

Time to Retire the Word ‘Homeless’ and Opt for ‘Houseless’ or ‘Unhoused’ Instead?

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As the homeless crisis deepens, the words used to describe those most impacted are finally beginning to change

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Tents on South Beaudry in Los Angeles for people without homes. Ed Freeman

Throughout the country, homelessness is an increasingly pressing and visible matter. And the situation has only become more acute due to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) [reported](#) more than 580,000 people experienced homelessness on a single night in the United States in 2020, up 2.2% from 2019. Now, in tandem with rising numbers, the language used to describe people experiencing homelessness is starting to change, as policymakers seek new solutions to this widening crisis.

In the mainstream discourse and official statements, *homeless* has been the standard term for years. More recently, however, activists and housing advocates have begun to use the word

unhoused (or, relatedly, *houseless*), even as governments stick with *homeless*. It's still the word HUD uses in its reports.

But this is beginning to change. In Los Angeles, Mayor Eric Garcetti and some members of the city council have embraced *unhoused*. In Seattle the city government uses the phrase *person experiencing homelessness*. That's also what the Centers for Disease Control used in [guidance](#) for how to aid unhoused people during the COVID-19 pandemic; the word *homeless* is used only as an adjective.

The change is happening in part as governments move away from punitive measures amid a deepening housing crisis. Past efforts have not resolved the matter, and both policy and messaging are shifting. The word *homeless* has become inseparable from a "toxic narrative" that blames and demonizes people who are unhoused, according to [Eve Garrow](#), homelessness policy analyst and advocate for the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. The term is increasingly used in a way where it implies someone is dangerous or devious, she said. As a result, a less charged term is more apt.

"We've seen this before, words like *transient* or *hobo* are retired and no longer acceptable to use," Garrow said. "*Homeless* has become intertwined with narratives that are toxic. It deserves to be retired."

The use of *unhoused* is not linked to any particular moment or event; it has been used for years and has steadily gained traction as an alternative to the more pejorative-sounding *homeless* over the last two decades.

At the same time, a related term to homelessness, *the homeless*, has begun to be seen as othering. In May 2020 the [Associated Press updated its stylebook](#) to focus on "person-first" language; it said not to use *the homeless*, calling it a dehumanizing term, and instead use terms like *homeless people* or *people without housing*.

When talking about people experiencing homelessness, the goal is to be respectful and not lump everyone together, according to Giselle Routhier, policy director for the Coalition for the Homeless. She noted that the experience of homelessness varies from person to person, and said part of it depends on how someone prefers to be described.

"We've had conversations with some members who were previously homeless about what term they prefer: *homeless person* versus *unhoused* versus *person experiencing homelessness*," Routhier said. "People said as long as they're being described with respect, they kind of don't care."

She added that *unhoused* seems to be used more generally along the West Coast compared to the East Coast, where *homeless* is more common.

However, the terminology is important in legal matters, according to Leilani Farha, global director of the housing initiative The Shift. Farha, who served as the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to housing from 2014 to 2020, said that in her work in international legal

fields, *homeless* is the appropriate term as it goes back to language in the 1948 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Article 25 of the document states “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

The other issue with finding the right terminology is that homelessness is different to every person experiencing it. Farha noted that some people could be chronically homeless—homeless for more than a year—or just experiencing it episodically, falling into homelessness for only a month or so, even just couch surfing.

More specific terminology can go a long way toward clarifying the kind of homelessness someone is experiencing. People can experience homelessness but are “sheltered” if they are able to stay in homeless shelters or transitional housing. “Unsheltered” people are those living on the street. New York City, for instance, has approximately [80,000 unhoused people](#), but the majority are sheltered. That’s a stark contrast with Los Angeles, where only 12,438 of the city’s [more than 41,000](#) homeless individuals are sheltered, per data from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.

