

Seeing the Human Side of the Homeless

Q: Do a lot of people have a basic misunderstanding about homelessness?

A: Yes. One of the myths is that homeless people are so different from the rest of us. When you work with homeless people you realize it's as diverse a group as any group of human beings. Really, homelessness is just a new word for poverty. It's the new American poverty. It arises from a number of different sources and policy changes. Of course, it all boils down to the lack of affordable housing.

Q: Well, let me mention the politically incorrect "B-word" that we don't use—bum. Is there some percentage of homeless people in Santa Monica that one could classify as bums?

A: I don't like the term because it's like saying that someone is sort of subhuman. In every social class there are people who are not very highly motivated, who are very self-centered and who really don't care about participating in society. Drugs, so readily available right now, can aggravate that tendency. After prolonged use, people become so

Q&A

Vivian Rothstein, 46, executive director of the Ocean Park Community Center, Santa Monica.

Claim to fame: Presides over an eight-project social service network, a key component of Santa Monica's ambitious array of programs for helping those in

alienated and distanced from themselves and other people that they end up living a lifestyle that is not connected to society and not productive.

Q: How many of the homeless fall into that last category?

need—the homeless, battered women, the mentally ill and youth in crisis. Long active in community affairs, Rothstein has played a prominent role in the city's Task Force on Homelessness.

Background: A graduate of UC Berkeley and veteran of the '60s civil rights movement, Rothstein registered voters in the South, organized residents of low-income communities and was active in opposing the Vietnam War. A single mother with two teen-agers, Rothstein lives in Santa Monica.

Interviewer: Times staff writer Nancy Hill-Holtzman.

A: I really have no idea. We run programs that are geared toward helping people become the most they can be. Our programs attract people who are trying to build their own self-esteem. So just about everybody

Please see ROTHSTEIN, J10



LISA ROMERREIN / Los Angeles Times

Vivian Rothstein, executive director of Ocean Park Community Center.

ROTHSTEIN: Taking Steps to Build Self-Esteem

Continued from J10
 that go on in the park—and they're terrified, particularly the women. A number of our clients have been killed over the last three or four years.

Q: Would you take your kids to the park if they were playground-free now?
A: I would. I don't think the conditions are great now, but my confidence is that the city is not that dangerous.

Q: It is overwhelmingly depressing to go to a restaurant and see somebody lying in front who is so disabled. That bothers me more than feeling physically unsafe. I don't feel physically unsafe. I feel morally under assault all the time and that makes me uncomfortable.

Q: Have you understood from listening to the public that many people in the city do feel physically unsafe?
A: Yes, and I think many people feel morally, totally in turmoil.

Q: What percentage of the homeless population is mentally disabled?
A: I'd say 30% of the people we see are mentally disabled, some not as severe as others.

Q: What percentage is substance abusers?
A: Well, there's an overlap. I'd say 30% to 40% of the people have abused substances. But you know I remember a woman at Daybreak [a women's shelter] who said to me, "God, I'm off drugs and alcohol and now I gotta get off the street. It's driving me crazy." Drugs and alcohol are used as a way to tolerate this horrible situation. This woman was getting clean so she could go into a shelter, but being sober and still on the street was terrifying.

Q: Would you favor checking warrants of people who come into programs?
A: No. Once social services gets associated with the law enforcement system, we have lost our ability to build trust with people. And I don't think it's legal.

Q: Is using public places as bathrooms a hostile gesture by the homeless, a sort of thumbing their nose at the society that has failed them?
A: I think that's mostly mentally ill people. What other person would defecate in public view of traffic and everything? People get more depressed than angry. They've given up on themselves. They go to the toilet everywhere because they've just lost their sense of self.

Q: Tell me what the Ocean Park Community Center is and what it does.
A: We call it a network of emergency shelters and services. It's an agency that runs a number of programs for special populations that are in crisis. That includes battered women and their children, homeless runaway youth, homeless mentally ill women and homeless adults and families. The community centers have been in existence for over 25 years. The overall budget of the agency is \$2.3 million, and we get a little over \$500,000 from the city.

Q: How does the social service network in Santa Monica compare to other cities?
A: Santa Monica's got one of the best social service/community service programs in the whole country. It was consciously built. When the liberals took over the City Council, one thing on their agenda was social services. The city hasn't backed down from its commitment.

Q: Tell me what a day is like for a homeless person who is home in a shelter and wakes up in the park.
A: They have to get to our drop-in center really early to get a number if they want to see a homeless advocate. There's a line here by 6 o'clock in the morning.

Q: What if somebody just wants breakfast?
A: They have to get a number. The food is packaged and it's not great. That's one fallacy about Santa Monica being a magnet. The best that you get is a cot in a church basement and a bag of groceries. It's not like you're going to come all across the county to get this minimal service. This is not the Hilton.

