

Youth Homelessness in San Francisco

Op Ed

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November is National Homeless Youth Awareness month, giving us an important opportunity to examine the issue of homelessness in San Francisco. Although over the years we have learned there is no simple resolution to this deeply troubling problem, we have also learned that there is one straightforward truth that lays at the heart of how to address it: All of us who are fortunate enough to have a place to call home, have the talent and ability as well as the obligation, to help those who are homeless. We have the ability, and indeed the luxury, of seeking solutions rather than laying blame.

A community truly is defined by how it treats those who are most in need. If we want to get the homeless off the streets, we must take care of their basic needs; we must house, feed, educate and employ them. The articles in the Chronicle have illuminated the complex issues and emotions that we are experiencing as a community that is actively striving to address homelessness. I am proud to live in a City that seeks to dedicate resources to address homelessness. I have been honored to meet hundreds of community members; business people, students, workers, and others who give generously of their time and resources to help those who have found themselves on the streets through no fault of their own

The reality of youth homelessness is that for the large majority of teenagers and young adults who are homeless, the streets were safer than the homes they fled. The myth that young people (or any homeless person) has "chosen" street life over the safety and sanctuary of their home is simply that – a myth; a misunderstanding; a misrepresentation. As the holidays approach and we gather with friends, family and loved ones to celebrate the good in our lives, I challenge everyone to commit to doing at least one thing to help break the cycle of homelessness. Some ideas: mentor a young person, support legislation to extend foster care; create affordable housing, participate in community planning forums, volunteer with agencies that address the issues of poverty, unemployment, violence, drug addiction, social justice, and education. We can donate to those agencies, and participate on their boards. We can inspire others to donate and volunteer. Any parent with a child in the San Francisco Unified School District can become engaged with our public school system. As residents of San Francisco, we enjoy the enormous benefits of living here. By helping those who are most vulnerable in our community, our homeless population, we can enrich those benefits for all of us.

Larkin Street Youth Services is a non-profit agency that serves homeless youth in San Francisco, ages 12 to 24. We offer our youth safe housing, hot meals, medical care and warm clothing. Once their basic needs are met, we give the kids opportunities to complete their education, retain career-track employment, and ultimately, achieve personal and financial independence. Of the estimated 6,800 kids living on the streets in San Francisco, we helped, in one way or another, more than 3,200 during our last fiscal year. Notably, 76% of youth who complete Larkin Street's comprehensive programs exit street life. We are, in other words, helping to reduce the homeless population by giving our kids the support they need to avoid ever becoming one of the unfortunate homeless adults we have been reading about.

There are very few people who choose homelessness. Many are on the streets through no fault of their own. Like all of us, most homeless people simply want housing, a job, and a chance to be personally and financially independent. We must continue, as we are doing now, to seek multiple solutions using multiple approaches. This is not a simple problem and it will not quickly, if ever, go away. Yet by working together to help the weakest members of our community, we all become stronger.