Those shelters can also vary in what form they take, be it the more familiar congregate spaces or transitional housing and tiny home spaces set up by local governments (such as in Oakland, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Seattle) where people are still without permanent homes. Garrow added that shelter should not be conflated with housing and officials performing that “sleight of hand” should not treat the two distinct things as equal.

“We need to investigate language elected officials are using and assess how accurate that terminology is,” Garrow added.

Part of the underlying causes of the homelessness crisis is the lack of affordable housing throughout the United States, but advocates note that although that is the main driver, other issues are at hand. Farha noted that both *homeless* and *unhoused* terms can seem to emphasize a house as a solution, but housing needs to be paired with supportive services, from mental health and medical care to social work.

There is the argument that in some ways, the language does not matter; material solutions to homelessness do. Garrow said that the lack of affordable housing remains a driving factor. She said that more focus needs to be on root causes rather than the people struggling.

The important element is treating those experiencing homelessness humanely and addressing the underlying issues that lead to homelessness, Routhier added.

ABOUT CASC

The Community Acceptance Strategies Consortium (CASC), is a unique twelve member network of homeless and housing service providers, advocates, legal professionals, and representatives of the public sector and faith-based communities. Part of HUD's Bay Area Regional Innovative Homelessness Initiative, CASC was launched in October 1996 to address a critical regional need: the provision of homeless housing and services.

Using capacity-building trainings and direct technical assistance, the CASC team enables developers of homeless housing and services throughout the Bay Area to obtain local government approvals for their development proposals by using a proactive and collaborative approach to the problem of local opposition. ("Local opposition" is defined as actions intended to block a meritorious proposal for homeless housing or services, or to create delays and obstacles to hinder its development.)

Prior to CASC, no regional network to aid developers of homeless housing and services manage neighborhood opposition existed. Since its inception, CASC has been able to bring together the cumulative expertise of homeless housing and service providers throughout the region, as well as advocates and supporters to bear on each particular development proposal. This allows homeless housing and service providers to maximize the benefits of past experiences and to avoid reinventing the wheel. The knowledge, skills, resources, and support gained through this network translates into more housing and services for homeless people.

(In 1996, HUD awarded a two-year \$7 million grant to the Bay Area Regional Innovative Homelessness Initiative to implement a new strategy for dealing with homelessness. The Bay Area Regional Innovative Homelessness Initiative provides financial support to a range of projects which enable homeless people to find a place to live, increase their incomes, secure employment and to enroll in training programs. CASC has received three grants from the Bay Area Regional Innovative Homelessness Initiative.)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes the lessons learned and the success of the Community Acceptance Strategies Consortium (CASC) in reducing homelessness in the San Francisco Bay Area. Through CASC's trainings, education, and legal and technical assistance work, CASC has helped high quality homeless housing and services proposals obtain local government approvals. This report is organized around an approach called "Six Steps to Getting Local Government Approvals," and provides a summary of CASC's on-going strategy for increasing the supply of housing and services for homeless people. The approach assumes that housing developers, sponsors, and service providers intend to provide developments which will meet important community needs, are well-designed, and will be well-maintained and well-managed.

CASC defines a successful community acceptance strategy as one which allows developers/sponsors of homeless and housing services to obtain funding and land-use approvals with fewer delays and reduced development costs caused by local opposition. Additionally, a strategy must meet three other objectives:

- ◆ Respond to the legitimate concerns of the local community.
- ◆ Maintain respect for the rights of current and prospective residents.
- ◆ Advance the prospects of future affordable housing and homeless services proposals in that community.

This report also identifies on-going challenges and makes recommendations for local government, community leaders, and developers related to the successful siting of homeless housing and services.

STEP 4: PREPARE A STRATEGY TO WORK THROUGH COMMUNITY ISSUES.

Step 4 recommends that developers and sponsors listen carefully to community concerns and then design appropriate responses to them.



Neighbors contribute to the design process during a community meeting.

