

# Los Angeles shelter director confirms gravity of recent increase in homelessness

Marc Wells  
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A 23 percent increase of homelessness in Los Angeles County over the last year reveals on one side the advanced stage of the crisis of capitalist society; on the other, the results of policies and measures aimed at cutting budget funds previously allocated to subsidize the most vulnerable layers of society.

Despite the hard work of thousands of individuals working in shelters and other similar organizations, whose intent is to help those in need, the problem of homelessness is spreading across different sections of the population, affecting layers of the working class that have suffered greatly, especially since the 2008 housing and financial crisis.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Nathan Sheets, director of operations and programs for the Center at Blessed Sacrament in Hollywood, California, an organization that provides support for the homeless.

“The figures from last week’s report already look bad, but I do believe it’s worse than those numbers say,” commented Sheets. “An increasingly desperate rental market is the main cause. We’re running out of ‘affordable’ units. Our center is in the heart of Hollywood, a few blocks from where the Oscars happen. We get people across a broad spectrum. Some of them have to take three or four buses to get to us.”

Sheets reported that affordable housing in the city is utterly inadequate: “When we spot an open housing unit, there are 50 applications. Some of them are people like me, working individuals without a Section 8 voucher but still desperate, with their entire families. Anybody who’s not super-wealthy is getting pushed out.

“We’ve definitely seen an increase in visible homelessness. It’s not just tents, it’s people on the street who have jobs, have families or are going to

school.” Sheets recalled, “Last year I noticed a high percentage of community college individuals who were homeless. I could not imagine, if I think of the time I went to college.”

Chronic homelessness has registered an uptick. Sheets’ organization focuses on that layer of the population. “Chronically homeless individuals went up,” Sheets remarked. “When comparing ‘falling out’ of an apartment 10 years ago with a year ago, the price of housing has increased and the people’s ability to find an affordable place has significantly decreased.”

The gravity of the situation, Sheets observed, is highlighted by the many who are left out: “We have to prioritize people on the basis of need, but it still leaves thousands of other people out. It’s the hardest thing in the world to tell someone ‘You haven’t been homeless long enough to qualify for anything!’”

Highlighting changes that occurred after years of budget cuts targeting the most vulnerable layers of society, Nathan commented, “Policy that doesn’t find a way to efficiently provide more affordable housing is a problem, while wages have remained stagnant for the most part and housing prices have skyrocketed. That is a policy problem.

“In the old days if you were homeless you could get assistance, get on your feet, get into a shelter relatively quickly,” Sheets recalled. “Now, even without shelter beds we literally have nowhere to tell someone to go. Sometimes whatever shelter available is arguably worse than sleeping on the sidewalk.”

Asked about the relationship between mental illness and being homeless, Sheets responded: “A good amount of people who come into the Center have a degree of mental illness that ultimately stems from trauma. I don’t think there’s a single individual who walks into the Center who hasn’t incurred some degree

of trauma. Being on the street for a while and having traumatic experiences that affect your mental sanity goes hand in glove.”

Sheets drew conclusions on the interrelation between homelessness and mental illness as the consequence of traumatic experience: “The longer someone lives on the street, the more they are susceptible to trauma and having to battle various degrees of mental illness. People aren’t meant to sleep on sidewalks.”

“It’s easy for some who fall off of prescription medications to supplement with street drugs to fill that void,” said Sheets. “That’s a systemic problem. On the flip side, when we succeed in getting someone into housing, it’s almost like their age decreases; they get their energy back, just because they have a roof, a bathroom. It’s amazing to see how a person transforms.”

Sheets concluded by reflecting on the reasons why the richest state in the richest country on earth cannot offer affordable housing: “It’s a very present question for everyone at the Center, all the good people who work in the field. I don’t even know what the word is for that we don’t take care of our poor in this country and it takes very low-funded organizations and individuals who maybe otherwise could or would be doing other things. Instead they decide to sacrifice for the good of the community. Unfortunately, our system is not built for that. What’s a word that’s more intense than insane, as we don’t have housing for the people who are the most ill in our community? It’s unacceptable.”



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