

Dispatches from the War Zone: Fresno's Anti-homeless Policies

An Interview with Michael Rhodes

By Cathleen Williams
with Mike Rhodes

Mike Rhodes is the past editor of the Community Alliance, an alternative/independent newspaper in Fresno. He recently published a new book, *Dispatches from the War Zone, Homelessness in Fresno 20012 - 2015*.

Cathleen: Tell us about the history of homelessness in Fresno and your involvement and concern with what is happening in Fresno.

Mike: I first became aware of the City's treatment of homeless people when I saw a Fresno Police officer, outside the print shop where I was working, circling a homeless man on his bike. The officer told the man he was dirty, filthy, that he was a human cockroach and should get a job. He called the man's girlfriend a whore.

When I spoke with the officer later, he said I should be thankful he was cleaning up the streets. I filed a complaint and started thinking about why the city took this punitive approach – like waking people up in the middle of the night and telling them to move on. The homeless man I met that day said that the police were pressuring them to get out of downtown Fresno, which the city had targeted for "redevelopment," and kept pushing them into the old industrial area of town.

I found out that the City was actually bulldozing encampments every couple of weeks. Some main service providers, the Poverello House, and the Rescue Mission, actually supported this destruction, in which not only personal property -- clothes, sleeping bags, tents -- were hauled away, but also irreplaceable possessions like medications, sending people to the hospitals. We started to look into legal action, which resulted in a federal lawsuit with a \$2.3 million settlement in 2007. The City agreed to stop destroying homeless property. Hundreds of people lived openly in encampments, even building temporary shelters, for several years.

By 2011 the City started dismantling encampments again, redoubling their efforts all over the city, and also taking any property briefly left outside, for example shopping carts parked outside the library.

The City created a "homeless task force" within the Fresno Police Department. Its main function is to go out and interact with homeless people to find encampments and shut them down, take property, and cite homeless for jaywalking or littering.

This pressure on people caused them to move up north and to live in hiding, oftentimes in abandoned or vacant houses where they were less visible. I even found a significant encampment inside an irrigation canal where it went under roads and a parking lot. A lot of people were camping in danger because those canals can flood without warning.

C: Does the state of the economy in Fresno help us understand what is driving people into homelessness?

M: Fresno has one of the highest concentrations of poverty in the country; our unemployment is always over 10% because there are so few opportunities.

Fresno is referred to as the Appalachia of the West. About 2% of our population is homeless – 15,000 to 20,000 people. This is double the rate of most cities.

There are many indications that homelessness is on the rise – even by the City's own count, which is deceptive since people are in hiding, couch surfing, or living in cars, and are not counted at all. But the official count went up by 9% between 2015-2016, and by 20% between 2016-2017. According to a recent report by the California Youth Project, Fresno County has 6,738 students who are homeless. That is 3.4% of those in public schools.

The City claims their policies are working. But any one who drives through the city would tell you there are homeless people on almost every corner asking for money. There are more people living on the streets – but because of the fear of losing their property, they are more dispersed, more careful about where they are sleeping at night, and harder to count.

C: Tell us about City Council's new ordinance to ban and punish camping.

M: Steve Brandau, a Tea Party member on the City Council, has advanced a new ordinance, which

would give to the police the authority to arrest people for camping. (Like Sacramento, there is an exception for camping one night on private property.) Council member Brandau has said that that homeless people should leave town -- he pretty much wants homeless people to die, get of town, or get into a "program."

The advocates for the camping ban claim this is an additional "tool" in the police "tool box." The penalty is 6 months in jail, or a \$1,000 fine. How are homeless people going to be able to pay the fine?

The police have the option to take homeless people either to jail or to a "clearing house" called "Map Point," which would allegedly provide services to help people get off the street. But the resources, the services, the shelter, the housing just don't exist. So people will be back on the street the next day.

C: What do they hope to accomplish through their punitive policies?

M: The City admits the camping ordinance will not end homelessness, but says "we have to try something because the problem is so bad." The City Council seems to believe that doing something wrong – enacting laws that will harm people even more – is a good thing. The path that the City is on right now – outlawing one thing after another, like pushing shopping carts, panhandling, asking for money on median islands – all these punitive policies obviously don't work.

The real reason for these punitive

measures and the new anti-camping ordinance is to convince people to hide better, to get out of sight. At least part of the goal is to make homeless people disperse, to drive them into hiding. The City doesn't want the public to see how many homeless people are living outside.

C: Under the anti-camping ordinance, people can be sent to the "clearing house." What is that?