Housing developers, community leaders, local government, and community residents all have a common interest in reaching agreement on how homeless and housing developments can fit into their community. All parties want a good quality development. However, concerns about numerous issues (e.g. traffic, parking, crime, etc.) are sometimes used to block developments. In other instances, neighbors are looking for a meaningful way to participate. CASC focuses on how these developments are part of the solution to a community's problems, not another problem. Below are some lessons learned in responding to community concerns:

Lesson 1: Clear, factual information reduces some concerns.

Education of community members, either through one-on-one contact or informational handouts, has been useful in answering many of the concerns that neighbors have about a proposal. CASC encourages agencies to create brochures and flyers that provide background information about the organization and the proposed development. CASC also uses door-to-door canvassing and an "open house" format to keep neighbors informed and to prevent misinformation. When stakeholders learn about why a proposal is an asset to the community, they will be less likely to oppose it.

Lesson 2: Maintaining respect and listening to community concerns can help diminish conflict.

Dealing with opposition is not always easy. It can, however, be less stressful and more constructive when both sides open the way for communication. Developers who are able to listen actively to neighbors' concerns and to address them appropriately, have a better chance of calming those concerns. These important skills must also be adopted by all stakeholders to enable legitimate concerns to be heard and resolved. Sometimes concerned community members have good ideas to contribute. When there is an opportunity to exchange information and build trust, those who start off opposing the proposal may end up becoming active supporters.

Lesson 3: Concerned community members are not necessarily opponents.

There is a big difference between expressing concern about a proposal and attending a public hearing to oppose it. By not rushing to judgment, developers can work with many concerned members to provide them with the answers they seek. Sometimes what is required is explaining the intricacies of federal funding programs. Other times, it's providing background information, showing successful examples of previous developments, presenting studies, or sharing an endorsement from a respected authority.

Lesson 4: Sometimes community members can be participants in the design process.

Sometimes concerned community members oppose projects because of fear that the development's design and/or density won't "fit the neighborhood" and will cause an undue burden. In some cases developers can sponsor meetings in which neighbors' suggestions can be solicited and, when appropriate, incorporated into the design. However, it's important for the developer and community members to agree on groundrules and expectations in order to avoid disappointment.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

- ◆ **Fear** – Fear about the potential behavior of residents remains one of the most difficult concerns to ameliorate. Stereotypes that some community members have of homeless housing and service developments often stem from negative anecdotes from media stories. Meanwhile, hundreds of impressive success stories go unreported everyday. Exploring forums in which these success stories can be heard is part of CASC’s on-going outreach efforts.
- ◆ **Blame** – Too often, the entire issue of homelessness in a community is blamed on an agency trying to respond to the problem. The misconception that building affordable housing or providing social services draws more homeless people to one’s community detracts from the fact that developments and services arise in the first place to meet an existing need. Well-designed proposals generally do not create new problems. Instead, they help alleviate and/or resolve existing ones. Responsible sponsors deal with any legitimate issues that do come up. When homeless advocates and community members can leave the “blame game” behind, they can work together fruitfully to improve their communities.
- ◆ **Appreciating timing complexities** – There is no right time to present a proposal to a skeptical public. If a developer comes before a clear concept is articulated, it can be criticized for being unprepared or unaware of the community’s needs. If a developer approaches the community with a relatively defined proposal, it can be criticized for presenting “a done deal.”

SUCCESS STORY:

For the past three years, Fremont had been embroiled in a particularly bitter conflict regarding an affordable housing proposal which dominated local politics and even city council elections. Within this climate of hostility, the Tri-City Homeless Coalition (TCHC) approached CASC for assistance in gaining community support for an eight unit transitional housing development in the Irvington District.