Q: Where else is breakfast served?
A: Nowhere else for those not enrolled in programs. The Salvation Army has been running a program at Memorial Park for people in the shelter.

Q: What if a homeless person wants to shower?
A: They can sign up here at the drop-in center. St. Joseph's in Venice has showers. The Venice Family Clinic I think has one or two showers. There are some showers at Memorial Park. It's hard taking a shower.

Q: So, a homeless person needs an appointment to take a shower?

A: It's full-time work to stay alive on the streets. You get up in the morning, figure out the place to eat, figure out a place to go to the toilet. You find out whether your name has been moved up on a waiting list for shelter or detox program, maybe come and get your mail, maybe go to [the County Department of Public Social Services office] to see if you have to do job searches to stay on general relief. It's very hard to have the time to look for a job and get permanent housing.

Q: Is lunch available at the Ocean Park Community Center?
A: Part of what we give out in the morning includes sandwiches, but usually people eat it right away because they haven't eaten since the day before.

Q: There are a few dozen detox beds in the whole county. So, what happens to somebody who's on detox and wants to get off?
A: They go on a waiting list. It may be six months before they get a detox bed. In the meantime, they're on the streets. By then they may have given up or be so high they've forgotten they wanted to get clean.

Q: There is an acute shortage of beds for the mentally ill, too, right?
A: There are very few. The other big crisis is the county mental health services. I was in a meeting with Supervisor Ed Edelman and he is committed to helping build Santa Monica West into a functioning clinic again. That would make a huge difference in Santa Monica.

Q: Do you have success stories to report?
A: Our adopted family program is uniquely successful right now. It's a partnership between us and homeless families and religious congregations. It's meant a lot to the congregations because they have been able to have a direct impact on a homeless family. And homeless families have found a sense of community, which is what people really need.

Q: Our shelter for mentally ill women also has a 70% success rate

of getting women, some of whom have been on the streets for years, into permanent housing.

Q: You're a member of the city's Task Force on Homelessness, which is preparing a comprehensive strategy for coping with the problem. Can you identify anything you've learned from listening to task force members and others?
A: I learned that the conditions in the city have become really intolerable for the residents. I take that real seriously because we can't survive if the residents in this community are unhappy. It's a threat to the programs and mostly to the health of the city. This has to be a healthy city where people feel the opportunity to be heard. If any one group feels totally unrepresented that's a problem.

One important thing is that all of [the city's homeless programs] were developed after very extensive community input. They did not arrive full-blown from the City Council or anyone else. I think the community process is at the core of the reason why this community has taken a leadership role on homeless services.

Q: How so?
A: You can't move ahead in any area unless the community is behind you. We are not trying to ram programs down the community's throat. Controversy and adversarial relationships don't serve anybody, least of all homeless people. If you really care about the homeless population you have to strive to build a consensus in peacefulness.

Q: At this point in Santa Monica, the atmosphere is as acrimonious as the recent peace talks in Madrid.

A: We're around the table. On the homeless task force, we've done really well. These are people who had been arguing with each other for three years and there's an enormous amount of mutual respect and mutual growth that has gone on. If only people would listen to us.

Q: The task force's report goes to the City Council in a month. Has your work been hampered by the various provocative statements and politicking on the issue by various officials and community groups lately?
A: The community has been totally split on this. The problem is there's all these other actors who are involved and the task force is not being allowed to provide leadership. There's a lot of competition for leadership. I think we can be very valuable to the city and the council if we're allowed to be.

Q: Is there a middle ground to be found on this most divisive issue?
A: This community really cares about public safety, but it really cares about people too. It's not an extremist community on any side. So, I think people wouldn't buy an extremist answer on either side.

Q: Do you think that the majority of the community is going to feel comfortable with the thrust of the task force report?
A: I think it can't be ignored—but I could be wrong.

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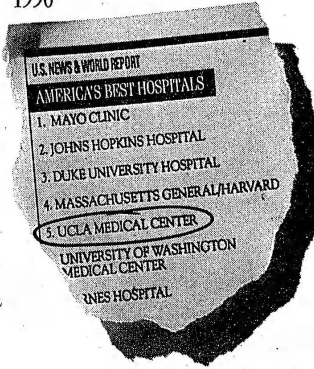
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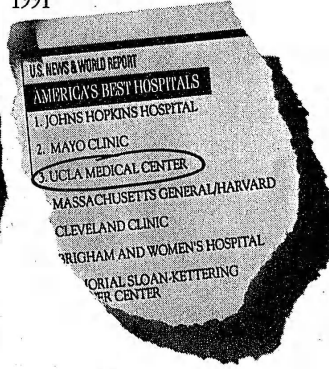
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