

OUT OF CONTROL

homeless services

There is widespread agreement by policymakers, business owners, homeless advocates and citizens that the city does not assist the homeless effectively.

The controller is San Francisco's chief fiscal officer. He certifies the accuracy of budgets and audits the performance of departments. And on May 15, he let the whole kit and caboodle have it right between the eyes in a scathing audit of city services to the homeless. The winds of change and the whims of politicians come in for the biggest brow beating. And while his predecessors' failures are listed, the current shortcomings come during Mayor Brown's watch. The following excerpts from the controller's report explain the causes of the problems. The controller's solutions will be featured in subsequent issues.

The City:

- has not yet developed an effective, unified strategy for dealing with the issues related to homelessness...
- has spent millions of dollars to address homelessness; however, the City has not been able to ensure that this money has gone where most needed.
- lacks an effective means to collect data related to homelessness.
- homeless services lack support from good policies – which specify goals – and good data – which shows needs.

S.F. defines 'homeless,' HUD adds to it

The City's official definition of homelessness covers people who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residences and who have their primary nighttime residences in one or more of the following categories: shelters, streets, vehicles, make-shift housing, doubled-up housing, and transitional housing.

HUD also identifies individuals as *homeless* when they live in transitional and permanent supportive housing programs, which include some of San Francisco's single-room occupancy hotels, or when the individuals are about to be evicted or released from institutions and who

It started with a failed law...

The 1963 Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act... proposed building 2,000 community health centers for the mentally ill to receive medical care and support services and thus to avoid long-term hospitalization. Due to budget constraints, however, only about 800 of the centers were funded.

Then Reagan made matters worse

In 1981, Congress passed the Federal Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, which combined all substance abuse and mental health programs into one fund and cut total funding by 25 percent. In addition, President Reagan cut HUD funding from \$32 billion in the first year of his administration to \$8 billion by his final year... such policy changes resulted in the total number of mental health patients in state-run institutions in the U.S.

Don't know how many

The City's "official" estimate of the homeless population – the one it submits to HUD in its application for McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act funds – is 12,500 people. The City's current plan for services to the homeless estimates that the population ranges from 8,500 to 15,000 people. In November 2001, the Mayor's Office of Homelessness conducted a count and reported 7,305 homeless people in San Francisco, but this number is also an estimate due to the necessity of guessing how many people might be living in a particular car or how many members of an observed group fit the definition of *homeless*.

A shortage of transitional and long-term housing exists for all segments of the homeless population.

The mayors of homelessness

Over the years, the City's methods for working with the homeless population have been inconsistent because different elected officials have favored different approaches to homelessness.

Mayor Dianne Feinstein ... created a hotline hotel system. ... Homeless people could stay for free in low-rent residential hotel rooms for up to seven nights. ... Feinstein launched a program in which social workers and police approached homeless people sleeping on the streets to inform them of available shelters. Despite Feinstein's efforts, San Francisco reportedly lost an estimated 43 percent of its low-rent single-room occupancy housing units between 1975 and 1988, and by the end of the Feinstein administration, homelessness was still on the rise. Beginning in 1987, homeless people had begun camping in Civic Center Plaza, just opposite City Hall.

In 1988, Mayor Art Agnos signed legislation calling for a long-range comprehensive plan to deal with homelessness. The 150-page plan, released in August 1989, outlined broad strategies: New housing, increasing the stock of residential hotel rooms, directing homeless people to entitlement programs, and providing additional emergency shelter. Housing services were to be provided to 3,667 additional people.

The plan set up a modified payment system for discounted rates and negotiated tenancy for clients of the single-room occupancy hotels. Mayor Agnos spearheaded the opening of two large City-owned multi-service centers to provide shelter, counseling, and aid to the homeless population. In 1990, the multi-service center at Fifth and Bryant streets opened and Mayor Agnos broke up the Civic Center encampment, at which time an estimated 150 to 300 homeless people were living there.

Mayor Jordan launched his "Matrix" program in 1993. The program directed police to enforce "quality of life" laws, such as those against littering, obstructing sidewalks, and sleeping in parks. The program resulted in approximately 30,000 arrests and citations of homeless people.

In January 1996, Mayor Willie Brown ended the Matrix program but vowed to continue enforcing the laws it covered.

These excerpts from the controller's audit use the report's actual words but not the order of the statements. In most cases, we use ellipses to indicate missing words – but not always.