TCHC had successfully operated a homeless shelter in Fremont and wanted to fill the gaps in Fremont’s continuum of care for homeless people by providing transitional housing for families living in its shelters. The Irvington district perceived itself as already having more than its share of subsidized housing. Also, the proposed site was near small retail businesses, a situation which often raise concerns about potential impacts. After strategy sessions with local housing advocates and CASC, TCHC developed and implemented a careful political and community outreach plan to gain support for funding. This strategy involved door-to-door canvassing of local businesses, presentations to community groups, and meeting with elected officials.

Targeted outreach connected TCHC to all the key players and quelled potential community opposition. No opponents showed up to the open house forum and the funding proposal was approved on the City Council’s consent calendar! Eight families, who otherwise would have been locked out of the community by Fremont’s high-cost housing market obtained a dignified place to live.

LESSONS FROM CASC TRAININGS

When CASC sent a survey to homeless and housing organizations to gauge their training needs, CASC found that working through the concerns of community members was their highest priority. Those who attended the training focused on this issue, found it useful to learn how to integrate this community outreach strategy into the development process, and recommended this training for all staff members. CASC conducted role play activities among attendees, including listening exercises, and used examples of actual local opposition experienced by housing groups in the San Francisco Bay Area. This experience gave workshop participants opportunities to develop skills in acknowledging and responding to concerns that often arise and provided guidance for formulating appropriate responses.

Making Sense of NIMBY:
poverty, power and community
opposition to homeless shelters

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A Progressive Community?

WIDELY PROCLAIMED AS ONE OF the more progressive communities in New England, with a thriving downtown, and a mayor and city council quite active in supporting HUD's "continuum of care" concept while providing a broad array of homeless services, the city of Northampton, Massachusetts was the scene of much public conflict and consternation regarding the placement of a winter emergency homeless shelter in 1997 through 1999.¹

Northampton, the home of Smith College, with a bustling downtown of locally owned businesses in the heart of a vibrant academic setting, is seen as a model of how to overcome the effects of deindustrialization.⁴ The city is also widely recognized as a "progressive" community, especially in terms of the relatively large, openly lesbian population. Yet, beneath the surface, there is another side to the city. Like all of New England, Northampton has undergone significant economic restructuring in recent decades. One impact has been the loss of 40 percent of the manufacturing jobs in the county since 1980. These have been replaced

largely by lower paying jobs in food service and retail trade. These trends are expected to continue as a 1999 study by the National Priorities Project found that 61 percent of the jobs with the most growth in Massachusetts paid less than what they defined as a living wage with 42 percent of those jobs paying less than one-half a living wage (National Priorities Project 1999).

As wages have stagnated for many citizens, income inequality has increased rapidly since 1970. When adjusted for inflation, the poorest 20 percent of state residents saw their income decline by 2 percent during this period while the wealthiest 20 percent of the population experienced a 60 percent increase in income. This ramplantly spreading inequality has increased even more rapidly since 1980 with even the middle 20 percent of the population seeing their incomes decline by 4 percent while the incomes of the wealthiest 20 percent increased by 18 percent (Bernstein et al 2000). At least in part as an outcome of these trends, many people are living on the margins of economic viability. A 1999 study by the Massachusetts Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project found that an estimated 300,000 Massachusetts citizens (almost 25 percent of the state citizens) made too much money to qualify for federal assistance, but did not make enough money to pay their bills.⁵ The situation in Northampton was found to be slightly worse than that for the state as a whole, with 28 percent of all families in the city making less money than they needed to make ends meet (Brown 2000).

Like many communities, Northampton also suffers from a lack of affordable housing units. As the studies by HUD indicate, the availability of affordable housing has failed to keep up with requests for services nationally as the number of people on waiting lists for housing assistance continued to increase between 1996 and 1998, during the height of the economic boom (HUD 1999). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, rents increased faster than income for the 20 percent of American households with the lowest incomes as the consumer price index for residential rent rose 6.2 percent between 1996 and 1998 (HUD 1999). This situation is especially acute in Massachusetts. In Northampton, the mean rent for a one-bedroom apartment was \$706 in 1997 with an occupancy rate of over 95 percent. A study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that 44 percent of renters in Northampton were unable to afford market rate rents in 1999 for a two bedroom apartment. To do so as renters would have to earn \$15.26 per hour working a 40 hour week to pay for an averagely priced rental unit in the city (Dolbeare 1999).

