the homeless population in this country has only intensified.

I would like to thank the National Coalition on a personal note as well, because as a result of my experience in DC I am now a Housing Counselor with Denver Housing First Collaborative with the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless.

I think that the Urban Plunge is an influential experience, and definitely helped me to find what I am passionate about in life. Although I do understand that not all participants will walk away from the Plunge with the same ideas and experiences that I walked away with, I am personally very happy that this opportunity exists to open peoples eyes to the issue.

Warm regards,

Amber Pace

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