M: The "clearing house" is being run by Poverello House. It's some kind of massive database on every homeless person – vital statistics, reports of activities and contacts, identity of associates. It's a surveillance program.

Advocates of this project claim that the purpose is to help vulnerable people to get housing by placing them on a continuum. If they find people who access the emergency room regularly, then they say they try to get housing for them first. The "continuum" leaves a lot of people out.

C: Has any housing been built to accommodate homeless people?

M: Fresno First Step Homes was started by mayor Ashley Swearingin shortly before they started bulldozing encampments in 2011. This non-profit announced they were helping people who were being displaced. I asked First Step Homes at the time about their budget, how the money was being spent and they refused to give any information. Years later I got tax records showing they paid consultants, paid for flyers asking

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Kicking in Someone's Shelter - Photo Courtesy Mike Rhodes

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the public to give First Step Homes money instead of giving it directly to the homeless. They were spending nothing on services or assistance to the homeless who were being displaced – zero.

The Fresno Housing Authority, with funding through HUD built the Renaissance at Santa Clara that houses 69 homeless people. This project cost \$11 million to build. This is expensive housing for Fresno – its small studios (340 square feet) cost \$159,000 per unit. This is twice the cost of a three bedroom house in Fresno at the time, which could accommodate many more people.

The president of Fresno First Step Homes is a builder and developer in downtown Fresno who received a \$1 million consulting fee to “coordinate” the project. He is very well tied in – he and members of his company’s board of directors plowed money into the former mayor’s political campaigns. So I see this as corruption – giving money to elect the very people who harm the homeless by advocating and passing punitive policies. I talk about this in my book – *Dispatches From The War*.

C: Is there opposition to the City’s policies?

M: The ACLU is looking at the new ordinance to determine whether it meets constitutional standards. We are hopeful that we can challenge it.

In Fresno, many groups have consistently opposed the City’s policies – Fresno’s “Dakota Eco Gardens,” a newer organization, has a large lot for small houses, architecturally innovative and ecologically friendly, with solar energy for electricity. This community is run by the homeless with dignity and respect, unlike the Poverello House which runs a “tool shed city,” very authoritarian, restrictive, with curfews, no air conditioning or heat, and you have to leave by 8 in the morning.

Food Not Bombs serves food continuously, Catholic Workers, Wings, an organization which helps homeless households once homeless people get housing. There are all kinds of good people doing good things, providing respite and help, drinking water and food daily.

**Homeward FYI:
The Meaning of Oppress**

Merriam-Webster: inhumane imposing of burdens one cannot endure or exacting more than one can perform.

Dictionary.com: subject to a burdensome or harsh exercise of authority or power.



Dumping People’s Possessions - Phot Courtesy Mike Rhodes

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Indeed, securing the right to sleep is anything but the focus of public health policies internationally. Instead, such rights are implemented as a result of piecemeal private initiatives. In Japan, a country where workers sleep an average of no more than six hours and twenty minutes a night (the lowest figure in the world), more and more companies are encouraging their employees to take a catnap at work. They do so by making ‘siesta rooms’ available, while many nearby cafés offer special discounts to customers who buy their meal and take a nap in a cot. Turning to France, a poll conducted by Robert Half in 2013 found that 47% of managers were in favour of introducing a brief nap for their workers during the working day. The most notable example is that of French company Léa-Nature, manufacturers of organic products in the city of Périgny, whose 450 workers have the right to a half hour nap in one of the company’s bedrooms at any time before four p.m.

Companies subsidising their workers’ sleep? Sounds utopian! There are further examples, however. Employees of the American insurance company Aetna earn \$25 for every 20 days that they sleep at least seven hours daily. The duration of their sleep is tracked by FitBit devices, which they are provided with, and the company even offers compulsory sleep lessons! In 2015, the small rural Spanish town of Ador, near Valencia, was the first in the world

to institute an obligatory afternoon siesta. All Ador’s shops, bars and businesses remain closed between two and five in the afternoon, so that employees are given an opportunity to rest.

The German Ministry of Labour, however, did not adopt the workplace siesta in 2013, as requested by the Confederation of German trade unions. Instead, to ensure workers’ rights to relaxation, rest and sleep, it banned business managers from sending emails or calling their staff on mobile phones outside of working hours, except in cases of emergency.

Which category of workers is affected more than any other by sleep deprivation? Those working evening shifts and at night, such as doctors and drivers, are likely to suffer from a lack of sleep. “This accounts for 20% of workers in France, who get around 1-2 hours less sleep every day than others,” explains Giordanella. He identifies that, as a result, they are at increased risk of cancer and cardiovascular disease.

Translated from Greek by Sophie Llewellyn Smith

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