In Massachusetts, over one million eligible families compete for 100,000 subsidized housing units or vouchers. Additionally, gentrification has resulted in the loss of many affordable housing units. The city of Northampton, for example, currently has approximately one-half the number of single-room-occupancy units that existed in 1970. Moreover, rent control was voted out of existence in Massachusetts in 1995. Combined with an economy that has created unprecedented wealth for some people, these forces have resulted in rental costs, housing prices, and assessed housing values skyrocketing throughout the state. A volunteer at the shelter described the local housing market as follows: "This market is so hot that people are offering more money for housing than the buyer is asking and they pay it in cash."

This economic and political restructuring has also resulted in an increasing rate of homelessness in the city for over a decade. In the late 1980s, homelessness increased in Northampton to the point where community pressure began to be placed on the city government to resolve the problem. In 1990, a tent city was erected in a downtown park where homeless people camped and lived for several months. Soon thereafter, local advocates, homeless people, and church officials organized a building takeover on the grounds of a soon-to-be-closed state mental hospital. Negotiations ensued which eventually lead to the creation of a twenty-bed shelter in 1990. For the next two years, the existing shelters were able to accommodate most requests for shelter. However increased numbers of homeless people during the winter of 1992 began to place a strain on existing resources. A variety of responses to the overflow problems were developed; these eventually resulted in the establishment of a city wide planning group whose stated purpose was to develop a long-term plan for ending homelessness in the city. The group was also charged with the responsibility of alleviating the immediate shortage of shelter space, resulting in the development of a sixteen-bed winter, emergency shelter.

Beginning in the winter of 1994-95, this shelter, staffed largely with volunteers, rotated between different church basements from November through April. The shelter operated in this manner for three winters. Meanwhile, the volunteer community group also searched for a permanent, downtown location for the shelter. Unfortunately, even with three years of searching, this committee was unable to locate an affordable building anywhere within the city. Finally, during the summer of 1997, many of the churches which had been hosting the rotating cot shelter announced they would not participate the following winter, for reasons ranging

from thefts in the churches and excessive pressure on church facilities to a concern that the program was not doing enough to solve or decrease homelessness.

After several months of frantic searching by community volunteers, a space available for rent was finally located in Ward Three of the city in August. Ward Three, a section of town which is predominately lower-middle class, seemingly made a perfect setting for the shelter. Located in the southwestern corner of the downtown area, bordering two of the main streets and extending to include the former farmlands of the lush Connecticut River Valley, the area features two streets with a few large, Victorian houses now mostly owned by educators, artists, lawyers, and doctors surrounded by an area of small businesses, social service programs, and much smaller homes. These smaller houses made up a working class neighborhood of older, mostly Polish, ex-farmers and ex-manufacturing workers. These are people and professions that have seemingly been left behind in the prospering new Northampton of boutiques, galleries, and up-scale restaurants. Additionally, a designation of this neighborhood as the working class and "ethnic" part of the city has a long history as some older residents of the neighborhood told stories about having always been seen as "the wrong side of the tracks" by those connected with Smith College at the other end of Main Street. Consequently, there was also a long history of placing social service programs in that section of the city, especially in the 1970s and 1980s with the closing of the state mental hospital. This area of the city was already home to many social service facilities, a methadone treatment program, and most of the remaining single room occupancy units in the city. Thus, the location was seen to provide easy access to the resources of the downtown for the homeless people using the program.

