

Sit/Lie, The Real Issue: The Lack of Service-rich Housing For Homeless Youth
OpEd
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For 26 years, Larkin Street Youth Services has helped tens of thousands of homeless youth get off the streets and become contributing members of our community. We believe in the resilience of youth because we see them working hard to rebuild their lives every day.

The young people we serve are on San Francisco's streets through no fault of their own. These are kids whose parents are unable or unwilling to care for them. Life circumstances far beyond their control have left them without a safe place to call home. If they are lying on the city's sidewalks, it's because they have no other place to go.

Larkin Street opposes the Sit/Lie ballot measure because it will do nothing to address the issues that led to its creation. The measure will only overwhelm an already ineffective system of citations, unpaid fines, and bench warrants.

We believe in logical consequences for counterproductive choices; in fact, it's central to our service model. The city has sufficient laws already on the books to deal with dangerous, disruptive behavior, and we believe these laws should be regularly enforced. Sit/Lie does nothing to address the root causes of our city's homeless problem and may serve only to create additional barriers for homeless individuals who are trying to get their lives back on track.

We believe that the real problem is the city's lack of service-rich housing for homeless 18 – 24 year olds. Larkin Street estimates that roughly 5,700 youth are homeless or marginally housed in San Francisco each year. There are currently about 350 housing beds to accommodate them. We applaud the city's current efforts to expand housing opportunities for youth, but we must go further. As concerned community members, it is our collective responsibility to ensure that homeless young people have access to safe and affordable housing.

Out of school, out of work, homeless youth need a safe place to live, and a comprehensive strategy to give them the education and employment skills to become self-sufficient. The unemployment rate in California is 12.5%, and local jobs that pay enough to cover the cost of housing require an advanced skill-set. Is it any wonder that youth who are disconnected from traditional systems of support—family, school, community—are sleeping on the city's sidewalks?

We need more housing. And we need youth-friendly daytime services—located in the areas where youth are most likely to loiter on the sidewalk—that give them a safe place to sit, a safe place to learn, a safe place to rebuild their lives. Moreover, we need major reforms to the systems that aim to help these kids: public education, child welfare, and mental health.

Accessible and comprehensive services for these kids need to be a priority. Rather than penalizing homeless youth for having no place else to go, we need to address the underlying reasons for why they are there.

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