A few days after signing the lease, the city planning department and the social service agency overseeing the cot program called a public meeting to discuss shelter policies and norms with neighbors. Much to their surprise and dismay several dozen neighbors spoke out against the location. This opposition shocked the mayor and shelter administrators because, unlike communities throughout the nation, this was the first public sign of any opposition to homeless services of any type in the city. Many city residents had understood the lack of opposition as one of many indicators of the liberal, progressive nature of the city.

Shelter administrators and city officials responded to the opposition by holding public meetings and other "educational efforts."

The goal of these events was to educate community members regarding the "truth" about homelessness. Current and formerly homeless people with the "best" jobs and the most education were handpicked and put on display as models of "good, hard-working" homeless people who had been "reformed" and "saved" by the shelters. The expectation was that opposition would dissipate once the neighbors were informed about the success stories produced at city shelters. However, these efforts still failed to assuage fears. As one woman stated, "Nice stories of redemption can't alleviate our fears." When these efforts failed to alter the public's perceptions and the opposition to the shelter, many homeless advocates became even angrier at what they saw as simple bigotry and discrimination. When the city and the agency opened the shelter despite their opposition and concerns, further protests ensued. Eventually, virtually every resident of the neighborhood signed a petition opposing the shelter and a lawsuit was filed arguing that the shelter violated local housing codes.

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Despite the turmoil, the shelter operated that winter while a search continued for a more desirable, permanent site. On August 19, 1998, a public meeting chaired by the Mayor was held to announce the location of the shelter on city land in a different neighborhood, a predominately upper-middle class area of the city. This meeting was even more contentious than that of the previous year. Nearly 150 citizens voiced opposition to the proposed site (Parnass 1998). Several speakers stated that the shelter would bring drunken people into "their" neighborhood and would increase crime and vandalism. These neighbors came to the meeting with a lawyer already in place and portrayed the vast majority of homeless people as mentally ill, dangerous, chemically addicted, lazy, and not really a part of their town. Eventually, as fate would have it, the upper-middle class residents of this neighborhood were spared from the shelter as toxic waste was found on the proposed site. In result, in October of 1998, it was announced that the shelter would once again be placed in the same building back in Ward Three. Many neighbors were outraged and once again responded with organized protests.

Shelter administrators, volunteers, and city planners had searched for three years to locate an affordable space for the shelter within the city. They proposed two different sites, only to be met with organized neighborhood protests. Both of the proposed sites resulted in threats, lawsuits against the city, thinly veiled racism, organized political campaigns against local politicians seen as supportive of the shelter, petitions, and anger and outrage

throughout the city (Cameron 1997; Kerstetter 1998a; Kerstetter 1998b; Loisel 1997). Despite a severe shortage of shelter beds, decent paying jobs, and affordable housing units, citizens in this “progressive” community had organized to publicly oppose the location of this shelter for the second consecutive year.

How do we understand these collective efforts to oppose the shelter? To most of the homeless advocates, homeless people, shelter staff, volunteers, and city planners I’ve worked with, the answer was clear. They attributed the opposition to parochialism and bigotry, selfish concerns with property values, misguided fears about increased crime, and misinformation on the “truth” about homeless people. My research suggests, however, that while these may certainly be a part of the story, they are only a small part of a much more complex situation. This is made especially clear when looking at the explanations, articulations, and practices of those neighbors who organized to prevent the shelter from locating in Ward Three.

When I spoke with neighborhood activists and read the lawsuit, petition, and correspondence they shared with me, a much more complicated picture began to emerge. Some of the opponents of the shelter did characterize homeless people as alcoholics, drug addicts, mentally ill, or criminals. As the local city council representative told me:

It is common-sensical to say that it’s going to be not so pleasant to have facilities in your neighborhood where people are under a lot of stress. Whether the stress is because of their alcohol dependency or drug dependency or just downright bad luck or ill health or whatever. People like that aren’t so stable, it’s hard to keep track of them. Occasionally they may be erratic people. A fair number of our homeless, what is estimated at between 50 and 80 percent of the homeless, are people who have mental health problems. Those are not your ideal neighbors.

Additionally, people referred to past negative experiences with homeless people. Homeless people were accused of entering neighbors’ garages and homes and of creating other problems when residents of the shelter were not allowed in due to drug or alcohol use on a particular night. For example, one woman told me, “On the nights that the cot shelter was in our neighborhood, we can correlate that, either that night or the next morning, with incidents of

minor vandalism, of entry into our houses. I mean, there was a long list of problems which were systematically ignored."

However, several of these neighborhood activists insisted that this was not just a case of NIMBY politics and strongly resented their being characterized as uncaring and bigoted. When I interviewed the woman who played the lead role in the opposition, she began the interview by stating, "First, there certainly was a NIMBY reaction, but that's partly because we're used to housing or giving shelter to all kinds of programs, people in half-way houses, we have tremendously high numbers of single-room occupancy places, so, we're used to them." As another neighbor insisted, "NIMBY has been used as a flag to turn off protest, to shut people down instead of really listening to people . . . it becomes a battle tool on the part of people who don't really pay attention . . . to say, 'Oh well, that's just a NIMBY response, we don't have to take that into account.'"

Several of the leading organizers of the opposition to the placement of the shelter had lengthy careers as educators as well as long histories of activism in progressive social-justice movements. They especially expressed frustration that such commitments could be dismissed as they were now labeled bigots for organizing opposition to the shelter. For example, while I was interviewing her during the summer of 1999, the lead organizer of the opposition still expressed profound sadness at this characterization. As she related, "I lost a friend down the street who insisted that I was just a bigot. And, I have a long history of not being a bigot. I have been an activist all my life." She felt that the biggest surprise to city officials and shelter administrators was that liberal residents of the two streets in the neighborhood with large Victorian houses spearheaded the opposition. She pointed out that these were mostly university professors, artists, teachers with long histories of liberal activism. I asked if she could tell me a little about her history of activism:

I started out in the peace movement in the '40s . . . I worked on the Rosenberg committee for years. And, I was one of those who picketed the bands when it was still a six day work week to get the five-day week. I've been around. I belonged to the American Labor Party for a long time . . . I came back here. Retired. And, I found a neighborhood that was fragmented and I wanted to do something about it. So, I began hosting block parties. I've done as much as I could.

with homeless people with very little professional staff presence throughout the night. Although not wanting to appear to agree with the opponents of the winter shelter, several staff members at other shelters in the city confirmed the validity of these sentiments. In fact, my observations while doing fieldwork at one of these shelters established that it was routine for the winter shelter to send their clients to seek help from the staff at other city shelters during the day. Similarly, volunteers and the one staff member at the winter shelter routinely called the professional staff at the more established emergency shelter for assistance with problems during the evenings. However, as those shelters were already understaffed, the overworked staff could offer very little tangible assistance.

As one woman explained to me, it was the inadequacy of the proposed shelter to actually help homeless people deal with the problems that the sheltering agency claimed were the causes of their homelessness that she found offensive. As she put it:

We also objected on the basis that the permit had been granted saying that this was for educational purposes, which was nonsense. It started at seven at night and ended at seven in the morning. You could hardly call that educational. They were also to be transported at seven in the morning into the middle of the city in the middle of the winter and we felt that was cruel and unconscionable. We also minded the fact that so much money was being put into this, what we considered an inadequate and inappropriate response to the plight of the homeless. It's this kind of superior, upper-middle class benevolence that really chills me. It's so snobbish. It's simply charity and I'm opposed to charity.

She went on to explain how she felt:

The shelters haven't really been of assistance. The problems have not been addressed. The problems are low wages and inadequate housing. It's clear if you just walk through the middle of town And what about families? It's families who lose their housing. Well, we're not a very good society are we?

Other opponents frequently articulated a similar sentiment; they were not opposed to homeless people. What they objected to